

*Community Pen Pals:
Pals Through The Ages*

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Abstract:

Can bringing the community into the classroom through the use of a pen pal program increase the students' sense of community while encouraging them to write? This inquiry delves into how children in second grade can make and expand relationships to gain a more meaningful and educational experience, while also getting a sense of the community around them.

A. Background Information:

Description of teaching context

I am an intern in a second grade classroom at Gray's Woods Elementary School. My classroom is comprised of 21 students with 9 girls and 12 boys. The students represent a wide range of ability levels, an assortment of interests and learning styles, and varying lengths of attention spans.

Writing makes up a large part of the primary curriculum and can be seen intertwined in our daily activities through our thematic units. The children have experienced and explored, creative writing, poetry, journaling, explaining their math problems through writing, writing hardback books, and are also familiar with writing post cards and thank you notes.

Although we value writing in our classroom and see it as an important part of the curriculum, we know it can be a struggle for some of our weaker writers. During our writing time, about 8 children get more focused instructional time between my mentor teacher, the para-professional and I at the two kidney-shaped tables at each end of the room. Some of these children have trouble expressing their thoughts on paper and need extra attention so the work will get done in a given amount of time during writer's workshop.

Even though a small group from the classroom struggles with the writing components of the curriculum, the overall feeling about writing from the students in the classroom is positive. The unit related writing is unique and appealing to the students.

What led me to this particular inquiry and why is it important?

The Living in Harmony B unit, which was not directly focused on at Gray's Woods Elementary this year, focuses on belonging to the community around us. After experiencing the Living In Harmony A unit at the beginning of the year, it was evident that the community can play an important role in student growth academically and socially.

As educators, we have the opportunity to influence not only our students' body of knowledge, but also their understanding of themselves and others, their sense of belonging, and their skills in communicating and solving problems. (O'Neil, 1996).

Students often come to school with fewer meaningful interpersonal connections than students a generation ago. I wanted to provide a connection between the students and community based adults who ordinarily would not have any contact with second graders. Family mobility, economic stressors, and the intrusion of technology and the media on the lives of children may undermine the sense of connectedness that is so important for healthy growth (Pipher, 1996). It is essential that our schools take up the challenge of creating a caring community of learners that is deemed important enough by the National Association for the Education of Young Children to be listed first in its revised Developmentally Appropriate Practices documents (1996-97).

As someone who was born and raised in State College, Pennsylvania, I have seen the positive effects that the community can have on the youth in the area. As a product of the State College Area School District, I was always participating in community projects and programs that were held through the school. I strongly believe that the dialogue and personal relationships that I made through these community experiences helped me gain

the skills and knowledge that I could use well throughout my lifetime in my personal interactions with people.

After recognizing the value that the school district places on community involvement in the schools, and seeing the extensive variety of writing in our classroom, I decided that intertwining the two with a community pen pal program might be something to look into as I explored options for my inquiry project.

What others think/know about this topic (literature/experts)

Research findings

I found it very difficult to find published literature on pen pals within a given community. There was plenty of expert advice on how to find pen pals around the world and ways to set up your classroom for this type of program, but none for local efforts. Although I did not find any information on community pen pals, I did find several pieces of information about pen pal programs in general. Suzanne Girard and Kathlene Willing say, “Pen pal programs add a real-life component to the curriculum. They present opportunities for students to extend their comprehension. In the letter-writing process, thinking skills come to the fore. Students assume a responsive and empathetic role by noting details, developing their questioning skills, and becoming critical thinkers. Evidence of this appears in the content of their communications and carries over into their daily lives. Berrill (2000) mentions that a... “pen pal program offers the advantage of inherent individual, affective, human connection that provide deep meaningfulness and purposefulness”,... for students. It also offers, “a balanced variety of writing activities which will encourage children to think in different ways and to communicate meaningfully” (Berrill, p 9). This was evident during our mini lessons when the children

came up with their own ideas and themes for their letters to their pen pals. Some wished to write about what was going on academically in their lives, while others chose a more personal side and wrote about family events.

Other literature touched upon the importance of letter writing in the classrooms. The NRC states, “Once children learn to write letters, they should be encouraged to write them often” (The NRC, p. 10). This reinforces the idea of possibly having a letter-writing standard written into the Living in Harmony Curriculum. If the children had a whole unit to write letters, they would be more willing to continue the letter writing process outside of school. According to Cheri Fuller, “Writing skills affect [the student’s] learning and achievement in every subject. If [a student] writes well s/he will be a more successful student, (1993 p 152).

Clearly stated wonderings/questions

My wondering is rooted in the question, “Can bringing the community into the classroom through the use of a pen pal program increase the student’s sense of community while encouraging them to write?” From this question I want to know: Will implementing this pen pal program encourage my weaker students to write more? Will the letter writing improve their ability to ask interesting questions? Will the letter writing process help them learn the five parts of a letter? Will children make a connection in some way with their community pen pals? Can the community also benefit from being involved with second graders through this pen pal program?

My original inquiry focused on having a pen pal program between my second graders and The Village retirement community. My initial wondering was: Can

relationships occur through a pen pal program between second graders and retirees?

From this question I wanted to know: Would the age differences hinder a writing relationship from forming? Would the retirees, much of whom were Penn State graduates, be willing to assist in the educational process of my second graders through the form of letters?

After numerous attempts to communicate with the retirement home coordinators, and with the retirees, I felt that it would be too much of a challenge because of the time constraints for the inquiry project. (Appendix A) I would still like to delve into these inquiries in the future when I have more time to find a group of community retirees.

The retirement community was not the best option at the time; I had to find other community members that were willing to be a part of the program. Since I have been a member of this community for my whole life, I used my own network to gather a diverse group of community members that were different in many ways including ages, gender, and occupations. Once I collected a group of people that I felt would communicate well with the children and with myself, I called each one separately to personally ask them if they would be willing to be a part of this program.

B. Your Inquiry Plan

What you did to carry out the inquiry in your classroom

After collecting and organizing my thoughts and ideas about the pen pal program and developing my wonderings, I was on my way to carrying out my inquiry plan. My plan was first organized in a classroom assignment, where I mapped out the course of my inquiry project. It was there that I first had a real sense of how my inquiry was going to

unfold in the classroom. I wanted the pen pal process to be consistent and sequential so the students and community members would have a routine to follow during the writing and corresponding phases.

The children were first introduced to the inquiry project through a mini lesson on letter writing. The lesson touched upon the five parts of a letter and the importance of each (heading, greeting, body, closing, and signature). I felt this was crucial in the first step of the letter writing process so they would know the proper way of writing a friendly letter to their pen pal.

The program was received with great enthusiasm by the class as I informed the students that they were lucky to receive their very own pen pal. They were told that their pen pal could be a college student, high school student, a middle-aged person or a grandparent, in other words, someone of any age. The word community was introduced to the class and I asked what “community” meant. After a discussion, we decided as a class that community meant a group of people that lived in the same area and shared common interests. I told the children that their pen pals may have similar interests but it was up to them to figure them out. I asked, “How would you figure out if you had similar interests with your pen pal?” One eager student raised his/her hand and said, “You have to ask them questions!”

Questions were an important part of the pen pal process; the children soon realized that the only way they were going to learn more about their pen pal was through questioning. In the first letter to their pen pals, the students were to introduce themselves and provide their new friend with background information that would give clues to parts of their lives. The other component of the letter was reserved for questions that the

students had for their new pen pals. (Appendix B) For instance, if a certain student was really interested in what the person really looked like, they were to ask him/her in the form of questions. The letters were all carefully proofread by the teachers and corrected by the students, before they were mailed to the pen pals.

From the very beginning of this inquiry project, I kept the lines of communication open between the community pen pals and myself. With each student pen pal letter that was sent to them, I provided the community pen pals with my own personal letters that informed them about the program, the agenda, and what was expected of them throughout the pen pal experience. (Appendix C) In each letter I provided contact information so the pen pals could get in touch with me in various ways if they had questions or comments about the process of the letter writing. These informative letters also kept me involved in the writing process as well. Although I did not have a pen pal, I still felt connected to the experience and to all the community pen pals.

Once the students received the first community pen pal letter, my mini lessons continued to give the students some organizational techniques for writing their letters. The children were encouraged to underline the questions that their pen pals asked them so they would remember to answer them when it came time to write their letters. They were encouraged to first answer all the questions and then write about a topic that interested them at that point in time, whether it was about a unit they were studying, or more details about their personal lives.

My culmination for the program was to have the students and community members attend a Pen Pal Tea. This would be an opportunity for the students and community members to meet one another face to face and to bring the project to a close

in a relaxing and fun environment. My mentor Bonnie Abrams, who had done a similar get together for the Living in Harmony Unit with grandparents, encouraged this event. At this type of gathering the children could create a personal bond with the pen pal they had been writing to for the past month. Since strengthening the community involvement in the schools was an underlying focal point throughout my project, the Pen Pal Tea provided a way for the community to physically interact with the children. During the tea, the children and community members could go into more detail about the letters they wrote to each other, the children could share the work they had been doing in school, and they could enjoy some light refreshments with the other diverse individuals in the room.

All The Ways I Collected Data

Prior to implementing anything in the classroom, I thought of all the ways that I would collect my data. Before beginning the pen pal project, I made a plan to collect data by making copies of all the student and community pen pal letters, to capture observations through digital pictures, to have a journal handy for my own observations and quotes that were said throughout the program, to make questionnaires and surveys for both students and community members for the end of the program, and to interview the students during the pen pal tea about what they learned from the program.

I began gathering observations through pictures during my mini lessons and while the children were opening, reading, and writing letters to their pen pals. (Appendix D) I also had a chance to collect some data from the children through the use of a journal. If

there was a particular quote, saying or observation that was made that could be analyzed for the program, I recorded it in my journal for later reflection.

Throughout the experience I copied each student's pen pal letters and filed them in a specific folder for each child. When the community pen pals responded, I would also copy their letters and add them to the child's folder. I decided to make copies of all the letters instead of just a small sample because I was not sure which student/community member combination would provide the best results in terms of personal connections made through writing, when it came time to analyze my results. (Appendix E)

Next I directed my attention to obtaining feedback from the students and community members about what they gained from their experiences with this program. I originally brainstormed multiple open-ended questions for them to answer on a (questionnaire/survey). I quickly realized with the community members being so busy, I should try to keep the questionnaire as short and simple as possible. I also wanted to create an assessment that would be easy for me to analyze. I thought of questions that were especially insightful and could be answered in survey-based questions. I did provide space for the community members to add additional comments under each question. A simple 1 to 5 number system was designed with each number clearly marked at the top and labeled with certain degrees of whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement that was provided. This would allow the community members to complete the questionnaire faster and require less writing time on their part. Once they circled the number that they thought fit each question from their personal experience, they answered a simple yes or no question pertaining to past pen pal programs and then there was e

room for additional comments about their involvement with the pen pal program.

(Appendix F)

My final type of questionnaire was given to my second grade students about what they learned and how they felt about their pen pal experience. This was given before the Pen Pal Tea. This questionnaire was easy to compare to the community member questionnaire because it had similar questions. I thought that a number system would be too difficult for the children to comprehend and I did not feel that I would get reasonable results if I used it for them. Instead I used three pictures labeled yes, no, and not sure. There was a smiley face, frowning face, and in between face for each corresponding label. These visual pictures made it much easier for the children to relate to when filling out the questionnaire. (Appendix G) Before giving out the survey I informed the children about what a questionnaire is and why it is important. I told them that I might want to do a pen pal program in the future and I wanted some honest answers to see if I should continue a program like this one.

Lastly, I videotaped the pen pal tea so I could accurately collect and assess the interactions between the students and community members. Along with recording, I interviewed several students to finalize my data before it was to be analyzed.

I originally thought about using some other forms of data collection along with a voice recorder. After careful thought, I did not think that it would be very efficient with the amount of time we had to analyze the data. The more you collect in the way of a tape recorder, the more time you are required to listen and analyze the data. I determined that the many other forms of data collection that I had planned to use would be sufficient for my analysis.

How I Analyzed the Data

I analyzed my data through my pictures, observations, and pen pal letters.

(Appendices D, E, H) The pictures were a great form of data in term of showing how the children felt about the pen pal program. The happy, enthusiastic expressions on the children's faces as they opened and read their letters from their community pen pals was just one of the ways I could tell they were enjoying the bond they had made with their new found friends. I could see a sense of pride and ownership in their faces as one picture shows an eager boy sharing his letter with another student. The pictures also gave me an idea of who was on task and attentive and who was struggling to stay focused during my introduction to the pen pal program and my mini lessons. While I am teaching it is hard to observe the students, so the pictures were able to capture those moments for me.

The student and community pen pal letters were very telling as to how the children and community interacted with each other. I observed many positive interactions between students and community pen pal members. The children were eager to include drawings, pieces of artwork, and other artifacts that were sentimental to them. The community members reciprocated and also attached materials and gifts to their letters.

I then looked at responses to the student and community member surveys.

(Appendices F, G) I tried to see if there were common trends between the two groups. I tried to analyze the surveys and see if there were some questions that had many similarities and see why those questions would be answered in the same way. I also looked for those surveys that may have differed from all the rest, and see why this may

have happened. I had to determine whether these outliers were significant or if it was just quite rare for it to occur that way.

C. What I Learned and Now Know

Findings

Through the data that I have collected, the pictures that I have taken, the video that I have recorded, and the student work that I have gathered, I was able to develop several claims about the pen pal program. I looked back at my initial wondering: *Can bringing the community into the classroom through the use of a pen pal program increase the student's sense of community while encouraging them to write?* And derived my claims from the work that I had done and the products I gathered from my students.

Claims and Evidence

- 1. Despite a difference in age (and/or gender) students can communicate effectively with community members to form bonds through letter writing.**

Evidence:

I found that no matter what age or gender, two humans can connect, without first knowing each other and form a positive bond through writing. This was evident after reading the first letters my second graders received from their pen pals. The community members were very enthusiastic and curious about learning about their new friend. As the children opened their first letters, they were eager to read and learn about their very own pen pals. This curiosity for learning about one another via writing continued throughout the pen pal experience.

After analyzing the student surveys at the end of the program, it was evident that this was a positive experience for both groups, 20 out of 21 students said that they really

liked writing to their community pen pal. Only one child said they were unsure of their experience. Out of the 17 surveys that I received back from the community pen pals, 15 said they strongly agreed while 2 said they agreed that they enjoyed writing to their second grade pen pal. (Appendix G)

The students were asked if they learned a lot about their community pen pal by reading their letters. 19 out of 21 students said yes and 2 were unsure. The community pen pals also responded to a similar statement. The statement said, "I learned a great deal about my second grade pen pal by reading his/her letters." 15 out of the 17 community members strongly agreed that they learned a lot about their second grade pen pals through this pen pal program. (Appendices F, G) One community member stated, "I enjoyed answering my pen pal's questions and reading her responses to my questions."

As the children and community members connected through their writing, I was sure the experience would be strengthened when they would finally meet in person at the Pen Pal Tea.

The Pen Pal Tea expanded on the pen pals' writing relationship as they interacted socially among the other pen pals in room 25 at Grays Wood's Elementary. The children were not shy with the diverse group of community members. They proudly found their community member, showed them to their seats, and began communicating with them about their letters, school, personal life, and the day. The afternoon was filled with smiles, laughter, gift giving, food, and the building of friendships, some of which I thought would be unlikely considering the age and gender differences.

The community surveys provided me with a lot of positive feedback in terms of how the community felt in general about the pen pal program. After compiling the

comments, it is apparent that the community members enjoyed their experience. One community member wrote, “It was delightful to connect with a child of this age. I found out what they think is important. It’s always good to see the world from a child’s perspective!” Another said, “Community involvement in schools is a good thing. Being middle-aged, it was interesting to be back in second grade!” Many of the community members thanked me for making them a part of this experience, and they mentioned they were glad they participated in the program. (Appendix F)

2. Pen pal writing increases student enthusiasm for writing as well as one’s motivation and involvement/ownership in the writing process.

Evidence:

As the weeks progressed, it became clearer that the students enjoyed and preferred this type of writing. By the time the students were writing the second letter, I was noticing that even some of our less enthusiastic writers were motivated and involved in the letter writing process. The children that I usually see pouting in the corner when we do our unit writing, or those who just write the bare minimum were at their desks or at the table with Mrs. Abrams writing away. One of these students approached me in the middle of writing and said, “Miss. Mandetta, Look how much I am writing, and it is on the white paper too!” This particular student was accustomed to writing smaller amounts and on green paper, which would not fit as many words. He was thrilled to be writing on the smaller lined white paper that could fit more words. (Appendix I) For this child, this writing experience has increased his motivation for writing and encouraged him to write more than he had on his past writing assignments.

There was a commonality among the children as we waited to hear back from our community pen pals. When some of the children would walk in and check our daily schedule many would ask, “Are we writing to our pen pals today?” One student in particular asked, “When do we get to read our next letter because I can’t wait any longer!” I was impressed at how inspired the children were by their community pen pals. (Appendix H)

This type of writing program masked itself as a social or fun activity. Most of the children did not see this as our usual unit writing activities, but instead as a special activity. Little did they know that they were actually writing and learning while also having fun at the same time.

- 3. Teachers must be flexible in their approach to involving community outreach, but it is possible if they are willing to put in the time, effort, and energy to make this a success.**

Evidence:

The road to finding community members for this pen pal experience was not as smooth as I had originally thought. With the Village Retirement home right down the street I thought it would be a great idea to pair each retiree up with each one of my students. Since most Village retirees are Penn State Alums I thought the educational background would benefit the students. Since I was doing this inquiry for my own professional growth, I thought they would appreciate that fact and be willing to help me accomplish my goals. After contacting a personal resource representative from the Village, I was told that I could only have contact with the retirees through inner mail. I designed an information sheet that described the pen pal program and provided contact

information if they were interested in participating. (Appendix A) After a week of waiting, I received no phone calls and after playing phone tag with the PR representative from the Village, I was told that these types of programs do not work well among their retirement communities. I was taken aback by this comment because my initial idea for the program was to have retirees because they would have the free time to put into writing letters, and I thought many of them may have grandchildren and could relate to an experience like this one.

I continued my efforts with the retirement home idea and went to my mentor for advice. She had a father-in-law at Brookline Village, a retirement home in the area. I had her pass along my information sheet so he could put it on a bulletin board in the mailroom where most of the retirees could see it. (Appendix A) After a week, there were still no calls. I decided to take a personal visit to the retirement home with my roommate. She had a grandma who resided there and we met her for dinner. I went around the dining room passing out my informative sheets, thinking I could personally appeal to my older audience. The retirees, were very kind and seemed somewhat interested in the program but after a week of waiting, no calls. For the sake of time, my efforts in the retirement community had to come to a close. I could no longer waste another week trying to find any retirees who were interested, let alone 21 retirees. It was time to find a different type of community.

As a member of the State College Area community for 22 years, I decided to use that to my advantage. I sat down and thought of a diverse (in terms of age, gender, and occupation) group of people within the community that I already knew who would have the time to participate in this pen pal program. I made sure the list of people consisted of

a wide range of ages, occupations, backgrounds, etc. Once they agreed to participate, I paired them up with my students according to interests.

Knowing these community members personally made it easier for me because I felt comfortable calling to talk to them throughout the program. If they had a question or concern, they also felt comfortable calling me.

4. The pen pal program improved the children's writing skills in terms of using the friendly letter format and asking interesting questions when writing to their pen pals.

Evidence:

Earlier in the school year the children had some experience with letter writing, but this program emphasized letter writing, the process, and the format involved. After reviewing the children's pen pal letters and looking over the community and student surveys, it is clear that the children learned about how to set up a friendly letter and how to ask interesting questions.

In the second grade survey, 16 out of 21 students said the pen pal program helped them learn to use a friendly letter format better. 4 students said they were unsure and 1 said that he/she did not think that the program helped him/her use a friendly letter format to write letters. Of the 17 community members that responded to the surveys, 16 said they strongly agreed that their second grade pen pal used the friendly letter format with increasing levels of effectiveness in their letters. (Appendices F, G)

In terms of writing more interesting questions, 20 out of 21 students said they could write more interesting questions after writing the pen pal letters. Out of the 17

community members, 13 strongly agreed that the children wrote interesting questions in their pen pal letters, 3 agreed, and 1 was unsure. One community member thought that it was interesting that her pen pal asked her how many brothers and sisters she had. She said that she was used to speaking (in terms of) “sons and daughters”. (Appendices F, G)

After the pen pal program came to an end I was curious to see if the children would continue to write in a friendly letter format. In our current pioneer unit we are studying now, the children are keeping a diary. In the responses I have observed, I noticed all the children have been using the friendly letter format. (Appendix J) Only a few children still misunderstand how to close their letters, having missed the formatting for the closing of the letters. I will continue to observe the children to see if they use interesting questions within their journals and future letter activities.

D. Conclusions and Future Directions

I will definitely use the knowledge that I have gained as a result of this inquiry when I have my own classroom. This pen pal program has shown me that writing can be fun, exciting, motivating, and most importantly, can bring the community into the classroom. I think that the benefits for the students and community were immense. I feel that implementing this program in my classroom in the future would be beneficial and have a positive impact on the students and the surrounding community. One of my community members wrote, “Schools should continue to do this program. I’m sure there are many [community members] in the community that would enjoy this experience.”

(Appendix F)

This project will have a great impact on my teaching practice for years to come because I will introduce others to this pen pal program and show them my findings. I will encourage my future school to add this writing component to their educational plan.

I have learned that while reflecting on what I do in my classroom; it is beneficial to enhance practices that are already successful as well as those that are in need of change. Based on my experience, extensions and enhancements to practices that are already thriving can clearly promote student-learning outcomes and are avenues that I will explore.

New Wonderings

I was very satisfied with the outcomes of my project but I am still left with some wonderings. I still wonder what my pen pal program would have looked like if my second graders were paired with retirees from a retirement community. I would like to explore this at some point when there are no time constraints. I think that there are retirees who would be willing to write to youngsters, it's just a matter of taking the time to find them. I might also want to look for retirees outside of a retirement home so I do not encounter as many privacy issues.

I am also interested in expanding the length of this program. Because of the limited amount of time I was given to carry out my plan, the children and community members could only correspond with each other for a certain period of time. Many of my second graders showed an interest in extending the program so they would have more time to interact with their pen pals. Increasing this time would only enhance the program, more letters would be added and the children would improve in their letter writing skills, and personal relationships between the pen pals would grow stronger.

I wonder how I would get community members involved if I was new to the area. I think that this inquiry project worked well for me because I have lived here for so long and had personal ties with many community members. This project may not have worked as well for someone who was unfamiliar to the area. Next year, my life may lead me outside of State College and into an area where I do not have easy access to a group of community members. The timeline of the program would have to be extended so more time could be spent reaching out to local community members who would be interested in this type of program.

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