



# Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

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College of Education  
Western Michigan University



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**July 2000**

**To The Readers of Reading Horizons:**

**The staff of Reading Horizons apologizes for the delay in getting out this issue. We have had a turn-around in staff personnel and the loss has caused us to miss scheduled deadlines. We apologize for any inconvenience this delay may have caused and trust you will read on and stay with us as we experience other changes in our journal and staff. Thank you for your patience and continued patronage.**

**Sincerely,**

**Karen F. Thomas  
Editor**





*READING HORIZONS:*  
A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Editor: Karen F. Thomas  
Executive Assistant: Susan Standish

Begun in 1960 as a local newsletter, *Reading Horizons* has developed into an international journal read across the United States and Canada, and world wide. Devoted to literacy instruction and research at all levels, the *Reading Horizons* tradition is to serve as a forum of ideas from many schools of thought. Through original articles and research reports, theoretical essays, opinion pieces, policy studies and syntheses of best practices, *Reading Horizons* seeks to bring together school professionals, literacy researchers, teacher educators, parents and community leaders as they work collaboratively in the ever widening horizons of reading and the language arts.

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*There is no more crucial or basic skill in all of education than reading.*

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# **READING HORIZONS**

**Volume 40, Number 4**

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## **Exploring the use of three level guides in elementary and middle school classrooms**

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**Nicole J. Ashley**

**Christy Emerson**

*Fairforest Elementary School*

**Christi Medlock**

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**Tammy Smith Owings**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Collaborative classroom research among a group of elementary and middle school teachers provides insight into the effective use of the Three Level Guide. Building lessons around content area materials, teachers employed the Three Level Guide regularly, coming together to share successes and frustrations and to offer suggestions. Their reflective analyses of the use of the Three Level Guide offer insight into its impact on teacher effectiveness as well as its impact on students' academic achievement, critical thinking ability, and academic esteem.

As reflective professionals, we all search for techniques, strategies, and approaches that support our students and increase our effectiveness.

We want our students to think critically; we want our students to learn independently; we want our students to feel academically confident and competent. We want to grow professionally — learning from experience, learning from the wisdom of colleagues and researchers, and learning from astute observation of our students. Certainly a vehicle for stimulating professional growth is classroom research. Particularly when research is a collaborative endeavor, the opportunities for new insights, new ideas, and new options increase significantly. Based on our working together during the fall of 1997, the six of us offer an example of collaborative research. Continue for our story.

### SETTING THE STAGE

Effective teaching and learning are active processes. Good teachers set the stage for learning — choosing material carefully, designing thought provoking questions, modeling higher level thinking, and promoting good discussion. They communicate to students that reading is an active, not a passive, activity during which the reader “constructs” personal meaning (Cambourne, 1995). Furthermore, as teachers design and model increasingly complex questions, they shape both the way students think and students’ expectations about reading comprehension (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton, and Kucan, 1997; Goldenberg, 1993).

Herber’s (1978) Three Level Guide is a tool for interacting with specific text or information while teaching students how to interact or construct understanding on three different cognitive levels — literal, interpretive, and applied. Vacca and Vacca (1996) elaborate on these levels noting that at the literal level the guide helps the reader identify the important information stated directly in the text. At the interpretive level, the reader must discern significant relationships among ideas in the text, while at the applied level, the “reader attempts to seek significance or relevance in the text” (p. 233). These categories, rather than being rigid and discrete, are interactive and thus inseparable. Given that the reader brings varying life experiences and background knowledge to the classroom and the task, the stage is set for a dynamic learning opportunity.

The Three Level Guide provides scaffolding for students — structuring their interaction with the text and shaping the quality of their responses whether completing the guide independently, with a partner, or with a small group. Teachers' use of the Three Level Guide provides an effective framework for classroom discussion, engages students in higher level thinking (Ruddell, 1991) and develops metacognitive awareness of varying cognitive levels.

#### DESCRIPTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Seeking to investigate the power and flexibility of Herber's (1978) Three Level Guide, the five authors who currently teach in elementary and middle school classrooms incorporated a Three Level Guide into their instruction once a week for eight consecutive weeks. Researchers experimented with the (1) design of the guide; (2) procedures for incorporating the guide in each lesson; and (3) the impact of the guide on the academic achievement, critical thinking ability, and the academic esteem of their students. During the period of research, teachers analyzed and discussed the use of the guides on a weekly basis considering variations in how each guide was designed and implemented, the successes and frustrations in using the different guides, and thoughts about future use of the guide. What follows is a melding of these discussions.

#### VARIATIONS IN THE DESIGN OF THE GUIDE AND HOW IT WAS USED

Though variations in the design and use of a Three Level Guide are highly appropriate, the guide is basically constructed of teacher developed statements or questions on three levels — literal (reading the lines), interpretive (reading between the lines), and applied (reading beyond the lines). Students, in completing the guide, are led to construct meaning on three levels, defending their answers with information from the text or from their background experiences.

#### Christy E.

With kindergartners, Christy used the guide orally to nourish language development and listening comprehension. Using informational books and *Weekly Reader* magazines related to her current thematic unit, Christy first introduced the book or *Weekly Reader* by having children

discuss the cover and pictures and make predictions about the selection. For example, Christy read to her kindergartners a simple book about bats. After having children make predictions based on the title and cover, Christy asked her students: “(1) What do most bats do at night? During the day?” — a literal question; (2) “Why do people sometimes say, ‘You’re as blind as a bat!’” — an interpretive question; (3) “If you were a bat, describe the body part that would be most important to you” — an applied question.

Christy found this particular guide, as well as others, worked best if she interspersed her questions during oral reading. An assistant recorded abbreviated versions of children’s responses on chart paper headed with the questions. Two techniques encouraged thoughtful answers. When Christy asked a question, she frequently reminded her students to take a few minutes and think before responding. If children struggled, Christy found that restating the question in a slightly different way often allowed success. A second technique was to have children talk over a response with a partner before sharing with the larger group. Follow-up conversation was often punctuated with comments such as “That’s what you said,” or “we talked about that too.”

Throughout her research, Christy found interpretive questions most difficult for her students. During one discussion, Christy asked, “If a squirrel has not stored enough food for the winter, how or where do you think it would find more food?” Only with significant prompting was a student able to respond, “They could find seed in a bird feeder.”

### Nicole

Using Three Level Guides during her social studies lessons, Nicole provided scaffolding for her second graders by completing the first guide as a whole group, completing the second and third guides in small groups, completing the fourth and fifth guides with a partner, and finally having students work independently. Unlike Christy’s kindergartners, Nicole’s second graders were provided their own copies of the Three Level Guide. Expecting students to give an oral reason for each response, Nicole recorded a sample of responses on chart paper. Though in her first guide, Nicole wrote questions at each level, she later experimented with statements as opposed to questions (see Figure 1). Wanting

to encourage careful consideration of the statements, she inserted one statement at the literal level which was untrue. Nicole found that students were less comfortable with statements as opposed to questions and that they had greater difficulty going back to the text to support their answers in response to statements than they seemed to have with a question format.

Because many of her students were still emergent readers and writers, Nicole found that her students were more attentive if she spread the Three Level Guide activity over two days of instruction. As with Christy's kindergartners, Nicole's second graders, particularly her weaker students, found work at the interpretive level most difficult. For example, Nicole asked the interpretive question, "How is a community related to a neighborhood?" Even though her second graders knew the definitions for both a community and a neighborhood, they struggled with combining the definitions and articulating a reasonable relationship.

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Figure 1. Example of a three level guide used in a second grade social studies lesson.

Living in Communities  
What is a State?

After reading about states, I would like for you and your group members to read these statements and put an X beside the ones your group feels are true. If there is a statement that your group feels is not true, do not put anything beside it. We will discuss the statements when all groups are finished.

The information in your book will help you with the first two.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ A state is made up of many communities.

2. \_\_\_\_\_ There are 49 states in our country.

Be careful with number 3. You need to use your brains.

3. \_\_\_\_\_ Columbia is the capital of South Carolina.

Use the information from your book and your brain to figure out number four.

4. \_\_\_\_\_ If you were to visit another state, that state would have a different capital than your own and a different governor.

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Kelly

Working with social studies materials, Kelly introduced her first Three Level Guide and discussed the questions with her students. Students were then to read the text silently and work with a partner to answer the questions. Finding that students tended only to search for answers rather than really read, Kelly tried presenting the Three Level Guide on a transparency before students read; once they completed the reading, they were given a copy of the guide and asked to answer the questions independently. This technique proved more effective in having students actually read the material.

In trying to maximize the benefits of the Three Level Guide and to emphasize the relationship between a question and the source of the answer, Kelly borrowed from Raphael (1982) her notion of Question-Answer Relationships. Directions for literal items indicated that the answers were "right there" in the text; at the interpretive level, directions noted that the reader must "put it all together" or "think and search;" directions at the applied level indicated that responses must be generated by the "author and you" or "on your own" (Alvermann and Phelps, 1998; Pearson and Johnson, 1986; Raphael, 1986). Wanting to use the Three Level Guide as a vehicle for having children express themselves in writing, Kelly experimented with true/false statements at the literal level; students were required to correct in writing any statements which were false. At the interpretive and applied levels, Kelly used questions and required students to support their answers in writing. She concluded that the repeated use of this procedure did encourage more thoughtful responses from her students.

Christi M.

For her sixth grade social studies classes, Christi initially asked students to read a passage, to respond to a Three Level Guide individually and then to discuss their answers in heterogeneous groups. However, she found that students tended to wait to work on the questions until they moved into their groups. Her lower achieving students particularly were frustrated by the application level questions such as "During the 1600's, what kinds of problems might Native Americans from the Great Plains experience if they were suddenly required to survive in what is now Georgia and Florida?" Struggling students tended to search the text for

the “right” answer and only after Christi convinced them to combine their knowledge and ideas with those in the text were students successful.

When she allowed group responses to the guides, Christi’s high achieving students assumed natural leadership roles. Christi recounted the experience of being asked by a student “Why Native Americans didn’t all live in the same kind of shelters?” Before she could respond and to her pleasure, the “leader” of the group, a high achiever, interrupted and began to explain how the immediate environment — weather patterns, building materials, food sources — all influence the kinds of shelter used by different groups of people.

Christi noticed that with repeated use of the guide, some students became careless and spent considerable time socializing; however, she learned that varying the composition of groups and alternating among whole group, small group, and individual work relieved the tedium and encouraged thoughtful work.

### Tammy

Using Three Level Guides in conjunction with a sixth grade social studies unit on the Americas, Tammy, like Nicole with her second graders, found that devoting two class periods to the reading, completion, and discussion of each of the guides maximized effectiveness. After explaining and modeling the Three Level Guide strategy, Tammy experimented with independent and group work. She, like Kelly, incorporated into her directions Raphael’s (1982) Question-Answer-Relationship terminology. For literal level questions, she wrote “You will find the answers to these questions right on the page;” while for applied questions she noted, “You must answer these questions based on ideas in your head, but you must also use the information in this lesson to explain your answers.”

Tammy found that her students’ performance on the guides and comprehension of the material increased if before reading, students brainstormed and shared background knowledge about the next text; then students scanned the text to isolate any unknown words. As a class, these words were defined using the context provided. At that point,



Tammy distributed her Three Level Guide and went over the questions before her students began to read.

Tammy chose to “grade” some of the guides to discover if this increased the seriousness with which students approached the work. In retrospect, she decided that grading was counterproductive. Tammy experimented in using the last of the eight guides as a review of her unit on the Americas; this, she found to be effective.

### IMPACT ON STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

#### Students

With this kind of “messy” classroom research, impact on students is difficult to measure quantitatively. All teachers involved in this research noticed a significant difference in the quality of their students’ responses to questions. Christy noted that her kindergartners’ oral answers became longer and more detailed with the use of the guide. When asked “If you were a squirrel, what kind of home would you live in and what kinds of materials would you use to create your new home?”, A.J., a student usually reticent to share responded, “If there are no holes in the tree, I would build my nest in the crown. I would use the same things that Samuel and Colby said (branches, leaves, grass) and I would use pine needles.” Her students learned that often there is no right or wrong answer; they became willing to accept a greater variety of thoughts and opinions.

Nicole echoed the growth in divergent thinking, commenting that the guide encouraged risk-taking since students quickly learned that a diversity of answers can be correct as long as the answer can be supported or defended. Her students became more skillful at turning to the text to support their answers and more willing to learn by interacting with each other rather than being dependent on the teacher for assistance. Nicole offered a fine example:

*The question read: Is a computer a need or a want? The book had listed the definition of a need and a want but had not made a reference to a computer. I wanted to see if they [the students] could form a relationship on their own and decide how a computer would be categorized. One of the children said, “I think it’s a need because we have one at*

*school to do things on and I have one at home that my dad works on for his job." His partner disagreed with him by saying, "A computer is a want because the book said that a want is something we can live without. We would not die without a computer."*

In a similar vein, Christi noted that this strategy seemed to teach her sixth grade students not to look for the one "right" answer. She noted that her students became more comfortable with making connections between the text and their own lives. Similarly, Tammy commented that the use of the Three Level Guide taught her students how to think about and how to talk about a text. She went on to say that giving students a guide moves them from searching the text to thinking about the text.

These teacher/researchers, particularly Nicole and Kelly, noted that use of the guide had a positive impact on student writing as children formulated answers to interpretive and applied level questions. Both Christy, with kindergartners, and Tammy, with sixth graders, commented on the improvement in students' ability to discuss the text. Nicole added that explaining the text to someone else is often the best way to understand it yourself. She noted that the interaction which occurred in discussing the guides improved the self-confidence of her weaker second graders especially as they learned that all answers have worth as long as they can be defended. Kelly commented that her fourth grade students seemed to gain self-confidence in their work. Tammy remarked that success with the guides enhanced the academic esteem of her sixth graders.

### Teachers

Without exception, Christy, Nicole, Kelly, Christi, and Tammy declared that their work with the Three Level Guides had significantly improved their ability to write questions at the literal, interpretive, and applied levels. Nicole came to a greater awareness that the more time and energy she put into the preparation of the guides, the more her students benefited from them. She had to study her material in depth and word her statements carefully.

Tammy commented that her use of the guide made her aware of the possibility of teaching content and reading/writing skills simultaneously.

She wrote, "I have learned how important it is for students to take responsibility for their learning by knowing HOW to read a textbook. I feel a sense of accomplishment with these guides because I know that I am teaching a life skill. I am giving my students a framework for reading and analyzing text."

### CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

A study of this nature certainly suggests more than it proves. One suggestion emerging from this collaborative research is the value of the consistent use of the Three Level Guide as a vehicle for helping students construct meaning from text. Students participating in this research improved in their ability to respond to questions at varying cognitive levels and to support and defend those responses both in discussion and in writing. The academic esteem of students improved as they became more skillful at approaching new text. As students became bored or frustrated with the repeated use of the strategy, teachers were reminded that any strategy can be overused. The intermittent use of a variety of strategies and techniques to provide scaffolding for the comprehension of text — particularly difficult text — is desirable. Also, as groups ceased to function effectively, teachers found that regularly varying group size improved student attention and achievement.

Specific suggestions for the construction and use of Three Level Guides include:

- Allot time to provide a framework for the lesson before students are introduced to the Three Level Guide; this might involve discussing the pictures in a book before it is read orally, brainstorming background knowledge about a topic, or scanning the text to identify and define unknown words.
- Ask fewer high quality questions rather than larger numbers of poor quality questions.
- Experiment with both statements and questions using the format most effective for your particular students.
- Be aware that for some children interpretive questions will be more difficult while for others applied questions will be harder; be prepared to provide additional scaffolding where needed.

- Discuss questions before students read the assigned passage.
- Model or “think aloud” responding to questions when the guide is initially introduced.
- Adjust the quantity of reading for less able readers.
- Encourage young children to respond independently by drawing responses, dictating responses, or using invented spelling to respond.
- Require older students to defend their answers in writing making connections to specific passages in the text.
- Encourage wider individual participation by using yes/no or true/false response cards during discussion.
- Rotate group arrangements and frequency to offset boredom.
- Give each small group a different applied question and encourage creative presentations of their responses.

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## **The role of questioning: Beyond comprehension's front door**

**Lane Roy Gauthier**  
*University of Houston*

### **ABSTRACT**

Activities involving questions are a time-honored practice in literacy instruction. Since the beginnings of American education, historical accounts of classroom procedures have included various descriptions of the ways in which questions were made a part of almost every literacy lesson. Whether requiring answers involving rote memory or the activation of higher level critical thinking processes, the role of questions in literacy instruction has always been strong. This article presents a six-step strategy for questioning followed by a field-tested group of fifth graders' responses to each step.

The development of students' comprehension of text relies heavily upon the types of questions asked by the teacher (Savage, 1998). This is true for both reading as well as listening comprehension. Traver (1998) suggested that the power of well-thought-out questioning techniques, especially the use of guiding questions, can provide intellectual focus and coherence for an entire curriculum.

Recent advancements in our understanding of the teaching-learning relationship, as well as literacy acquisition, have given rise to a number of notable efforts to develop specific strategies to promote comprehension of text (Beck, McKeown, Hamilton & Kucan, 1997; Brand-Gruwel, 1998; Harris & Katima, 1997; Loranger, 1997; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1996; McMahon, Raphael, Goatley & Pardo, 1997; Ogle, 1986, 1992;

Raphael, 1982, 1986; Saleinbier, 1999; Walpole, 1999). These types of strategies, almost without exception, contain provisions for questioning on the part of the teacher, student, or both. Although the literature is replete with suggestions for improving students' comprehension, there is a glaring shortcoming in many of the strategies. Oftentimes, the recommended procedure does not go far enough in getting the most out of the questions at hand (Gambo, 1997). For example, an activity may be given to a group of students, calling for them to provide written answers for a set of questions and then to share and discuss these answers. Such an activity, in and of itself, is instructionally sound. What it does not reflect however, is the plethora of possibilities to promote reading comprehension beyond the initial written answers and discussions.

Ciardiello (1998) and Pugh (1999) suggested that student-developed questions can enhance comprehension by fostering a synthesis of concepts through practical application, increased motivation, and focusing on main ideas. This thought represents a good starting point, with one possibility being for a small group of students to generate and add questions to the teacher's list, then to provide initial and alternative responses to each item. To further the line of thought, a discussion would be conducted to determine which of the answers to each question is the most likely response. Such a discussion would, of course, necessitate returning to the text to find evidence for the different options which would emerge inevitably. A summative discussion would follow as part of the group presenting its results to the rest of the class.

The remainder of this article presents a step-by-step procedure which incorporates all of the elements in the previous paragraph. This strategy was field-tested over one school year on different groups of students who were members of a 5<sup>th</sup> grade class of twenty-six students. Each step will have two sections, an explanation to the teacher of how to carry out the step, and a report on how that step worked with the first group of students to whom it was presented.

### **Step 1: Choose an appropriate unit of text**

The reading material may be narrative or expository, depending upon your objectives. Possible choices for narrative text include a short novel being read by the whole class or a small group of students, a short

story or trade book, or a novel that you have been reading aloud to the class. If the entire novel, or unit of text, is to be read or listened to eventually, then the activity can be done several times as the students progress through the material. Another option would be to choose only a short section of text from a book which the students will not be reading or listening to in its entirety. Possible choices for expository text include sections from textbooks used in the content area courses, or related books, materials, or periodicals which are informational in nature.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher and this author had already established contact a week before school began. After a long conversation, during which the teacher agreed to assist with the project during the course of the school year, she indicated that she would much prefer the option of reading an entire novel to the class and employing the strategy at periodic junctures, thereby promoting students' listening comprehension competencies. She was familiar with the well-known report Becoming a nation of readers: The report of the commission on reading (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott & Wilkinson, 1985), and was a strong believer in the pronouncements concerning oral reading to the students by the teacher. Specifically, the teacher felt that contemporary students' listening skills are seriously underdeveloped, thus her preference for a listening comprehension activity to begin the field-testing. When discussing possibilities for the novel to be read, this author mentioned that Summer of the Monkeys by Wilson Rawls (Dell, 1976) seemed to be a hit no matter where or how it is used. The teacher said immediately that she would love to try it.

**Step 2: Give a small group of students a set of "jump start" questions and have them generate some more of their own**

Create a small group of students (4-5) in any manner that is deemed appropriate for the desired outcome of the lesson. To begin the activity, you will prepare a set of "jump start" questions based upon the particular material the students in the group have been reading or listening to. After the students have each received a copy of the questions, the teacher will ask them to look over the items without attempting answers. The students will then be asked to add questions to the list which represent other important parts of the material read.



In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the teacher created a heterogeneous group of three girls and two boys, with two being high achievers, two being low achievers, and one being a medium range achiever. The teacher had read aloud the first three chapters of *Summer of the Monkeys* before we tried to implement the strategy during the first week of October. Before giving out the “jump start” questions, the teacher provided each group member with a paperback copy of the book for referencing and double-checking facts. The starter sheet the teacher prepared was as follows:

- 1) What was the name of the main character in the book?
- 2) What do you think the “money situation” was like in the family? Why did you get that impression?
- 3) What kinds of things did the children do for fun, or to entertain themselves?
- 4) Why was what he found in the woods so unusual?
- 5) Who was going to help him out with his plan?

At first, the group was a little confused about adding questions to the list. The teacher clarified matters by saying, “If you were the teacher, what are some other questions you would have put down?” This resonated much better than the original request, and after pondering other important things which had taken place in the first three chapters, the students added these items.

- 6) What did Grandpa’s plan turn out to be?
- 7) Who was the Old Man of the Mountains and why was Jay Berry afraid of him?

### **Step 3: Have the group answer the questions and report the results**

The group will appoint a recorder/spokesperson. The members of the group will then work with each other to provide answers for each of the questions. Tell them that the group must reach consensus on one answer only for each item. When this has been done, the recorder/spokesperson will convey the results to you (with assistance from other group members, as needed). Discuss the results briefly with the students, offering feedback where appropriate.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, this step had an inauspicious beginning, as the students began arguing about who was going to be the recorder/spokesperson. The teacher's first inclination was to intercede in the conflict, but she decided to wait a little longer. After about 2 or 3 minutes the students resolved the issue amicably, as a young lady named Rosa was appointed to the position. The group proceeded to address the questions, but ran out of time. The next day, the activity was resumed and completed within about twenty minutes. The teacher sat down with the group in a partitioned area of the classroom and a discussion began regarding the answers to the questions, which were as follows:

- 1) "Jay Berry Lee."
- 2) "Not very good. Because they lived in a poor place and everything seemed to be real hard for them."
- 3) "Daisy went to her playhouse and Jay Berry went running in the woods."
- 4) "Because monkeys did not usually live anywhere around where Jay Berry lived."
- 5) "His old 'boy loving' Grandpa."
- 6) "He wanted Jay Berry to try to trap the monkeys with hunting traps."
- 7) "He was the guy who took care of all of the little animals in the mountains and was also like an angel or spirit. Jay Berry liked to trap and catch animals so he thought the Old Man of the Mountains was going to be mad at him."

**Step 4: Have the group provide alternative responses and report/discuss the results**

Ask the group to think of a different answer to each question. To help the students along, encouragement should be provided to look at each item from a variety of perspectives. Explain to the students that even an unlikely or far-fetched answer will be better than not giving an alternative response, and that some of the suggestions which were not chosen as the first choice answers in step 3, could serve well as alternative responses. When the group is finished, sit down and discuss the results, having the members offer opinions about why these are possible

responses (collective rationale). Initiate a discussion to reach consensus on whether answer one or two is the most reasonable, and why that is the case.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the students were hesitant initially. The teacher suspected that they may not have been clear about the task. On the spur of the moment, the teacher gave an example which emanated from another part of the first three chapters and which neither she nor the group had included on the starter sheet or group-generated items. Due to the ad-lib talents of the teacher, the group grasped what needed to be done and set about the task of giving alternative responses.

The results, including the collective rationale for the answer as well as the consensus, regarding which would be the most reasonable, were as follows:

1) "Jimbo."

**Collective rationale:**

"Because the whole story happened when Jimbo led his monkey friends to where Jay Berry lived. It was Jimbo's cleverness that made a lot of the story so funny."

**Consensus:**

"Jay Berry is really the best answer for this one, even though Jimbo was very important to the story. Plus, Jay Berry was the one telling the story, and everything said was the way he felt, not really Jimbo's feelings."

2) "They didn't have any money."

**Collective rationale**

"It's not really that they were poor, but they didn't need any money like we do today. They lived on a farm and they grew all of their own food. When they had to go to the store in town, they just traded some chickens

or something if they needed anything. Anyway, Grandpa owned the store so he probably just gave them most of what they needed.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer is probably really the best one, because the way Jay Berry described things, it seemed like they were having a hard time. He even came out and said that money was something they didn’t have, even for the special operation that Daisy needed.”

3) “Daisy liked to tease Jay Berry and give him a hard time and Jay Berry liked to chase and trap animals around the farm and in the woods.”

**Collective rationale**

“It seemed that Daisy really loved her brother but would like to throw him off by teasing him. That would be kind of like fun and entertainment. Jay Berry liked to catch animals and that would be like entertainment, too.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer was really the best because she probably liked to play in her playhouse more than tease Jay Berry. The first answer would be better for Jay Berry too because catching things can be just a little of all the things you do when you run in the woods.”

4) “Because it seemed like they would have run when they heard him coming.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This could be an answer because of the word ‘unusual’ in the question. Even though it was unusual to find monkeys around where Jay Berry lived, it was also unusual to be able to get close enough to see them even if there were monkeys there. Wild animals usually get scared and run when they smell and hear something strange coming close to them.”

**Consensus:**

“The first one is the best answer again, because just about everybody would think about the monkeys being in the Oklahoma woods in the first place.”

5) “Rowdy was going to help him out with his plan.”

**Collective rationale:**

“Of course, everybody knows that dogs are the most loyal ones to you, so you know that Rowdy was going to automatically be there helping when Jay Berry was going to try to catch the monkeys.”

**Consensus:**

“The first answer again was probably the one that most people would think of because Grandpa was really the one who talked to him about it and mainly thought up the plan.”

6) “Grandpa wanted Jay Berry to trap the monkeys, but he knew that the monkeys would be smart and it wouldn’t work. He figured it was better for it to be hard for him to catch the monkeys so that when he finally did he would appreciate it more.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This could have been an answer even though it is far out. Grandpa loved Jay Berry very much and he wanted him to grow up knowing that you had to work hard for things and that nothing is really easy.”

**Consensus:**

“Even though Grandpa probably did want Jay Berry to grow up right, he also probably wanted Jay Berry to catch those monkeys as bad as Jay Berry wanted to catch them. The first answer with the traps is the best one.”

7) “He was just someone in Daisy’s imagination, but Jay Berry was scared anyway. He had always been afraid of ghosts, and this guy sounded like a ghost. This is why Jay Berry was afraid that he might be real, so he wasn’t taking any chances.”

**Collective rationale:**

“This is a possible answer because hardly anybody believes in stuff like ghosts. The answer to the question all depends on whether you want to talk about who he was in the story or who he probably really was, even though the book is all just a big story anyway.”

**Consensus:**

“We think that this answer is a better answer than the first one, because nobody in our group believes in ghosts. We can make ourselves believe it for the story though, because it makes it more fun.”

**Step 5: Share the results of the activity with the rest of the class**

Make room in the schedule for the group to present the results of the activity to the rest of the class. If this is the first group with which you have tried this strategy, have them start out by addressing what they were asked to do and how they went about it. Encourage the group members to point out the junctures in the activity where they were confused, as well as how the confusion was resolved. The critical part of this step should be for the group to report on the questions posed on the starter sheet, the student-generated items which were added, the primary answers to these questions, the alternative responses followed by a rationale for each, and an explanation as to which of the two responses is most feasible. When the group is finished with the presentation, invite the rest of the class to ask questions to any group member and/or to the group as a whole.

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the group eased into the presentation very well, explaining to the rest of the class what they had been asked to do. Comments about points of confusion and how these had been resolved included, “I didn’t know what to do when she asked us to add questions

to the list because no one had ever asked me to help make my own questions before. But when I realized what it meant, I couldn't wait to do something that usually only the teacher gets to do." Another student who added, "I was really mixed up when we were asked to give another answer to each question because usually one is enough. It made me think a little more than I usually do, especially for those questions that seemed like there was no way there could be another answer." The rest of the class was very attentive when the results of the activity were reported, asking a variety of questions when the presentation was completed.

The most poignant issue during the question and answer period involved question number 7, "Who was the Old Man of the Mountains and why was Jay Berry afraid of him?" A number of students in the class objected to the group choosing the alternative answer as the best one for the reason which was given. One member of the class expressed the sentiments of several others by saying, "Just because nobody in your group believes in ghosts and spirits doesn't mean that other people don't. I think that things like the Old Man of the Mountains can exist and that the first answer was really the best one." After the period ended, the teacher assured the students that the discussion would be continued. The discussion did continue the next day, with a truce being forged between the two factions disputing the possible answers to the Old Man of the Mountains question.

### **Step 6: Give each student a chance to participate in a group**

As the school year progresses, rotate all of the students in and out of groups which utilize this strategy. Ideally, each student will have the opportunity to participate in such a group at least two or three times, using a variety of materials (narrative and expository) which have been approached in a variety of ways (listening and reading).

In our 5<sup>th</sup> grade class, the teacher continued to use the strategy throughout the year, not only for material students had listened to, but for narrative text which they had read. With a few modifications, the teacher was also able to utilize the strategy across the subject areas. Each student participated in the group strategy five times: once for the activity reported in this article; an additional listening activity for *Summer of the*

*Monkeys*; a listening activity for another book the teacher read aloud during the second semester; one social studies lesson which the students read themselves; and one science lesson which the students read themselves.

## **Discussion**

As a result of extensive conversations with the teacher during the course of the school year, it was agreed that the strategy was indeed a worthwhile undertaking. The teacher reported the students looking forward to being selected for the group work, which frequently involved persistent requests from several students wanting to be placed in the next group. The teacher also observed that during step 5, the members of the class appeared to be more attentive to and tended to ask more questions of the group than when a single person was presenting something to the class separate and apart from this strategy. She added jokingly that most of the time, it seemed as though they paid closer attention to their peers in the group than they did to her under similar instructional circumstances.

Another observation made by the teacher is that the strategy was more effective when it was not overused. After the initial field-testing in the fall, she implemented it again only two weeks later. In her estimation, the enthusiasm was at a lower level than the first trial. This was addressed by shelving the strategy for about a month and then systematically spacing it out for the rest of the school year. This resulted in each child participating in the group work five times, at approximately equal intervals of time between each engagement.

As part of the five rotations, the teacher applied the strategy to the content areas for each student, once in science, and once in social studies. She indicated that the activity was more involved in these two content areas, namely because it was more difficult to formulate jump start questions which lent themselves to more than one answer. Also, the students tended to generate questions requiring discrete, factual answers which were the only feasible responses. To address this, the teacher reminded the students that even far-fetched alternative responses were better than none (the same thing they had been told when applying the



strategy to narrative material). This actually added a humorous twist to the activity, with some alternative responses bringing laughter to the group during step 5. One example had to do with a student-generated question in conjunction with a science lesson. The question was "What does H<sub>2</sub>O stand for?" The primary answer was, of course, "water." When the time came for providing an alternative response, the group was stumped because no one could think of anything else that H<sub>2</sub>O could really be. Finally, one student said "Why not just say what it is directly? Say 'two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen.' So there, the first answer will be 'water' and the second one will be 'two molecules of hydrogen and one molecule of oxygen.'" A smile came to the faces of the students, teacher and the two observers when realizing that the obvious had been overlooked. The teacher pointed out how amazing language can be, for example, that two things which are exactly the same can sound so different.

A final observation of the teacher was that several students carried the strategy over to their work in other literacy assignments as well as the various content areas. She recorded numerous instances when a student would declare that there were other ways to answer a question or address an issue. The teacher could not recall any point in her thirteen years of teaching when students had been self-motivated to look at responses to questions from so many different angles. There were even instances, for questions requiring higher level critical thinking, when a myriad of answers was proposed. One particular activity toward the end of the spring semester yielded a range of 2-5 responses per question. At the end of the school year, the teacher related that she had asked students why they frequently gave multiple responses to questions, even though it was not required in most activities. Many of them said that they enjoyed it very much when they had a chance to use the "special" strategy which required more than one answer, so they did it on their own during other lessons.

As this project demonstrates, questioning practices need not be relegated to one-step exercises that simply entail a quick response. Encouraging students to examine questions (the teacher's and their own), seek initial answers followed by alternative answers, and have discussions in small group as well as whole class scenarios, expand the network of cog-

nitive connections needed for understanding text. By the use of procedures which take the questions further into students' thinking abilities, higher level comprehension processes are activated resulting in a multi-dimensional understanding of whatever material is read, including different lines of thought, a variety of responses, and diverse points of view.

Although the procedure was field-tested in a very informal manner, the comments of the participants as well as the teacher indicate that it was not only enjoyable, but effective in developing comprehension of whatever was being read by them or to them. The teacher added that she planned on using the strategy during the next school year, with the advantage of including it in her summer planning. This indicates that when teachers judge a strategy to be successful, informal versus formal research paradigms do not seem to affect their decisions to incorporate it into future plans. The area of questioning, and the augmentation of questioning procedures in order to develop students' comprehension of text, doubtlessly play a significant role in the more encompassing pursuit of helping students to understand the use of language in the world around them. Hopefully, this strategy represents a modest contribution to a growing corpus of research dedicated to forging links between what is and what is not possible with the role of questioning in taking students beyond comprehension's front door.

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## **Grades four and eight students' and teachers' perceptions of girls' and boys' writing competencies**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Addressing gender disparities in the results of large-scale tests of student writing, this study examined fourth- and eighth-grade teachers' and students' perspectives on boys' and girls' relative writing competence. Interview and questionnaire responses showed a privileging of girls' writing over boys' writing. Girls' writing was viewed as more detailed, descriptive, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions. To some extent, girls' relative success on large-scale writing assessment may be related to students' and teachers' expectations that girls are more competent than boys in the areas measured in the evaluation rubrics. The results of this study indicate a need for conversations that question an emphasis on conformity in writing and that explore ways to nurture boys' and girls' identified strengths in areas that are overlooked on evaluation rubrics, as well as their identified needs in areas that are emphasized.

Historically and across international borders, large-scale examination of middle-grade students' narrative writing competencies favor girls over boys in their assignment of proficient scores (Afflerbach, 1985; Alberta Education, 1995; Applebee, Langer and Mullis, 1986; Danielson and Wendelin, 1992; Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1995). This trend, together with research indicating a positive correlation between (1) students' self-perceptions and their performance (McCarthy, Meier and Rinderer, 1985; Wachholz and Etheridge, 1996) and (2) teachers' expectations and students' performance (Johnson, 1973-74; Palardy, 1969), indicates a need to examine teachers' and students' perspectives on boys' and

girls' relative writing competence to propose possible relationships between expectations for writing success and the writing performance of girls and boys.

This research investigated the following questions:

- How do fourth- and eighth-grade students in urban, suburban and rural school districts describe the writing competencies of the writers of six narrative papers written by girls and boys at their grade level?
- How do these students describe their own writing strengths and weaknesses?
- How do fourth- and eighth-grade teachers characterize girls' and boys' writing competencies?

#### RELATED RESEARCH

Nistler's (1989) study of first- through fifth-grade elementary students' concepts of authorship is one of a number of studies that found relationships between students' writing success and their goals as writers. In Nistler's study, students' self-perceptions as writers fell along a developmental continuum. At the low end of the continuum was a preoccupation with physical aspects of writing, such as neatness and handwriting. At the high end of the continuum was a focus on the "sense of the text, its appeal to their audience, its form and its topics" (Nistler, 1989, p. 11). No developmental patterns were observed in Danielson's and Wendelin's (1992) study of sixth-grade, eleventh-grade and college students' perceptions of their writing needs. Consistent across all grade levels, however, was a perceived need for more writing and reading experience and a need to improve on skills in using writing conventions in order to achieve greater success as writers. Similarly, Donlon (1986) found an interaction between fifth-grade students' high apprehension and their preoccupation with spelling, staying on track, and selecting a topic.

Gender played a role in students' perceptions of their writing abilities in Cumming's (1994) study of eleventh-grade students. Participating students viewed literacy skills as being more natural for females and perceived hands-on activities to be more natural for males. Furthermore, 29% of females and 37% of males felt that superiority in reading/literature or math

was determined by one's sex. Students whose writing scored in the low and middle ranges comprised the majority (88%) of the group espousing this view. In studies of elementary and middle grade students in Great Britain and in North America (Davies and Brember, 1994; Pottorff, Phels-Zientarski and Skovera, 1996) students consistently described girls as being more competent writers than boys. However, boys considered male writers to be competent to a greater degree than girls did.

A study of nine and eleven year old girls' and boys' literacy attitudes and performance conducted in the United Kingdom revealed that girls were more likely than boys to have positive feelings about literacy and to experience success with literacy tasks (Assessment of Performance Unit, 1982). Swann (1992) proposed that these gender differences may have been the result of students' perceptions of writing as: (1) a passive, quiet feminine activity that elicited little interest from boys; and (2) less intellectually demanding and requiring greater conformity than other subjects. Swann believed that girls' positive attitudes toward writing may have been formed through a perception that they could achieve success through non-intellectual factors such as legible handwriting. In contrast, few or no differences in the reading abilities of girls and boys were found in research studies in Japan (Kagan, 1969), Finland (Thorndike, 1973), and Germany (DePillis and Singer, 1985).

Finally, in research (Palardy, 1969) exploring teachers' gender expectations there was an interaction between American teachers' beliefs about first-grade girls' and boys' relative success in learning to read and the children's actual reading achievement. Year-end reading test results were consistent with teachers' expectations of girls as better literacy learners. A similar study (Johnson, 1973) of Nigerian teachers' expectations also revealed a Pygmalion Effect of self-fulfilling prophecies (Rosenthal and Jacobson, 1968). In Nigeria, where teachers expected better performance in literacy learning from boys, males performed better than their female peers.

The results of previous studies are mixed in terms of finding relationships between students' and teachers' expectations for girls' and boys' literacy performance and their actual performance. This study contributes further information by examining students' perspectives on the writing of other students at their grade level and their self-assessments of personal writing strengths and weaknesses. The students' expectations are compared and contrasted with those of their teachers.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

I selected three classrooms at each grade level (fourth and eighth) within one urban, one rural, and one suburban school district in north central Ohio. In the urban district, a language arts consultant provided a list of teachers who were interested in participating in the study, whereas the principals of the rural and suburban schools provided a list of teachers who could be approached as potential participants. Ninety-seven grade four girls (37 urban, 39 rural and 21 suburban), 104 grade four boys (35 urban, 37 rural and 32 suburban), 85 grade eight girls (30 urban, 21 rural and 34 suburban) and 100 grade eight boys (27 urban, 37 rural and 36 suburban) participated in this study. Multiple classes taught by the eighth-grade teachers participated in the research study. As a result, though nine grade four teachers participated (three females from the urban district; two females and one male from the suburban district; and two females and one male from the rural district) only three grade eight teachers (one female from the urban district; one female from the suburban district; and one male from the rural district) took part in the study.

### *Procedure*

Participating students read three stories written by students at their grade level. On a questionnaire students noted whether they thought that the writer was male or female or if they were uncertain of the writer's gender, and identified gender markers within each story. The stories, written by Ohio students from a nearby district that had not participated in the study, were selected because they exhibited characteristics of both girls' and boys' writing as identified in previous research studies (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel, 1995-96; McAuliffe, 1994; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1991). According to these studies, boys' writing can be characterized by a limited offering of roles for female characters and a positioning of male characters in powerful, risk-filled roles that require independent problem solving to overcome obstacles. Violence and crime are typically found in boys' writing. Girls' writing is defined less rigidly, with the positioning of female characters in both powerful and powerless roles, and the presence of some male characters. Violence may be an element in girls' stories. Characters are more likely to resolve conflicts through the creation of alliances with others, however, than through independent, aggressive action. I pre-

sented the papers to participating students in type-written form, unedited by adults.

In addition, students indicated their own gender and responded to the following questions: (1) What are you good at as an author?; (2) What are you trying to do better as an author?

I elicited teachers' perspectives on girls' and boys' writing competence in half-hour interviews that took place in their classrooms after school hours. Interview questions found in Appendix A served as starting points for the interviews.

### *Data analysis*

Following the calculation of frequencies of students' assignment of gender to the writers of the three papers, a graduate research assistant and I analyzed gender markers within the nine stories using three categories that had guided previous studies (Gray-Schlegel and Gray-Schlegel, 1995-96; McAuliffe, 1994; Trepanier-Street and Romatowski, 1991): (1) relative proximity of the topic to the writer's immediate experience; (2) gender of character in control; and (3) level of violence. In addition, we used one category that emerged from the data; and (4) linguistic competence. The graduate research assistant and I categorized gender markers independently, then compared our analyses, clarifying our rationales for the placement of gender markers when disagreements arose until we reached consensus. A description of all categories of the gender markers is in press (Peterson, 2000). In this paper I focus on linguistic competence, the category that had not been identified in previous studies of gender differences in student writing.

I calculated the frequencies of features that boys and girls at each grade level identified as their writing strengths and needs. Five categories of writing strengths and needs emerged: (1) audience appeal/creativity; (2) description, (3) organization; (4) writing conventions; and (5) length. In addition, some students wrote that they had no writing strengths. I calculated the percentages of the total number of comments written by students of the same gender, grade and school district.

I grouped the gender markers gathered through interviews with the 12 teachers into two categories: (1) demonstrates competence; and (2) demonstrates a lack of competence.



## RESULTS

*Students describe competencies of writers of six narrative papers*

Students in both grades identified the gender of the writers of the three papers they read with less than 100% accuracy. As shown in Table 1, fourth-grade students' accuracy in identifying writers' gender ranged from a low of 4.8% of boys' guesses for a story written by a girl to a high of 69.9% of boys' guesses for a story written by a boy. Eighth-grade students' accuracy in identifying the writer's gender was lowest for a story written by a girl (28.3% of boys' guesses). The highest rate of accuracy (65.9% of girls' guesses) occurred for a paper written by a girl.

Whether students correctly identified the writer's gender or not, their assessment of the writer's linguistic competence revealed a perception of girls as better writers, particularly at the eighth-grade level. Often students who identified the writer as female highlighted certain features, describing them in favorable terms. Students who thought that the writer was male, however, highlighted the same features and described them in unfavorable terms. In the following discussion I compare and contrast gender markers showing linguistic competence that students identified within each of the six narrative papers.

Eighth-grade students privileged female writers over male writers, for the most part, in their description of the story, "Zookeepers," written by a boy. In this story, Anne, who had a "bizarre imagination," came to school with bruises and scratches, telling Byron that the zookeepers were really animals who ate children. Byron visited Anne that night and found half-human and half-beast creatures crawling all over her. He ran to his home for safety, and the story ended with his glimpsing a "small human-like footprint on the window sill." Of students who identified the writer as a girl, four female students described the story as imaginative, and four male students described it as a long story. One female student observed that boys "don't take the time to write a long interesting story." Another female student asserted that "girls have a wider vocabulary like this writer does." Two boys thought that the "big words" were identifiers of a female writer and three girls felt that the story was descriptive and had "great detail." Another girl noted that "boys are not into detail." Finally, a male student identified the "good grammar" as a female gender marker within the story. Students who deemed the writer to be male identified different gender markers. One male

student noted that the writer “uses short words like ‘c’mon.” Two female students assessed the story as weird; one of them adding “it doesn’t make a lot of sense.” Four students, however, felt that the story was imaginative.

**Table 1**  
**Students’ Identification of Writer’s Gender**

Grade; Gender; Title of Narrative	# of Girls & Boys at Each Grade	Guessed Girl		Guessed Boy		Uncertain	
		% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys	% Girls	% Boys
Grade 4							
Girl	95						
<i>Magic Shoes</i>		7.4	4.8	90.5	95.2	2.1	0.0
<i>Clock</i>							
<i>That Rang</i>		49.5	60.8	12.9	4.9	37.6	34.3
Boy	105						
<i>Aliens Attack</i>		6.5	8.7	66.3	69.9	27.2	21.4
Grade 8							
Girl	85						
<i>Untitled #1</i>		32.1	28.3	40.5	45.5	27.4	26.2
<i>Untitled #2</i>		65.9	47.0	21.2	41.0	12.9	12.0
Grade 8							
Boy	100						
<i>Zookeepers</i>		36.5	42.0	51.5	46.8	11.8	12.0

Of the eighth-grade students who identified the writer of an untitled paper as male, one boy labeled the story as short and another boy stated that the story “wasn’t complete, though it sounded good.” In this story, the protagonist, Amber Pierson, turned on the television upon arriving home on the last day of her Junior year. She listened to a journalist reporting on the murder of two Juniors in their home. The story ended as “Amber’s piercing scream broke the stillness ...” Another male student assessed the plot as simple and stated that there was “not a great ending.” A female student felt that the writing lacked description and detail. A male student thought that the writing “made no sense” and observed that the writer “used ‘went’ in pretty much all of ‘his’ sentences.” One boy did find the story to be interesting and asserted, “boys write interesting things better.” The story was penned by an eighth-grade girl. Of those who correctly identified the writer’s gender, a female student thought that the writer was female because

"girls are very creative and imaginative." Two boys who identified the writer as female explained that the writer had used "big" and "precise" words. Two girls and a boy found the writing detailed and descriptive. In contrast, one boy thought that a male writer would have written a better ending, and another boy felt that male writers would use "better grammar."

Eighth-grade students who identified the writer of an untitled story about an archaeological dig as a boy described the writing in mainly pejorative terms. This story, written by a girl, is told in the first person by the leader of a team of "famous archaeologists." In the year 3785, the protagonist finds an "enchanted bag," produces two million replicas, and gives the original to a museum. The income from the sale of these replicas is given to charities such as "Save the Whales" and is used to buy a house and many pets. Two boys described the story as having "poor grammar," one boy found it to have "short sentences," three boys stated there was "not a lot of detail," and two boys felt that there were "no big words." One boy elaborated after identifying spelling errors, "Usually girls would go back and correct them." A female student explained, "there's no main character, plot and setting" and another female student asserted that the story did not have a good ending. A boy observed that male writers "write stuff short and simple" and a girl assessed the writing as "boring and short." One female student stated that the writer "doesn't make any sense." One male student did state that "boys write cool stuff like that," however. Of the students who identified the writer as female, one girl assessed the writing as "imaginative with descriptive words." Two boys felt that the paper was "not exciting." Students who identified the writer as female used no other gender markers showing linguistic competence.

Far fewer fourth-grade students identified gender markers of linguistic competence in the three narratives they read. In a story written by a girl entitled "The Magic Shoes" a boy who identified the writer as male stated, "boys make more mistakes" and a girl assessed the writing in these terms: "not proper English." The assessment of a girl who thought the writer was female was more favorable. She explained that there was "more expression to it." Written in the first person, this story tells of a boy, Miky, who was the last one to be picked when the class played basketball in gym class. After Miky's parents bought him running shoes for his birthday, Miky began "jamming above the rim and was so popular. So everybody was picking [him]."

Students did not use linguistic gender markers to identify the writer of a story, "The Clock that Rang at Twelve Noon," as male. Written by a fourth-grade girl, this story tells of mysterious events that began to occur to a boy and girl after the clock rang at noon. Finally, the little girl made the connection between the clock and the mysteries and abruptly solved the problem by throwing away the clock. Of the students who identified the writer as female, one male student noted that the writer "gave some ideas" and another felt that there was "a lot of excitement in the story." A third male student asserted, "girls mess up on their spelling and sentences," however.

When identifying gender markers in a third narrative, "Aliens Attack" two male students and a female student assessed girls' and boys' writing competence in general terms. This story, written by a boy, is about a boy and a girl who conduct a nonviolent rescue of several humans who have been captured by aliens attacking with guns. One student wrote, "Some boys write kind of good stories" to identify the writer as male. The other student, who felt that a girl had written the story, observed, "Most kids think a girl can't write a good story as that." A female student asserted, "boys write about stupid things like that," identifying the writer as male.

Overall, at the fourth grade level students did not favor one gender over the other in terms of use of writing conventions nor in the writer's success in entertaining a fourth-grade audience. At the eighth grade level, however, there are marked patterns of perceptions of linguistic competence favoring girls.

#### BOYS' AND GIRLS' ASSESSMENT OF THEIR WRITING COMPETENCIES

##### *Perceptions of writing strengths*

Responses to the question regarding students' perceptions of their writing strengths are featured in Table 2. Girls and boys within the same grade level and school district identified similar writing strengths. Few gender patterns emerged. Missing from this table are statements by a number of students at the fourth-grade level asserting their competence at writing and advice on writing a story offered by an eighth-grade boy. All students from the suburban schools gave a response to this question, whereas small percentages of students from other schools did not. The largest percentage of students who did not respond to this question were eighth-graders from the

urban school. Small numbers of fourth-grade students in the urban and rural students and eighth-grade boys in the suburban school stated that they were not good writers.

Students' assessment of their writing success appeared to be contingent to a large degree on their peers' responses to their writing. They identified writing strengths in terms of the audience's emotional response. Whereas exciting, funny, scary/suspenseful, action-filled, emotional, and interesting stories were valued evenly by eighth-grade students, fourth-grade girls and boys singled out their writing of humorous and scary, action-filled stories as particular strengths. Eighth-grade urban girls identified writing strengths in this category with the greatest frequency (68.8%) and their counterparts in the suburban school identified the smallest percentage of writing strengths in this category (30.0%).

No gender patterns exist in the "description" category in which vocabulary, characterization and details are included. Within this category, the interaction between identified writing strengths and grade level and school was most pronounced. The differences between girls and boys within a particular grade and school district were less than 10%. Urban eighth-grade girls identified the smallest percentage of writing strengths (3.1%) and suburban eighth-grade girls identified the greatest percentage of writing strengths (40.0%) in this category.

At the fourth-grade level, girls identified the organization of ideas as a strength to a greater degree than boys did, though the differences were small. The "organization" category I included story and paragraph structure. Eighth-grade students perceived organization as a strength to a greater degree than fourth-grade students did. The greatest gender difference (12.5%) occurred at the eighth-grade level in the rural students' responses.

With the exception of 5.7% of suburban boys, fourth-grade students did not identify their use of writing conventions as a strength. Only rural and suburban eighth-grade students stated that they were strong in their use of grammar and spelling. Suburban girls identified the greatest percentage of strengths (12.5%) within the category of "writing conventions."

Length was not considered a strength by great numbers of students at any grade level and there were no gender patterns in this category. How-

ever, length is a significant factor in students' identification of areas needing improvement

**Table 2**  
**Students' Identification of Writing Strengths**  
**Percentages of Comments in Six Categories**

<b>Strength</b>	<b>Grade 4 Girls</b>			<b>Grade 4 Boys</b>			<b>Grade 8 Girls</b>			<b>Grade 8 Boys</b>		
	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S
School District and # of comments within each group	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=	N=
	50	40	23	34	33	35	32	26	50	25	41	42
Audience Appeal and creativity	56.6	67.5	47.8	55.9	69.6	42.9	68.8	38.4	30.0	36.0	46.2	42.9
Description	30.0	17.5	34.7	29.4	18.2	37.2	3.1	26.9	40.0	20.0	17.0	35.7
Organization	6.7	7.5	13.0	0.0	6.1	5.7	15.6	19.2	14.0	28.0	31.7	7.1
Conventions	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	5.7	0.0	11.5	16.0	0.0	2.4	4.8
Write Long Stories	0.0	0.0	4.3	2.9	0.0	8.6	3.	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.4
Could not identify strengths	6.7	5.0	0.0	5.9	6.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	7.2
No response	0.0	2.5	0.0	5.9	0.0	0.0	9.4	3.8	0.0	16.0	2.4	0.0

- Note: Percentages may not add to 100 within each column because students wrote comments that could not be classified as writing strengths.

## PERCEPTIONS OF WRITING NEEDS

Similar to the patterns established in students' identified writing strengths, there was a greater interaction between perceived needs and students' grade and school district than between gender and students' perceived needs. Students identified writing needs within the categories of "audience appeal/creativity" and "writing conventions" with the greatest frequency. The percentages of students who did not respond to this question ranged from 0.0% of rural and suburban eighth-grade girls and suburban fourth-

grade boys to 12.5% of urban eighth-grade boys. Thirty-nine fourth-grade students' comments and 17 eighth-grade students' comments indicated a general need to become a better writer. The remaining features that students identified as their writing needs are presented in Table 3. This table presents percentages of writing needs within five categories identified by girls and boys at each grade level in each of the three participating school districts.

With the exception of rural fourth-grade students, girls were more likely than boys in their school district to perceive creativity and audience appeal as an area in which they needed to improve as writers. The greatest gender differences occurred in the rural school at the eighth grade where 40.9% of girls compared to 10.1% of boys stated that they wanted to write "more creative and exciting stories." Other descriptors included within this category were: "better ideas," "interesting things and not boring," "funnier," and "more action."

In a gender comparison, the percentages of students identifying writing needs within the categories of "description" and "length" were fairly uniform. Urban grade eight students provided the exception, as 22.3% of girls' descriptors identified a need to write longer stories whereas 8.3% of boys' descriptors did.

With the exception of eighth-grade students in the urban school and fourth-grade students in the suburban school, boys identified writing conventions as an area needing improvement with greater frequency than girls did. Students in the suburban school district identified the greatest number of descriptors within the "writing conventions" category at both the fourth- and eighth-grade levels. Fourth-grade students identified spelling as an area needing greatest improvement, whereas eighth-grade students identified grammar as the area of greatest need.

#### TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GIRLS' AND BOYS' WRITING COMPETENCIES

Teachers who identified gender differences characterized girls as more competent writers than boys. At both grade levels, they described girls' writing as more detailed, descriptive, creative, legible, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions at both grade levels. Teachers explained that girls have a greater propensity toward verbal and written communication than do boys. At both grade levels, teachers also credited girls with greater emotional and intellectual maturity, with more conscientious atti-

tudes, with greater self-confidence as writers, and with a greater willingness to conform to teachers' expectations. With greatest frequency, teachers in both grades across school districts identified girls as careful, hardworking writers and boys as careless writers whose goal was to finish quickly. In addition, the eighth-grade female suburban teacher and one fourth-grade teacher from each of the urban and rural school districts stated that they tried to dispel boys' perceptions of writing as a "sissy kind of thing."

**Table 3**  
**Students' Identification of their Writing Needs**  
**Percentages of Comments in Five Categories**

Areas Needing Improvement	Grade 4 Girls			Grade 4 Boys			Grade 8 Girls			Grade 8 Boys		
	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S	U	R	S
School District and # of comments within each group	N= 30	N= 41	N= 20	N= 41	N= 37	N= 33	N= 36	N= 22	N= 52	N= 24	N= 40	N= 38
Audience Appeal and creativity	30.1	14.7	30.0	21.9	21.3	21.6	22.3	40.9	21.1	12.5	10.1	13.2
Description	6.7	24.4	10.0	7.3	18.9	6.0	8.4	18.1	13.5	8.3	15.0	15.9
Organization	23.3	12.2	10.0	34.1	18.9	12.1	13.9	4.5	19.2	45.8	5.0	10.5
Conventions	10.0	14.6	30.0	12.2	16.6	27.3	13.9	13.6	17.3	8.3	40.0	31.6
Write Longer Stories	13.3	19.5	15.0	9.8	13.5	18.2	22.2	9.1	7.7	8.3	15.0	7.9
No response	3.3	4.9	5.0	9.8	2.7	0.0	11.1	0.0	0.0	12.5	2.5	5.3

Note: Percentages may not add to 100 within each column because students wrote comments that could not be classified as writing needs.

The only exceptions to this trend were in two eighth-grade teachers' perceptions of the best male writers' stories as "more exciting and interesting" than the best female writers' stories and in the urban eighth-grade teacher's observation that girls tended to "use more words than are necessary to express themselves." Table 4 summarizes teachers' perceptions of girls' and boys' writing competencies.



Teachers who felt that writing competence is unrelated to gender explained that they focused on students' individual cognitive abilities and were unaware of any gender differences in students' writing. A fourth-grade female suburban teacher stated, "I don't feel that gender plays as much a part in ability to write as intellectual ability." Two female rural and urban fourth-grade teachers explained that they had "never thought about or noticed gender differences and another rural female fourth-grade teacher asserted that she had not thought about gender differences because she was "too busy with individuals." All teachers observed that they had had good writers of both genders in their classrooms over the years.

These teachers' comments either presented a view of writing as an idiosyncratic process that is not influenced by social or cultural factors, or highlighted the family environment in terms of parents' education levels and home literacy practices as the only significant social influence on students' writing.

#### DISCUSSION

Previous studies of gender differences (Davies and Brember, 1994; Potorff, Phelps-Zientarski and Skovera, 1996) in perceptions of writing competence advocated the need for teachers to examine their gender expectations for student writing achievement. These studies also recommended that teachers promote literacy as both a desirable activity for boys and one in which boys' competencies match those of girls. These recommendations are indicated by the data in the present study, as fourth- and eighth-grade teachers perceived female students to be more careful writers who were willing to take the time to meet the expectations of a writing assignment. They viewed girls' writing as more detailed, descriptive, creative, and showing greater conformity to writing conventions. A shared perception of girls as more highly motivated, more conscientious and more competent as writers than boys was also evident in gender markers identified by eighth-grade students within three narrative papers. In addition, in their identification of gender markers within the six narratives, students at both grade levels perceived that girls' use of writing conventions was superior to boys' usage.

**Table 4**  
**Teachers' Identification of Girls' and Boys' Writing Strengths**

Linguistic Competencies	Girls' Writing				Boys' Writing			
	Grade 4		Grade 8		Grade 4		Grade 8	
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
	U	R	S		U	R	S	

<u>Demonstrating Competence</u>								
Add more Details	2			1 2				
Imaginative; creative	1 1		1					
Legible Handwriting	1 1		1	1	1	1		
Better Use of Conventions	1 2				1			
Teacher Pleasers	1					1		
Risk Takers	2							
Work harder; take greater care								
	1 1 1		1	1 1	2			
More Descriptive					1	1		
Enjoy Writing; more at ease with writing				1 1	1			
Stories More interesting							1	1

<u>Demonstrating Lack of Competence</u>								
Want to get done quickly; careless					1 2	1 1	3	
Find writing boring						1		
Think writing is silly					1 1		1	
Use more words than necessary	1							

However, the results of this study also indicate a need to examine dominant values and standards of good writing. It appears that students' and teachers' assessment of gender differences in student writing competencies were intertwined with values of conformity to writing conventions. Students' perceptions of their personal writing needs also revealed gender patterns in the category of conformity to writing conventions. With the exception of fourth-grade suburban students and eighth-grade urban students, boys identified the use of writing conventions as a need to a greater extent than girls did.

With few exceptions, teachers in this study described the writing strengths of male and female students in terms of the criteria in the scoring rubrics used in the state-wide writing examinations. Because the teachers participating in this study were expected to prepare their students to demonstrate proficiency on a state writing examination, they used the state education department's rubrics to evaluate classroom writing. The rubric focused their evaluation of student writing on criteria that demand conformity to rhetorical conventions: providing supporting details, organization, word choice, grammar, and the conventions of punctuation, capitalization, and spelling (Ohio Department of Education, 1990, p. 3). These scoring criteria parallel students' identified areas for improvement, but they do not reflect the creativity and audience appeal that all participating students identified with greatest frequency as their writing strengths. In particular, the scoring criteria privilege the strengths that teachers and students attribute to girls' writing. To some extent, girls' relative success on large-scale writing assessment may be related to students' and teachers' expectations that girls are more competent than boys in the areas measured in the rubrics.

At the classroom level, teachers might extend the parameters of what is valued in narrative writing by adding criteria to their evaluation rubrics that assess the audience appeal and creativity of student writing, as well as evidence of conformity to writing standards. Student self-assessment could play an important role in redefining dominant values of good writing, as well. In their self-assessment, students might identify the unique twists on familiar ideas that they expressed in their writing and the parts of their writing that they feel express their personality, those that give students the greatest pleasure to create, those that reflect a new discovery about themselves or their world, and those that reflect students' experimentation with new ideas. By asking students to consider these aspects in the assessment of their own writing, teachers would demonstrate that the competencies viewed by boys

and girls as strengths are at least as important as the quality of conforming to conventions that teachers and students attribute to girls.

Change must take place on a broader level, as well. In order to address the disparities in measured writing competence of female and male student writers, teachers, teacher educators and designers of large-scale writing evaluation must take part in conversations that question an emphasis on conformity in writing evaluation. What are the social and political motives and implications of an emphasis on conformity? How do prevailing assumptions and beliefs about good writing privilege some groups and deny other groups success as writers? How do the scoring criteria reflect what students, teachers and the wider society believe about the role of writing in students' lives within and beyond the classroom? What alternative values of good writing need to be considered? Finally, teachers and teacher educators must participate in conversations centered on ways to address boys' and girls' identified needs in areas that are emphasized on the evaluation rubrics and at the same time nurture their identified strengths in areas that are overlooked on evaluation rubrics. Through these conversations, teachers and teacher educators may transform classroom and large-scale evaluation practices and extend possibilities for writing success to greater numbers of students.

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## APPENDIX A

1. Tell me about the better writers in your class and whether they tend to be boys or girls.
2. Tell me about the differences and similarities you see in the topics, characters and writing styles of narratives written by boys and girls in your classroom.
3. Tell me about the similarities and differences you have observed in the kinds of feedback which boys and girls provide on their peers' narrative writing during peer conferences or authors' chair.
4. Tell me about the similarities and differences you have observed in boys' and girls' attitudes toward narrative writing.
5. Girls tend to do better on writing proficiency tests than boys do. Does that surprise you? Why? If it doesn't surprise you, what possible reasons do you have to explain this trend?





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

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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 author was trying to say don't watch too 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 pan 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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