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## **Literary pen pals: Correspondence about books between university students and elementary students**

**Patricia Austin**

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### ABSTRACT

In a semester-long, pen pal exchange between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders with college students enrolled in a Children's literature class, I wanted to engage students in critical thinking about what they read and to involve students in authentic literacy activities. Using qualitative methodology of recognizing patterns and culling themes from more than 200 letters about books, I examined the nature of the letters, categorized the kinds of questions asked, and noted the patterns of communications between the pen pal pairs in order to glean the benefits to both groups. Both elementary and college students learned about books, about themselves, and about one another.

Ideas are often born of social interaction and the seed that grew into this study is an instance of exactly that. During the spring semester that Michelle was in one of my graduate classes in children's literature, we engaged in a deep and ongoing dialogue about literature, children, and teaching in general. When she received word of a new teaching position, we chatted endlessly about plans she had – how she'd schedule her day and how she'd arrange her room to engender the sense of community that she wanted to develop, what books the students would read and how she'd organize book clubs. In an often endless volley, like revved up tennis players, we bounced ideas back and forth. We wanted to work together as a research team in her class and vaguely talked about my observing book discussions. We wanted to explore how kids talked about books and how they created and discovered the meaning of text. It was a

lob shot that came from nowhere when, quite casually, I posed the idea that we develop a correspondence between her third and fourth graders and my undergraduate children's literature students. At first, while both terribly excited about the idea, we thought of it as just a nifty activity. We hadn't yet plumbed its depths and considered the benefits that both groups of students could gain. Only when she began to write her curriculum and I began to revise my syllabus did the seed of the activity germinate into this research study. As with any qualitative study, we began with broad research questions. What are the benefits for the school-age children? What do they learn? What are the benefits for the university students? What do they learn?

### **Rationale – Why pen pals?**

Two issues lie at the heart of the study: 1) engaging students in critical thinking about what they read and 2) involving students in authentic literacy activities. With the increased emphasis in educational literature (e.g., Graves, 1984, 1991; Calkins, 1986, 1991; Harwayne, 1992) that classroom teachers involve students in activities that occur naturally in day to day living rather than in activities that are fabricated, letter exchanges between pen pals who have read the same books provided an opportunity to address both issues.

Projects have documented the benefits of pen pal projects targeting communication between school children and senior citizens (Ashe, 1987; Bryant, 1989; Smith, 1995) and have reported both the development of positive relationships and increased understanding and respect for one another. Pen pal projects between school-age children and participants in teacher education programs (Burk, 1989; Crowhurst, 1990; Curtiss and Curtiss, 1995; Rankin, 1992; Yellin, 1987) reveal benefits to both parties. The preservice teachers provide a model in writing for the young people and develop abilities to observe features of writing and writing growth. Both parties receive the benefit of writing within a meaningful context. The primary aim of the above studies was to create opportunities for personal growth for participants. The nature of the writing, for the most part, was thus generic; pen pals wrote about daily events and concerns.

Two educators tell the benefits of school-age children and university students reading the same novel and meeting to discuss it (McDermott and Manczarek, 1995). Schall (1995) describes an activity with a college-school partnership in which sixth grade students wrote a letter to college students about favorite books and the college students responded. She reported that the letters were filled with “the excitement of reading” (p. 18). Curtiss and Curtiss (1995), searching for engaging ways for second graders to respond to trade books and also to be involved with computers in meaningful ways, encouraged the children to write via the Internet to college students about books they were reading. The children learned that writing was real communication and began to view reading material as interactive. Preservice teachers saw the connection between learning processes of reading and writing.

Classroom teachers are always looking for new ways to have students explore books – that is, to look at characters, to appreciate writing style, to heighten understanding of what it means to be human through rich and deep personal connection between their lives and literature. In teaching Children’s literature at a university, I want the same for my college students. In addition, since many of the preservice teachers have had little or no contact with young students in an academic setting, I want to provide the theory-practice link so crucial in a teacher education program. University students often ask me how elementary students react to certain books, or they conjecture student response. The pen pal link can enable them to see and hear first hand reactions of young readers. As a research team, Michelle and I began the pen pal project fervently hoping that the place of discovery could be within the letters that the young people and college students would write to one another. Having little idea what truly would happen, though, we adopted a we’ll-see-what-happens attitude.

### **Project participants**

Michelle’s multi-age elementary class of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders included fourteen boys and thirteen girls. She incorporated reading throughout the curriculum as students read and researched various topics in history or science, but primarily she taught reading through having Book Club dis-

cussions, which one nine year old described this way in a letter to his college pen pal:

*A book club is when a bunch of people that are reading the same book get together to talk about what they read. For example lets say someone is reading ZIA they would met together (the other people reading the book.) 2 days a week and talk about what they read.*

Michelle read aloud to the children at least once daily (often more); children had frequent opportunities for free reading during the day and were expected to read at home daily. She also incorporated writing throughout the curriculum. Clearly, she designed a class that provided a language-rich environment.

My university students were predominantly enrolled in the class in Children's literature as a requirement of the teacher education program. The literary pen pal project was a required component of the class.

### **Implementation**

At the beginning of the semester, I introduced the pen pal project to the university students. The following explanation is an excerpt from the syllabus:

*At the core of our learning this semester will be reading and communicating our thoughts and feelings about books with children and with one another. Each of us will be maintaining a correspondence with an elementary student. Here's how it works: We'll read many books in common, by virtue of reading them aloud in class or having them as assigned reading. Other books that the children write about, you will find on your own and read. . . Since both of you will have read the same material, you will not need to retell the plots, but rather can discuss characters, symbolism, relate how books affect you personally, or make connections with other books.*

(For further directions provided the students about the way the project worked, see Figure 1.)

**Figure 1**

**University students were expected to:**

- Respond weekly to the school-age child
- Write to the instructor at three designed intervals reflecting on what they noticed about the correspondence to date
- Maintain a sequential portfolio of the correspondence, i.e., each letter from the child, a copy of each of their own letters to the child, the letters to the instructor
- Complete an analysis of both their own and the child's letters

**The school-age children were expected to:**

- Write weekly letters
- Complete an analysis of their pen pal's letters

**The university instructor was expected to:**

- Serve as mail carrier collecting and delivering the letters
- Write to any child whose pen pal did not submit a letter
- Share literature with both groups
- Respond to college students' letters about correspondence

**The classroom teacher was expected to:**

- Assign novels for children's reading and conduct book club discussions
- Ensure that children wrote letters by the designated day

At the outset, Michelle and I decided that the teachers' level of participation with the actual writing of the letters would be minimal. While both of us often conducted discussions to provoke thought about books prior to the students' writing their letters, the letter writing was assigned as homework and there was to be little, if any, instructor input.

**Setting the stage for critical thinking**

At the beginning of the Children's literature course, I wanted to emphasize the need to think about books, so I began by reading Chris

Van Allsburg's *The Wretched Stone* since it carries with it a powerful message about the importance of reading. The classroom teacher also read and discussed *The Wretched Stone* with the third and fourth graders who then wrote a "Dear pen pal" letter. In their letters, most third and fourth grade students introduced themselves; twenty-one or twenty-four students wrote about, or at least mentioned, their "book club book," and all wrote something about Van Allsburg's book, two-thirds mentioning that they didn't know what the stone was. The following students' comments capture both the essence of the book and of the community of readers that was engaged in discussing it: *"I liked it how about you? I couldn't figure out what the stone was. Until Niel said they were looking at it like it was a T.V. At first I didn't realize what it was. Then Niel said he thought it was a T.V. and we decided it was. I think the auther was trying to say don't watch to much T.V."* Interestingly, nine out of twenty-two college students acknowledged to their pen pals as well that they didn't know at first that the stone symbolized a television.

### **The research process**

I have to admit that what transpired during the semester looked and felt more like just an assignment than a research project. The letters were one tool among many to attune my university students to critical reading of books, and in the elementary classroom, the students were not only writing weekly to their pen pals but also to their teacher, Michelle. We all simply proceeded with our designated tasks (Figure 1). Although I had begun to write field notes of my visits to the elementary school, I did not sustain this. Thus most of the anecdotal data, the "what happened in the elementary class and in the university class" was in my head. I chiefly relied on the analysis of the portfolios to make sense of and understand what had happened. Thus, the real research began once the mountain of data was submitted to me, and I was, as most researchers, overwhelmed when I faced it. Short of reading all the portfolios, where would I start? What did it mean? At that point, I simply began immersing myself in the pen pal letters, letting order emerge from chaos.

Perhaps because of some lurking feeling that research wasn't real unless I was quantifying something, I began attacking the data with mundane tasks like counting words to ascertain average length of letters

and compiling all the questions asked in order to categorize them. From in-class discussions and from preliminary analysis, I already sensed that questioning was a key domain.

In reading and rereading the letters, I then started to recognize patterns and develop a list of themes. In portfolios, the college students had clearly articulated what they had learned. To glean further what elementary students had learned, I met with groups of five children at a time. I presented each child with the portfolio of correspondence and had them reread their own letters to select the one that they regarded as their best letter. I then chatted individually with the students asking why they selected that particular letter. I also met with the elementary students in a large group and asked what they learned regarding writing about books and what they learned about adults. The social nature of whole class interaction enabled students to feed off and to build on one another's ideas. Hearing one person articulate a thought helped others to clarify their own thinking. Integrating the pen pals' written and verbal thoughts about the process with the letters themselves, conclusions then emerged.

### **Nature of the letter**

Since one of the first questions of the undergraduates as they wrote their first response to the children was the typical, "How long should it be?" and since I couldn't really answer that question at the time, word counts seemed in order. The average length of the letters from the university students was 200 words. The range was wide, however. One student averaged letters that were 53 words while another wrote letters that averaged 469 words. The average length of the letters from the school-age children was 79 words. The range was from 46 to 187. Several university students noted that the longer their own letters, the shorter the child's letter. We could only surmise that letters that were too long were daunting and overwhelming for the youngsters.

Michelle and I were both interested in the relationship that would develop through letters, and after the college students' first letter to me about the correspondence process, we had a hunch that many seemed to be assuming the role of teacher rather than that of mutual learner. The college students, however, did not corroborate this hypothesis -- indeed

many of the college students assumed one role characteristic of a teacher, (that is, questioner). They asked about both books and personal interests. Some of the letters seemed to simply mention books rather than discussing them. In most of the letters, however, both the college and elementary students made comments about book club books or picture books read in class. Comments entailed relating books to life, comparing books, talking about characters, and describing favorite characters or scenes of a book. In some of the exchanges, the writers made discoveries about meaning and gained insight into the books being discussed.

Eleven shared poetry – either their own or poetry that they enjoyed. The pen pals frequently shared drawings, decorating envelopes and the letters themselves. They often recommended books to one another. Several students noted the difficulty in writing to someone they didn't know. To build a friendship, many pairs exchanged personal information about family and friends, activities, and interests.

### Questioning

The issue of questions and the role of questioning emerged early in the research as a key domain. In their final analyses, when asked why they asked questions, the college students articulated that they saw the purpose of questions as stimulating thinking, initiating or guiding discussion, and sparking response. Overall, the university students asked a total of 493 questions about books and 234 personal questions (e.g., about interests, activities, and family) during the eleven-letter exchange. The elementary students, overall, asked a total of 193 questions about books and 111 personal questions. Many questions did little more than provide progress-report information (e.g., what are you reading? How far are you? Have you finished the book yet?). Many of the questions were asked in a yes/no or either/or format (e.g., Did you like it?). While the content of some of the questions could have evoked critical thinking, the format of the questions negated the likelihood that the student would elaborate. A question formulated in yes/no format invites a choice, not a discussion (e.g., “Do you think [*Rose Blanche*] is too disturbing for other children to read?” “I wouldn't want to live in a world like that [*The Giver*], would you?”). More appropriate, a discussion question should be

worded in such a way that “permits a range of answers and openness to alternatives not yet identified” (Dillon, 1994, p. 41).

Many of the questions also tended to be generic rather than specific. For example, the most common question stems were *What do you think of. . .?* and *What did you feel about. . .?* While such questions work well in classroom discussion (Dillon, 1994), they require probing if the issues raised are to be fully explored, and such probing rarely occurred in the letters.

Since one of the key goals was to engage students in critical thinking, I classified the questions utilizing a system which designated cognitive levels (Wilén, 1991). The purpose of convergent questions is determining basic knowledge and skills. Corresponding to Bloom’s knowledge level questions, low-order convergent questions require students to recall or recognize information. Students define, quote, identify, and answer “yes” or “no.” Responses can be anticipated. High-order convergent questions, corresponding to Bloom’s comprehension and application levels, require students to demonstrate understanding and apply information. Students describe, compare, contrast, summarize, explain, interpret, relate, and provide examples. Low-order divergent questions, which are equivalent to Bloom’s analysis level questions, require students to think critically about ideas and opinions. Students discover motives, draw conclusions, make inferences, and provide support for those conclusions. High-order divergent questions, relating to Bloom’s analysis level questions, require students to think critically about ideas and opinions. Students discover motives, draw conclusions, make inferences, and provide support for those conclusions. High-order divergent questions, relating to Bloom’s synthesis and evaluation levels, require students to perform original evaluative thinking. Students make predictions, propose solutions, solve lifelike problems, develop ideas, and judge them (Wilén, 1987; 1991).

In analyzing the kinds of questions, three rates, achieving interrater reliability coefficients of .76, .68 and .69, noted that the college students asked 236 low-order convergent questions, 179 high-order convergent questions, 66 low-order divergent questions, and 12 high-order conver-

gent questions. Elementary students asked 113 low-order convergent questions, 63 high-order convergent questions(see Figure 2).

### **Patterns of communication**

Several patterns of interaction emerged among the 27 pen pal pairs. Five pen pal pairs were not sustained. Four college students dropped out of the course within the first four weeks. One college student did not maintain a sequential portfolio of correspondence. Their exchanges were not included in the analysis.

In eight exchanges, there was little or no responsiveness. In five cases, the college student either did not understand or did not seem to take the project seriously, not reading the same books as the child. Their letters were either largely personal rather than about books, or they were extremely short with no effort to engender critical thought. In four of those cases, the children seemed to echo the challenge given to them. Those who received extremely short letters, just mentioning books, responded in kind. In one exception, however, a child wrote about his reading and also asked questions even though he received little challenge from his pen pal. He did not, though, answer many of the questions asked of him.

In three other cases, the children did not seem to take the project seriously, although the adults that were writing to them did. The children continually failed to have the letter in front of them when they were responding. Either they wrote at home and left the letter at school, or they wrote at school and had left the letter at home. The children answered fewer than twenty percent of the questions asked. Despite the students' apparent lack of interest or lack of organizational ability to carry through with the project, the college pen pals continued to write letters that asked questions and modeled discussion of books, and they maintained a reflective attitude by continually trying new ways to encourage the children's participation, e.g., "*I included my own thoughts and feelings to encourage her to express her feelings,*" one student wrote in her final letter to me. Another wrote:

*I wanted to find out how much students actually get from the books they read. I really don't think, however, that the letters I received are an accurate indication of what 3<sup>rd</sup> graders get from reading. If I were to use my letters as a measure I would have to say that the students get very little from reading. I know this is not true though. Toward the end of our writing I began to get genuinely discouraged. I still don't know whether it was just me. Maybe I just didn't provide the right model. The last few letters were slightly better. I included poems in those letters and they got a better response than all of the other strategies I used.*

Figure 2

**Kinds of questions university students asked about books:**

Low-order convergent	236	48%
High-order convergent	179	36%
Low-order divergent	66	1%
High-order divergent	12	3%

**Kinds of questions elementary students asked about books:**

Low-order convergent	113	59%
High-order convergent	63	33%
Low-order divergent	14	7%
High-order divergent	3	1%

Nine pen pal pairs were moderately responsive. While the letters included some personal information, they were primarily about books. The letters were largely casual and spontaneous in tone. They seemed like written conversations, often rapidly skipping from one topic to another. Both elementary and college students seemed to use little paragraphing to denote change of topics. Children generally answered between twenty and forty percent of the questions posed. Comments about books demonstrated some critical thinking, but little real solid discussion of books developed because the child was either reading a new book by

the time the college student answered, or the college student took several weeks to get and read the book that the elementary student was reading.

One college student noted the lack of discussion in a letter to me: *"The only problem is the letters are so unrelated I don't feel as if I am actually discussing the books. I guess the fact that they are writing about books is good enough but it would be nice to discuss it more."* Both groups seemed to want to write about only the book they were currently reading. A book that they finished last week felt like ancient history.

Particularly successful correspondence could be characterized as responsive and occurred in five pen pal pairs. Both writers seemed genuinely interested in what the other wrote; both took initiative. Even when they didn't keep up with the reading, each made an effort to respond to comments and questions, and yet communication didn't hinge on questions. Both the elementary and college student got to the heart of the book and they often made connections. Children answered more than fifty percent of the questions asked.

### **The Literacy Club**

The patterns of interaction led me to wonder if the adults' interest in literature was evident to children and if the children's interest in literature was evident to adults. A negative or neutral attitude of the college students emerged in such statements as: *"If I get a chance to read it, I will."* *"My teacher says you're getting a new book. I promise I'll read this one."* A child's attitude toward reading is revealed in these exchanges. *"Julie of the Wolves is a terrible book. But my teacher makes me read it. Are you reading it?"* And in another letter: *"I usually read whatever my teacher tells me to read. Adventure usally."* More frequently, however, the feeling that developed was what Frank Smith (1988) refers to as the Literacy Club. The children were pleased that an adult was interested in reading what they were interested in and seemed to hold an expectation that their pen pals wanted to read the novels that they read. One child writes: *"In the Stone-Faced Boy, I'm on chapter 6. Maybe you could [read] the book and we could talk about it in our letters."* Another writes: *"I can't wait till you start reading Julie of the Wolves because it is very exciting."* Even when children didn't elaborate

on books that they were reading, they seemed to feel the importance of having their pen pals read the same books. One university student noted this phenomenon: *“Although it is difficult to get him to tell me what he thinks about the characters and what he is reading, he seems to be very persistent when it comes to me reading what he is. It is as if he wants me to read it and then ask him questions.”*

In several instances, when university students realized that they were behind in their reading and opted not to read a current book but go on to the next book club selection, the child continued to ask about it – e.g., College student: *Are you almost finished reading the book Zia? How do you like it? I did not get the chance to read this book.*” Elementary response: *“I have been finished with Zia for weeks. I thought you were too!”* Although the college student made no mention of Zia in her next letter, the child’s response made another inquiry about it. *“Did you finish Zia? How did you like it?”* Another child wrote: *“In Island of the Blue Dolphins I’m on chapter 20. I hope you catch up soon. I rely want to read together.”* Another child respected a reader’s need for the element of surprise or suspense: *“In Monkey Island I’m in the middle of chapter 9. I’d like to tell you what’s happening but I don’t want to give it away.”* After writing about *The Double Life of Pocahontas*, a child wrote, *“I like history books a lot. I hope you read this book.”* The exchanges were an affirmation for both younger and older students that books are worth sharing. The pen pals acknowledge books as something to talk about even if they didn’t really talk about them.

Further evidence of students’ entrenchment in the Literacy Club is their incorporation of information from books into other comments – e.g., after writing about *Letters from Rifka*, a college student wrote: *“p.s., Can you read my handwriting? Or is it small like Rifka’s penmanship?”* After discussing *The Wretched Stone*, another college student wrote: *“I will have to find Zia or I will be turned into a monkey for not having read it.”*

### **Benefits to elementary students**

When asked to read through all of their letters and determine which one that they considered best and then to explain why, the children

shared what they learned. Eight students said that their best letters were those that “talked most about my book club book” or “had a lot of details.” Seven said that their best letter was about the book that they liked best. Five recognized feelings as most important – e.g., “It has the most feelings and what we thought about writing to each other.” Another student stated, “I have two best letters. They really describe my feelings and a little bit about me and a lot about how they related.” Intuitively recognizing the importance of voice, one student said, “This is my best ‘cause I wrote about what I really felt. I expressed what I was talking about. I was honest. He was honest back so I guess it worked. I said what I had to say.” Four identified their best letters as those they “put the most thought into.” Others recognized their own insight and learning. “I like the one I compared myself to Anastasia. I really thought about it hard. I never realized I was like Anastasia in ways. Even if I didn’t do stuff like her, I could be like her.”

When asked what they learned about adults’ responses to books and about writing about books, the students clearly verbalized their thoughts. They were surprised that “people as old as that would enjoy children’s books,” that “they can actually like them and can learn things.” Some noticed that adults “have such different feelings than us.” Many other young students realized, however, that they shared similar thoughts and feelings about books. One nine year old boy stated that “you think college students are so far ahead of you but we’re more alike than different.” One of the fourth grade girls hypothesized that “adults have strong feelings about adult books but don’t about kids’ books.”

Many students mentioned that writing about books “can help you to understand when you write it out and read it over.” They said that they “get more out of it – like if a book is sad, you realize it” when writing about it. When one student stated that it was an “easier way to express feelings by writing than talking,” many others agreed. (Half of the class said that talking was easier.) One nine year old girl said that “books help you understand when you face a problem in real life and what to do and not do.”

### Benefits to the college students

For the students' final reflective piece, they examined a handout delineating traits of mind of a critical thinker (Stout, 1995) and analyzed the extent to which they demonstrated their own critical thinking about books and fostered the critical thought of their pen pals. They were asked to cite examples both in their own letters and their pen pals letters of looking beyond the surface, drawing inferences, transferring learning, drawing conclusions, comparing and contrasting, predicting, and synthesizing ideas to form a new idea or concept. I also asked that they consider what they learned about books, about children, and about writing about books.

Several students wrote that they discovered "the vast variety of children's literature available," one noting that "I was not as familiar with many of the newer junior novels that dealt with important issues." One student articulated, "I learned that books are a great way for kids as well as adults to learn about different life styles and aspects of life different from their own." One of the older students noted:

*I learned that children's books are much more interesting than I remember from my youth. I had not read any of these books, but I found them enjoyable and thought-provoking. The issues were very different from the ones I remember. I found it was good to read about situations in life that presented problems, and showed children what could be done to resolve the problems. The books were written with descriptive, musical language that held the reader's attention and encouraged the reader to continue. The illustrations included much more detail and feeling than I had seen before this class. The different media and styles gave the stories life and encouraged imaginations. I found children's books to be very complicated and able to reach many layers.*

Other students realized the role that books could play in communicating with children. "I learned that a book is a great way to start a conversation with someone about something important in your life. The book is what helps you back up what you are feeling and expressing. Many times after reading a book new emotions and ideas are discovered,

and these are what keep us relating books to our lives and vice versa.” “I learned with [my pen pal’s] help that books are a way to view life and often a way to escape life. Children often see books in a different light than [sic] we as adults but no matter the age books are the most precious tools one can have.”

Considering that most of the university students anticipate becoming teachers, what they learned about children was perhaps even more valuable. Many students noted that they had underestimated children’s abilities. “I learned that kids can understand the books and point out the obvious things in a simple way.”

*I learned that kids are pretty observant when reading, and they do comprehend things that you may not think they would. The best example. . . was when we talked about Pink and Say. I asked her what she thought about Momo Bay and she went on to talk about people being treated equally no matter what their skin color is. I think I have learned children are more perceptive than I gave them credit for.*

Another student corroborated this:

*I learned that children are more capable of reading things into picture books than I had previously thought. Children develop a morality and a value structure as they read good books. They learn to empathize with characters who may be from a different racial or economic class. Yet, because their writing level is not as high as their reading level they may not express all that they have learned in their writing.*

One student seemed almost surprised “that many of the things we notice are noticed by children. They seem to get the same things out of books as we do despite the age differences.”

Other students clearly had a different vision of students’ abilities as a result of their eye-opening experience. “I was able to see better how diverse their capabilities can be. I couldn’t help but notice the difference between [my pen pal’s] writing capabilities compared to that of

[my daughter]. I think it is important to keep expectations high." Another student noted "I became aware of the 'realness' of the level of ability in a third grader. Not everyone is alike, and this is only one child, but this could very well be one of the students in my future classrooms." Several other students realized the challenge that lay ahead for them as teachers. "I really enjoyed reading these books that we shared and having a pen pal to discuss them with, but I also learned that trying to get a child to discuss them and his or her feelings can be quite difficult." "It was interesting to see how a young child reacts to books. However, I thought these kids might have been too young. I felt like I would get a better response from them if we were talking face to face."

*I realized that it will be a challenge to withdraw opinions from certain [children]. While some children are eager to answer and consistently volunteer what they think not every child is that way. The challenge will be to get those reserved students to answer more often. This has taught me to lower my expectations of students. I shouldn't expect every child to be an overachiever. This should not have come as a surprise due to the fact that I never was much of an overachiever.*

Of course there are always the disheartening comments as well: "I have 2 children already so I never learned anymore on children." Fortunately, such comments are counteracted by others: "I am so glad that I had the chance of meeting my pen pal. Through her voice I have awakened the literature within me. She has been a gift and I will always value our friendship."

Since writing about books in response journals, dialogue journals, and reading logs are popular and effective methodologies frequently employed in classrooms today, the knowledge that the preservice teachers gained about writing about books may well serve them in good stead. "My later letters written by my pen pal tended to stimulate conversation about books in depth. We both learned to ask questions that caused us to think." Another student stated, "I found it easier to bring up issues in a letter rather than in a conversation. Sometimes children (and adults too) feel intimidated to answer if they are unsure of their response, whereas

when not speaking directly to someone it is easier to open up. Questions can be answered without feeling pressured or ‘put on the spot.’”

Some students discovered as much about their own process of writing about books as they did about the children’s process. “[Writing letters] has also taught me that when writing about books to any age group, but especially with children, to let the feelings and ideas you get from the book out onto paper. I did not do this in all of my letters, but I see now how much more meaningful the writing process is when you do so.” Others wrote: “After reading the *Traits of Mind of a Critical Thinker* I deeply realized how much richer I could have written my letters. . . I could have shared more on how I felt about the books, but I didn’t. I needed to get into the books more. For me, it was fast paced;” “I need more practice and training in getting children to express their ideas. I also think that interacting with the children on a daily basis will enable me to communicate better with them;” “Corresponding with a pen pal about books was a difficult but very interesting assignment. I enjoyed the process but didn’t feel well prepared for it. As I look back on the letters now, I see things I could have done differently.”

One student articulated the need to be more than just a teacher. “I also learned how you have to get to know someone personally before you can write to someone. You have to get rid of the feelings of strangers. The only way to do this is to tell the person about yourself.”

### **Final reflections**

There is a common saying that states - if you don’t know where you’re going, you’ll end up someplace else. The initial experience with pen pal exchanges between university and elementary students led me to modify this saying. If you know where you’re going but you’ve never been there before, you’re going to need a map. Despite our initial we’ll-see-what-happens attitudes, Michelle and I *did* know where we wanted to go. We wanted to have students at both educational levels think and write deeply about books. We wanted the pen pal exchange to be a forum through which students learn how to learn. We discovered that in order to make those goals happen, we needed a greater degree of intervention.

In the research, we began to develop the map, the delineation of our own roles in the process. We needed to devise ways to achieve greater responsiveness and to heighten critical thinking. One clear problem involved access to books. On a procedural level, we needed to find ways for the college students to have more ready access to books which involved more advance planning. We also needed to provide a checklist of what book each child was reading rather than depending on the letters as the forum to exchange that information. Too great a lag time existed and too great a portion of each letter was devoted to “what are you reading now” kinds of information.

For the elementary students, Michelle needed to place a greater emphasis on writing for an audience and the notion of communication. For example, she could discuss the issue of invented spelling as an inhibitor of communication – making the students aware that the audience tends to focus not on what is said but how it is said. She also needed to demonstrate how to develop ideas. We both needed to articulate our own goals to participants more clearly to maximize the opportunity for both groups of students.

For the university students, I needed to help them develop the skills of observation – to notice how and when a child created an opening for responding, and help them understand the importance of framing appropriate, relevant, and valuable questions, and to have them practice asking questions that are formatted to invite elaboration. In short, I needed to heighten awareness to enhance their responsiveness.

These thoughts led me to think about the issues at the core of the student – reading for critical understanding and using authentic literacy activities in the classroom. With the first semester of the project behind me, I began to see those notions as almost mutually exclusive unless I reconceptualized the notion of authentic activities. When we began the correspondence, I conceived of an authentic activity as an event which occurs naturally in the course of living, as letter writing can. I felt that I had toyed with the authenticity enough just by prescribing that the students would write chiefly about books, not necessarily a typical topic of letter writing. Both Michelle and I intuitively decided that the relatively

unmediated nature of our correspondence would somehow make it more authentic. After all, when is someone looking over our shoulders and advising us about what to write and how to write to friends? Thus, the only interventions included my response to whatever verbal comments made by both populations and my response to what the college students wrote to me about the correspondence process. I now clearly see that writing to real people who will write back (as opposed to writing a letter to an imaginary person or to a character in a book) is authentic, regardless of the degree of intervention. However, the critical thinking and modeling, by and large, simply wasn't going to happen on a large scale unless I systematically read and responded to the letters that the university students wrote, noting points to which they could have been more responsive, suggesting ways that they could have elaborated, guiding them how to format questions, and correcting blatant errors in use or spelling. Clearly, since the college students articulated that the purpose of questions was to stimulate thinking and to initiate discussion, and since more often than not, the thinking and discussion did not occur, the students needed the guidance to make happen what we all wanted to happen.

The methodology of letter exchanges is a viable one. The motivation was as keen on the last day as the first; both groups really looked forward to getting letters. Many university students advised me to continue incorporating this assignment into the syllabus. "I feel this has been a successful and interesting project," one student stated. "It was great fun writing to this child, and this is definitely something that I think you should do again in children's and even in adolescent literature classes." The college students were not alone in deriving benefit and finding pleasure in correspondence. The elementary students couldn't wait to get new pen pals.

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