

# What happens to third graders' writing when they participate in a reading and letter writing program?

by Cynthia Brawner

In Washington, D.C. a pen pal book exchange program providing a means to help D.C. educators, mainly teachers, assist students in meeting the state standards in reading and writing was established.

In2Books is an organization with a pen pal reading and writing program, based in Washington, DC, that provides students with opportunities to make connections, employ inference, analyze informational text, increase their writing, improve their usage of grammar and sustain a conversation of a literary work with another person through letter writing. In2Books claims to have research showing that their program can “enhance the literacy skills of our nation's students and encourage their love of learning” [In2Books.org]. The motto of the group is to “motivate students in [the primary] grades to read, think, and write by matching them with adult pen pals coached to discuss important subjects through letters about thought-provoking books”.

In2Books provides D. C. public school children with a maximum of five books and a thoroughly screened adult pen pal from the D.C. business community. This concept of students and businessmen and women reading the same book and exchanging dialogue via the written letters has soared. In2Books is now considering bringing this concept to Chicago, Illinois.

During the 2003-04 school year in Chicago, several pen pal writing groups were piloted targeting grades 2 thru 4. It is from implementing one of the pilot groups that the data of this action research is drawn. I will answer the following question about pen pal letter writing: What happens to third graders' writing when they participate in a reading and letter writing program?

The guiding questions are:

- How often do students dialogue in their letters?
- Are the letters written in an organized manner?
- Which sentence structure is used most often?
- Is the letter easily read?
- Are any text-connections spoken of?
- Is vocabulary use properly?
- Are the mechanics used properly?

- Are statements supported from the reading?
- Is there a reference made about the student?

### **Rationale:**

Within the four core subject areas: language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies, writing is a major component in my classroom. However, it was during my years of teaching children and adults that I realized students, many of the primary grades, were not successful in writing. According to teachers from past workshops and some students from other classes, many students loathed writing altogether. Some students thought, “this is too much” or felt, “I’m tired.” Others questioned, “Why do we have to write”, and complained, “This is unfair”. Within my third grade class, I decided to take a hand poll to determine who liked writing. What I found wasn’t too far apart from what I’ve heard from teachers and students over the previous years. I realized a great challenge was ahead since my teaching goal was to help my students become better writers.

Of my 21 students, who original signed on to participate in the program, only three like to write and 13 did not like to write. (Table 1.) That is 62% of my students would rather not write. My next task was to assess why most of my students did not like to write. I realized that of the 13 students 11 were poor writers. Since they had not taken a standardized writing assessment, I had to make this determination after reading samples of their writing in September 2003. All lacked knowledge of how to use dialogue, organization, sentence structure, writing mechanics, text-connections, and grade level vocabulary. None of my 21 students had written a structured, book discussion letter. With this information, I decided to have my students participate in the In2Books pen pal letter-writing program that is designed to foster writing and reading skills.

n= 21	Like to Write	Somewhat Like to Write	Does Not Like to Write
	#	#	#
Boys	1	2	8
Girls	2	3	5
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>

## Review of Literature

Within writing, there are many components to assist teachers in helping their students fulfill the task. Some areas of focus are writer' workshop and pen pal letter writing.

### Struggling Writers

Struggling writers “present a unique challenge” (Christenson, 2002, p 17). Struggling writers are those students “who experience difficulty meeting the demands of writing” (Christenson, 2002, p 17). Reading, writing, and thinking are essential as eating, drinking, and sleeping. Students who don't read, write, and think well by the end of third grade are unlikely to catch up (In2Books). Yet, as educators we owe it to our children to [help them] succeed [in reading and writing] (Zelmelman et. al, 1993). Graves (1994) claims that educators can also help students by looking “for more precision in the use of nouns and verbs” and observe [the students'] growing lists of conventions they use in their work” (p. 281-2) and by highlighting samples of those skills in shared literary works.

### Reading and Writing

Reading and writing go together (Graves, 1994). However, as Graves states “writing is the making of reading” (p. 282), that is, when students learn how to “construct reading through writing” they will have a better grasp of how to take reading apart . Bring reading and writing together is an essential feature for participating in In2Books' pen pal program where discussing books and writing letters back and forth are pared to support improvements in writing and thinking abilities (In2Books). Reading and writing are beneficial to the student when they are scaffolded (Allen, 2000): “scaffolding techniques begin with reading literature and end with ... writing” (179). And, as Fletcher and Portalupi's point out “The writing you get out of your students can only be as good as the classroom literature” (10).

### Benefits of Letter Writing

“Once children learn to write letters, they should be encouraged to write them often” (The NRC, 1999, p. 10). According to Cheri Fuller (1993) “writing skills affect [the student's] learning and achievement in every subject. If [a student] writes well s/he will be a more successful student (p 152). In addition, “when [students] are given time, encouragement and materials to write, the normal student will progress through certain developmental stages ... the [third grader] uses more conventional spelling, punctuation, and capitalization” (153).

### Pen Pal Programs

Berrill (2000) adds that a “pen pal program offers the advantage of inherent individual, affective, human connection that provide deep meaningfulness and purposefulness” for students. It also offers “a balanced variety of writing activities [which] will encourage children to think in different ways and to communicate meaningfully” (Berrill, p 9).

In a pen pal letter-writing program, certain structures and wise use of class time are necessary to ensure the timely and continuous exchange of letters and the ongoing support for the relationship between the writers (Berrill p.5). In addition, being part of a pen pal letter-writing program brings enthusiasm among “even by the struggling readers/writers” (Berrill p. 6). Berrill continues, this “demonstrates just how powerful a pen pal relationship can be in helping children learn to ... write” (p 2).

According to In2Books, about 60% of the students who attend our nation’s urban public schools read [and write] below grade level. With that in mind, Berrill (2000) notes that participating in a hand-written letter “pen pal program adds letter writing and reading as real-world activities where children can apply and refine their skills” (p 8-9). In addition, as Berrill suggests, “handwritten letters allow the classroom teacher to observe several very important aspects of language development, such as letter formation, spacing of words, use of punctuation and capitalization”.

### **Background/Context:**

The 21 African American students began in this action research reside in a metropolitan city and attend the largest public school system in the state. They are third graders in a self-contained classroom with daily access to modern technology including laptops and wireless Internet. The public school they attend services preschool to eighth grade. Ninety-five percent of the students’ parents have a fixed income that qualifies students for the free meal program. About 25% of the population is part of the specialized service program; their annual income is below the poverty level. [2004 Illinois School Report Card].

Additionally, many studies have shown that “students who cannot read, write, and think well by the third grade are unlikely to catch up. Unfortunately, 60 percent of students attending our nation's urban public schools read [and write] below grade level” [In2Books].

## The Study

To assure that my students are able to establish that relationship which “enhance critical thinking” and “requires knowledge and focuses [their] thought” [ERIC # ED285829], I modified their classroom schedule by incorporating “writers workshop; a term coined by Lucy McCormick Calkins in 1986 [that] established a special time set aside for [writing]” (Buss and Karnowski, 2000). According to Ralph Fletcher and JoAnn Partalupi, of *Writing Workshop*, (2001) some components of the writing workshop are independent reading, book discussions, and workshop mini-lessons. It is here that students “make the reading-writing connections” (Fletcher, p 74). Per Steven Zemelman, Harvey Daniels, and Arthur Hyde, “students need real audiences” (p.55), therefore, the central focus of the writing workshops was the pen pal letter-writing program following each literary work read.

This action research began in November 2003. Participation in the program required students to read five books and write one letter introducing themselves and five letters about those books. The focal point of this action research is the first four letters, written from November to March. Students wrote for 120 minutes a week and learned about writing in mini-lessons on writing for 100 minutes a week. In some instances, students began their pre-write or first draft at home. They were encouraged to read the book we were focusing on in the classroom specifically for the program (Appendix A) at home and to share their reading with their family.

Because of a scheduled block reading period, students had their writing mini-lesson after lunch followed by a writing period from 1:55 to 2:15 p.m.

During our mini-lessons we addressed the following

- strategies for extracting factual information from a literary work;
- getting information in from the reading into letter;
- writing simple and complex sentences;
- using the writing process in personal letter writing; using a thesaurus;
- asking open-ended and closed-ended questions;
- using standard English;
- the organization of a letter;
- and personal sharing policies were addressed.

Each letter focused on the use of one of these topics. Our reading and letter writing are divided into three cycles. The process began with a visual profile. The profile provided an

illustrate view of what the students liked and did not like. It was sent before the introductory letter that provided a written view of the students.

In November 2003 my third grade, students began the In2Books pen pal program, which normally begins in September. I conducted a mini-lesson of pen pal letter writing. Students were given the components of letter writing using some non-tradition terms: salutation, courtesy, discussion, and closing. We wrote a letter together: using the writing process - pre-write, draft, revise, edit. They began their first draft letter to their new pen pal. Since students were not familiar with the pen pal, it was difficult for them to compose a letter using the components. Some letters began with "hi" others began with the standard "dear". Many of the letters consisted of simple sentences. Due to many of the students having poor writing skills, the introductory letter or first letter became the most challenging. In addition, many had no additional support at home to help them continue to write in the writing process.

Finally, another limitation is not knowing how much students might have changed if they were given the same amount of instruction without the letters and an audience.

### The Beginning

- After five weeks the students would receive a same title, grade level book to read and keep in their personal library.
- We began each cycle with a pre-discussion activity:
- I would give background genre information before the book was distributed.
- We would explore similar works to analyze the writing style.
- Graphic organizers were used to show the various mechanisms of a writing style.

### The Process

- Students engaged in 4 to 5 book readings: silent, choral, round robin, group, reader's theater - "pair and share" discussions, small group peer discussions, whole class discussions, and participated in writing strategy activities provided prior to letter writing.
- The student lead discussions and revisions consisted of word 'pull out's, and writing down all factual-information.
- Students continued to share their facts and make new discoveries through questioning.

- Each student would ask about the content of the literary work, ten questions: five open-ended and five closed-ended.

### Ending of the Cycle

- This is followed by them asking each other the questions and finding the answers or support for the answers in the work.
- By the next session, students began organizing their writing using a prewriting strategy provided during the mini-lessons.
- Once the students completed a pre-write they began to draft their letter.
- Each participated in a second pair-and-share to look at their drafts.

They were given comments to each other concerning the writing and work together to best incorporate the factual information found and questions asked. After each 'major' discussion, the students were to draft again. Once the drafts were 'perfected' to the students' liking, they wrote their final letter on the supplied In2Books stationary. This process was slightly altered, to meet my students' needs, from In2Books format.

### Tools used to collect data

The tools used to provide information are the occurrences of errors, the introductory cycle-letter and the Cycle 1, Cycle 2, and Cycle 3 letters, a scoring rubric: that I adapted from the In2Books materials specifically designed for this pen pal letter writing research [Appendix B], and a rubric guide [Appendix C]. The data collected over a period of four [4] months was measured against the In2Books-writing rubric. (Appendix D)

#### Phase One: Establishing a base-line

During the book discussions, many of the students began with "I liked the book 'cause" or "It was good 'cause". However, they had would not transferred their feelings into their letters. They often wrote in fragmented sentences or extremely long sentences and some would have a ten-lined sentence. Other noticeable trends in vocabulary were the use of 'in' for 'and' and the use of 'fill' for 'feel'; the incorrect use of the apostrophe [used as a comma at the top of the word]; and the incorrect use of the subject and verb tenses [Table 2].

Table 2 (Occurrences of Errors in the INTRODUCTORY-Letter)

Area/Boy/Girl	G	B	G	G	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	
Dialogue	2	1	0	n/a	2	3	1	4	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	14
Organization	0	2	2	n/a	2	2	1	3	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	12
Sentences	0	2	0	n/a	4	1	0	2	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	9
Flow	3	1	3	n/a	1	3	1	3	1	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	16
Connections	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0
Vocabulary	1	3	4	n/a	2	0	8	12	10	n/a	n/a	n/a	4	44
Mechanics	0	3	5	n/a	6	3	3	9	55	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	84
Evid Reading	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	0
Self	0	1	3	n/a	3	1	6	0	0	n/a	n/a	n/a	0	14
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>6</b>	

n-13

# = Error in Area

### Data Collection

I focused on the students' early writing, writing during the research and post reading writings, my journal about book discussions, and an analysis of the students' pen pal letters. A rubric, shared with students, will be used to determine mastery of specific areas: the occurrence of dialogue, letter organization, sentence structure, readability, text-connections, correctly spelled vocabulary, proper mechanics, text support, and reference to self.

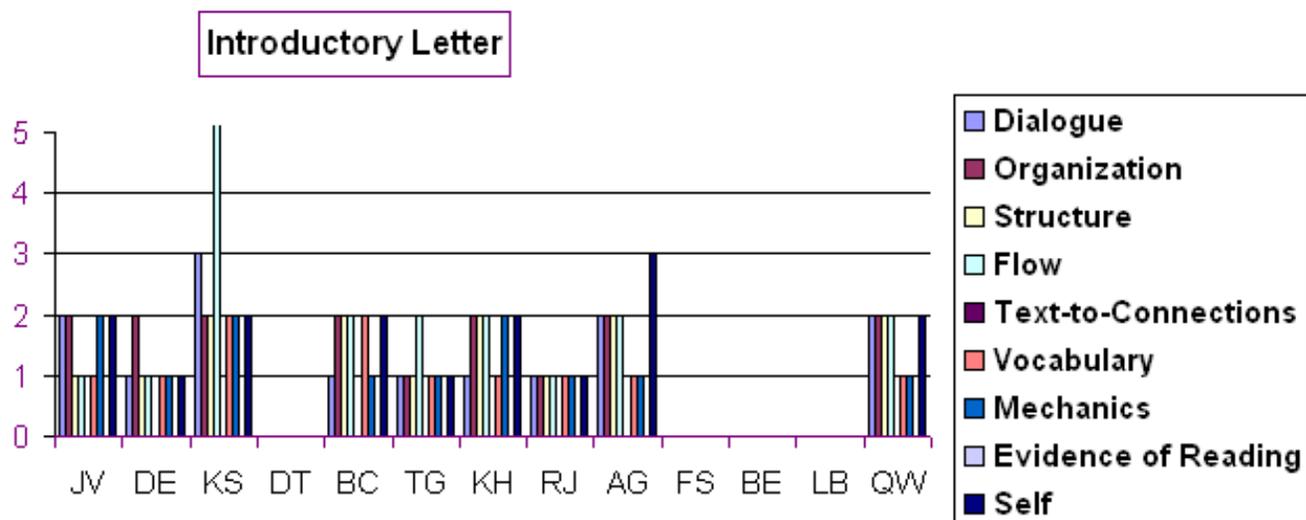
All 21 students' letters, their adult pen pal response letters, and comments from the literary class discussions were used to answer the guiding sub questions. For the sake of this action research, only 13 selected students' work will be evaluated. Eleven of the students didn't not remain with the program, did not complete a majority of the letters or transferred out of the classroom.

### **DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS**

The questions were essential to *this* action research that demonstrated the extent pen pal letter writing augmented a class of third graders' writing.

### The Introductory-Letter

After assessing the introductory letters, I noticed several trends among many of the students' writing. During the data collection from the letters, other trends began to emerge. The students had inconsistencies in creating dialogue, in organization, sentence structure using a combination of simple and complex sentences, spelling and using the correct tense, showing evidence of reading the literature, using transitional sentences, and making text-to-connections.



After the introductory letter, I found that four of the students did not submit a letter and only one rated very high in the “flow” segment. The majority of them rated a one in vocabulary, mechanics, evidence of reading and relating it to themselves. This information guided my instruction for the next writing mini lesson. In Table 2 the number of errors occurring in the I-Letter are show.

### Intorductory-Letter Mini-Lesson

This mini lesson provided students with suggested things to talk about in an introductory letter. They participated in individual brainstorm to help them visualize their likes and hobbies. They were guided by questions – what do I like to do, where do I like to go -- to help them decide what to put in a letter.

Since they were familiar with the process of writing, they worked independently with a personal visual profile [an illustration of themselves and things they like], and their introductory letter.

These letters were written before the introductory pen pal letter was received. The students' sole objective was to tell about themselves. For all, this activity was the first time they had written a pen pal letter.

They did not stay on task, they were not focused, there was not any dialogue, the letter was not organized, they had poor sentence structure; grade level vocabulary was weak; they had a weak command of proper punctuation and incorrectly used basic sight words.

### **Cycle 1 Letter**

After the writing mini lesson of using vocabulary, mechanics, evidence of reading and relating it to self, the students' second letter, following the book discussion, showed that seven of the 13 students increased in vocabulary usage, five of them increased in mechanics usage, six increased in evidence of reading and only four made gains in referencing themselves. However in the occurrence of errors, less errors occurred in mechanics and relating to self. The area of evidence increased since it was not applicable in the I-Letter.

### **Cycle One Letter Mini-Lesson**

This mini-lesson focused on letter vocabulary, mechanic, evidence of reading, making connections, and self-references. Writing, voice, punctuation, and asking questions were mentioned. After four demonstrations, students were given samples of incorrect writing [teacher designed], to correct. Within the allotted time, the samples were discussed.

Table 3 Occurrences of Errors in the Cycle1 –Letter\* n-13 # = Error in Area

Area/Name	G	B	G	G	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	B	G	
Dialogue	1	2	0	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	7
Organization	3	0	1	2	0	0	0	3	0	0	2	0	0	11
Sentences	0	0	0	5	0	0	2	2	0	2	2	0	0	13
Flow	3	1	2	4	3	0	2	4	0	1	2	2	0	24
Connections	3	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	32	4	1	1	1	53
Vocabulary	2	2	3	6	0	0	4	4	2	3	5	6	4	41
Mechanics	0	2	5	10	3	15	5	2	2	3	4	8	0	59
Evid Reading	2	0	0	3	2	1	0	1	4	4	0	0	1	18
Self	0	2	0	2	3	3	1	1	0	0	1	0	0	13
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>6</b>	



Area/Name	JV	DE	KS	DT	BC	TG	KH	RJ	AG	FS	BE	LB	QW	
Dialogue	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	2	0	0	0	6
Organization	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sentences	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	4	3	0	0	0	0	8
Flow	0	0	0	4	0	0	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	10
Connections	1	0	1	1	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	8
Vocabulary	0	4	5	6	3	3	5	3	6	11	3	0	4	54
Mechanics	2	6	8	2	0	3	5	4	2	17	7	1	1	48
Evid Reading	0	0	0	1	1	4	0	1	0	3	1	0	0	11
Self	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	2	0	3	0	1	0	10
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>6</b>	
<b>T-13</b>	<b># = Error in Area</b>													

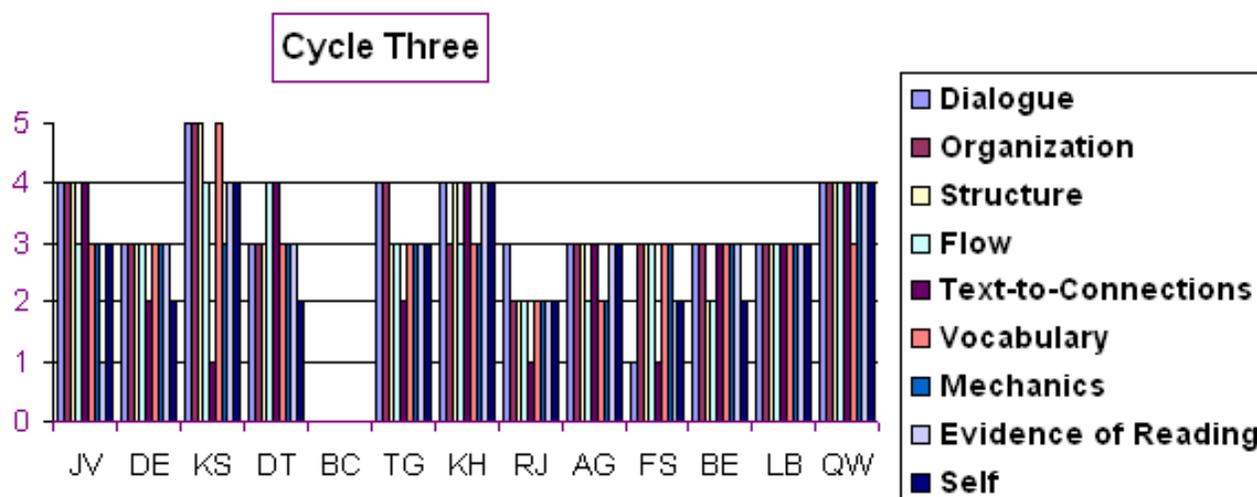
### **Cycle 3 Letter**

The last letter of the research students made tremendous gains. Twelve of the thirteen students demonstrated writing growth [Chart 4]. Although in Table 5, vocabulary and mechanics continue to be a challenge for the students as their writing matured.

### **Cycle 3 Letter Mini-Lesson**

In this mini-lesson, students participated in writing simple and complex sentences. They also revisited vocabulary and mechanics. Continuing the familiar format, several demonstrations were provided and the students experimented with their own letters. The students are now making fewer errors in dialogue, organization, sentence structure, flow, and

text connections. These results directed my next series of mini lessons, revisiting vocabulary, mechanics, evidence of reading and self-references.



**Table 5 Occurrences of Errors in the C3 –Letter**

Area/Name	JV	DE	KS	DT	BC	TG	KH	RJ	AG	FS	BE	LB	QW	
Dialogue	0	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	1	2	0	0	0	3
Organization	0	0	0	0	n/a	0	2	0	0	1	0	1	0	4
Sentences	0	2	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	3
Flow	0	0	0	0	n/a	0	2	1	2	0	0	2	0	7
Connections	0	3	1	0	n/a	0	3	0	0	2	0	0	0	9
Vocabulary	2	4	3	0	n/a	2	2	4	8	4	3	3	6	39
Mechanics	0	1	2	1	n/a	0	2	1	5	3	4	2	0	21
Evid Reading	1	1	0	0	n/a	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Self	0	0	0	1	n/a	1	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	5
<b>Total Errors</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>n/a</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	
T-13	# = Error in Area													

## Individual Results

### Introductory Letter

#### **G**

She creates a one sided conversation because she asks very few questions and makes statements that make it difficult to draw the letter reader in. "Hello, my name is...., I am nice and I go to school. I like school a lot." She does follow the format by having an opening and a closing to the letter, but the body hasn't been developed. One key point to this letter is she shared a lot of information about herself.

#### **B**

He misspells some of his words when writing. He does not punctuate his sentences nor uses capitalization properly. In his introductory letter, he doesn't focus his and his letters are short using very simple sentences.

#### **G**

She asks questions that are part of a conversation, 'how are you doing?' Her question seeking residential information from the pen pal shows that she has read her pen pal's letter. Throughout her letter, she doesn't share much about herself; her likes and dislikes. She demonstrates a rich vocabulary using words like mostly and wonderful. She does this though simple sentences that are loosely punctuated. Her flow is a bit awkward and jumpy. She goes from talking about her pen pal, herself and back and forth.

#### **B**

There was very little information in his introduction letter; two sentences. There wasn't any dialogue, a great use of vocabulary, information about him, or the use of complex and simple sentences. He did have two standard features from the organization area; and opening and a closing.

#### **G**

She uses some dialogue in her opening letter. She does focus on herself a lot using simple sentences. She demonstrates a beginning, middle, and end. Her mechanical flaw is her lack of commas.

#### **B**

His letter was about a paragraph long with almost ten mechanical errors. Many of his words were misspelled and misused. His tenses did not agree and his letter flow was awkward. He had an organizational opening but no body or ending.

**G**

She doesn't ask any questions but does make statements that can lead to a strong dialogue. Throughout, she at times, directly and indirectly focuses on herself. It appears that she may write too fast because in some instances she has forgotten the word I and misspelled too. In this letter, she uses a mixture of simple and complex sentences. Her flow of the letter is continuous, however, she uses unnecessary capitalization and somewhat weak in her ability to punctuate correctly.

**Second Letter**

**G** continues to dialogue with her pen pal. She has generated questions to ask her pen pal. She also answers some of the questions from her pen pal. She is beginning to use newly learned words in her writing therefore, her choice of vocabulary shows her maturity. Her writing is more structured and easily read. However, she makes no reference to the book reading in her letter. She also doesn't make any type of text-to connections.

**B** continues to have a conversation with his pen pal. He makes one reference to the book and ends the letter. There is very little sentence structure and the sentences used are short and direct. However, he has less spelling errors, one. In this brief letter, he has a flow of thought, but he doesn't make any text-to connections, nor does he continue his thoughts, and he has little use for mechanics.

**G**, this is her first attempt to respond to her pen pals questions. She does so using simple sentences. She cites a small section of the text. She doesn't use transitional sentence so she jumps from one point to the next. She makes no text-to connections and uses very little punctuation; commas and quotes.

**B** in his first attempt has very little dialogue in his letter and does not share information about him. He does spell his words correctly and uses simple straight to the point sentences, however, he has very little evidence of ever reading the book, and he doesn't make any type of text-to connections.

**G** begins to ask more questions and has completed the format of letter organization. She continues to use simple sentences that flow smoothly. However, she doesn't make any type of text connections, write in paragraphs, or show evidence of her reading the literary work.

**B** asks very few questions however; his letter was difficult to read because of the choppiness, misspelled, and misused words. He shows no evidence in reading the literary work.

In **B**'s second letter, he makes very little improvement. He continues to struggle with the organization, sentence usage and structure, and the flow of the letter. For his modification, I needed to revisit vocabulary and mechanics along with sentence structure, flow, and connections. These modifications were in addition to the mini lesson. His additional help came during the draft letters.

### **Letter Three**

**G** continues to answer the questions raised by her pen pal. Many of her questions are generated from her pen pal's questions. She uses more four syllable words and sentence modifiers [Table 5]. Yet, she continues to not show evidence of reading the book. Her simple sentences are now run-on as she attempts to write complex sentences.

**B**'s letter format changed from his previous two letters. He's attempting to write in paragraph format. He is asking questions, but doesn't always stay focused, He is beginning many sentences with 'and'. Throughout his letter, he did not talk much about the book and he did not use transition sentences to connect his paragraphs. He's made no text-to connections and is not using the question mark properly.

**G** is asking questions but makes no direct connection to herself and her opinion. She increased her vocabulary with terms-great, and travel. However, she still needs structure in her writing. She has some evidence of reading the story but she's not using proper sentence structure; capitalization.

**B** has made some great gains compared to his second letter. He has an increase in key areas: mechanics, vocabulary, organization, and dialogue. Because he scored below a three in self and connections, his modification was to practice with finger puppets and other literature ways to talk about oneself and how to make connections.

**G**s participation in the mini lessons has helped her improve in seven of the nine areas. Her areas of targeted instruction will be in connections and evidence of reading. She participated in activities that focused on pulling out factual information from literary works. As her letter writing became stronger, she had a slight amount of difficulty with new words.

**B**, after the mini lesson and individualized instruction, he made little to no gain at all. He did improve in dialogue writing, organization, and making connections. He continued to score low in sentence structure, mechanics, and vocabulary to list a few.

**B**, has shown the greatest gain from the mini lessons and individual instruction. Her scores range from a 1 – connections to a 5 – dialogue and organization. She continues to need help with using capital letters and double words.

#### **Letter Four**

**G** continues to ask questions and is slowly moving into actual dialogue sentence. She continues to write run-on sentences and is not expounding on her thought.

**B** begins to create dialogue with his pen pal by asking an indirect question, “K, you had been to the White House?” He shares about his family [a text-to self/family connection] and about himself. He is controlling his structure flow and is incorporating ‘new’ vocabulary. As he writes more he tends to go from one thought to another without transitional sentences and he’s not using punctuation as well as in the first letter.

**G** is asking more questions and making text connections. Her vocabulary continues to increase but her spelling needs modifying; draw as ‘deaw’. However, she lacks the conversation aspect in letter writing.

**B**’s letter four shows great gains when compare to his own work. However, against the entire class, he shows even more gains. His total number of errors for this letter was 3. They were in vocabulary and self. His immediate modifications were to continue letter writing in general, in after school, at home or during free time.

**G** continues to make errors in vocabulary and mechanics. She has demonstrated her ability to organize, answer questions and ask questions, share about herself, make connections, and write some complex sentences.

**G**’s lowest scoring area is connections, her other scores range from 3 to 5. Her language has improved and her use of sentences. However, she made some mistakes; 6. Her improvement, based on my notes, was the greatest over all.

#### **Individual Modifications**

Overall, each student made great gains, some more significant than others. After each assessment, the students were able to have individual conferences with me. Some modifications used were peer conferences, peer editing, and pair and share. These venues help the struggling and non-struggling students improve their writing.

The following is a post survey of the class to determine who enjoyed reading and pen pal letter writing.

T= 21	Like to Write	Somewhat Like to Write	Does Not Like to Write
	#	#	#
Boys	6	3	2
Girls	7	2	1
<b>Total Number of Students</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>

### What Does It all Mean?

Many of the students were reluctant to participant when they realized that this program involved writing. That signaled that they were not secure in their current writing situation. After this action research I've discovered that letter writing to a known audience helps student become more efficient in their overall writing. It provides them with writing practices; skills and opportunities and helps them to become focused and task oriented individuals. The students were provided with many writing activities during the school year, however, having a targeted audience allowed them to become better with structuring their writing. Participating in In2books pen pal letter writing program has allowed them to overcome that fear and go beyond the basics in writing. Even though there were some students who were not as successful or demonstrate great gains, they too, have made some progress.

After viewing their letters, there were obvious trends that occurred; lack of using dialogue, lack of organization, lack of sentence structure, lack of text-to connections, lack of grade appropriate vocabulary, and lack of writing mechanics. These trends faded as the writing continued and as strategies were provided.

What this demonstrated was that students, when provided with an audience and opportunity will mature in their writing ability. They become experienced writers and self-starters of writing.

I found that after four months of mini lessons, individual conferences, and letter writing that my students in the beginning did not use dialogue. They began to really use it after exposure; reading various dialogues, and writing it. By letter four many of the students were able to write a formatted letter that included salutations and a body. I also learned that many of the students varied with simple and complex sentences, which made the reading flow easily. The main struggles continue to be using vocabulary and the mechanics. The remaining guiding questions in this action research: Are any text-connections spoken of?, Are statements supported from the reading? And Is there a reference made about the student? Were

assessed and the on going research showed that five students continue to make fewer errors in their letter writing than in previous months classroom writing.

### **Limitations:**

In November 2003 my third grade, students began the In2Books pen pal program, which normally begins in September. I conducted a mini-lesson of pen pal letter writing. Students were given the components of letter writing using some non-tradition terms: salutation, courtesy, discussion, and closing. We wrote a letter together: using the writing process - pre-write, draft, revise, edit. They began their first draft letter to their new pen pal. Since students were not familiar with the pen pal, it was difficult for them to compose a letter using the components. Some letters began with "hi" others began with the standard "dear". Many of the letters consisted of simple sentences. Due to many of the students having poor writing skills, the introductory letter or first letter became the most challenging. In addition, many had no additional support at home to help them continue to write in the writing process.

Finally, another limitation is not knowing how much students might have changed if they were given the same amount of instruction without the letters and an audience.

### **Policy Implications:**

After analyzing the findings, I strongly believe that the policy implications should be for school districts to require more writing across the curriculum blocks with a link to classroom's [school to school] having authentic audiences for students' writing. The students in this research began as poor writers because of the lack of exposure to letter writing and writing based on reading. As they corresponded with their pen pal improvements began to emerge. During most of this research, many students struggled with maintaining satisfactory writing and the pen pal dialogue. If school districts, mainly Chicago, stressed the writing in other ways; similar to young authors, students' reading and writing ability will increase.

At a local level, schools can implement writing across the curriculum program. One program that Chicago Public Schools designed in the past was the Read, Write Well. This citywide program provided a means for the reluctant writer to engage and succeed in writing. If CPS were to encourage the K to 2 grades to participate in pen pal groups, and offer writing contests for grades K to 2 and recognize them system wide, writing improvements will be evident.

In the classroom, teachers can create a classroom pen pal letter writing activities or correspond with other schools outside of the city or state to establish the beneficial pen pal letter writing process.

#### APPENDIX A

### Literature Used in the Action Research

#### ***Diego***

By Jeanette Winter

This biography of Diego Rivera recounts the muralist's unusual childhood and his lifelong passion for making art that celebrated the Mexican people.

#### ***Once a Mouse***

By Marcia Brown

In this ancient folktale from India, a hermit acquires a new pet and attempts to magically protect it from predators with disastrous results. Read and see how he resolves the problem.

#### ***The Empty Pot***

By Demi

When Ping enters the Emperor's contest to grow the most beautiful flower and become the Emperor's successor, the seed he is given just won't grow. Will Ping tell the truth and admit that the seed hasn't grown?

#### ***Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears***

By Verna Aardema

A pesky mosquito causes a cumulative disaster in the jungle, and only King Lion can sort it out. This pourquoi tale attempts to explain the origin of the mosquito's irritating buzz.

#### ***From Seed to Plant***

By Gail Gibbons

From Seed to Plant explores the complete life cycle of plants, from pollination to germination and the growth of a new plant. The vocabulary-rich text exposes young readers to the various parts of plants and flowers, and even offers instructions for a do-it-yourself growing project.

#### ***Wacky Plant Cycles***

By Valerie Wyatt

Photographs and drawings help readers understand the life cycle of a plant from seed to maturity in this book. The many captions provide additional information about seeds and how they grow.

#### ***How Plants Survive***

By Kathleen V. Kudlinski

Do you think plants have it easy? Think again! Imagine having to fight your neighbors for water, sunlight, or space to grow! Read this book to find out how different kinds of plants compete for the resources they need to grow and survive.

**APPENDIX B**  
**Letter Scoring Guide**

<b>Area</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Dialogue</b>	Asks at least 5 questions and answer all questions from pen pal's letter	Asks at least 4 questions and answer at least 2-3 questions	Asks 2-3 questions and answer at least 1-2 questions	Asks 1-2 questions and answer at least one question	Does not ask or answer any questions
<b>Organization</b>	Has an opening salutation, greeting, Tells about self, answers the opening question from the pen pal letter, introduces the book via telling own opinion of the book, talks about the book with no less than four support references from the book, asks questions, makes connections, asks more questions, And closing salutation	Has an opening salutation, greeting, Tells a bit of self, answers the opening question, introduces the book via telling own opinion of the book, talks about the book with no less than two support references from the book, asks questions, makes connections, asks more questions, And closing salutation	Has an opening salutation, greeting [How are you doing, etc.], Tells a bit of self, doesn't answer the opening question from the pen pal letter, might introduce the book, And have a closing salutation	Has an opening salutation And a closing salutation	Doesn't have an opening, greeting, body, or closing salutation
<b>Sentence Structure</b>	A mixture of simple and complex sentences	A use of 80% simple and complex sentences	A use of 60% simple and complex sentences	A use of 40% simple and complex sentences	A use of 20% simple and complex sentences
<b>Flow</b>	Uses paragraphs and a Transitional sentence between each paragraph and has clarity	Some paragraph with the use of Transitional sentences between is readable	Uses one Transitional sentence between a sentence is somewhat readable	Does not use a Transitional sentence between sentences is slightly readable	Letter does not flow nor make any sense
<b>Connections</b>	Makes a text-to-text, text-to-self, and a text-to-world connections with added support	Makes a text-to-text, a text-to-world connections and a text-to-self with no added support	Makes 2 of the three connections	Makes a text-to-text, text-to-self, or a text-to-world connections	Makes no connections
<b>Vocabulary</b>	Uses words correctly, spells all words correctly, and uses correct tense	Uses, spells majority of the words correctly, and Majority of the time uses the correct tense	Uses, spells most of the words correctly, and most of the time uses the correct tense	Uses, spells some of the words correctly, and some of the time uses the correct tense	Does not use Uses the words, nor spell, nor uses tense correctly
<b>Evidence of Reading</b>	Proper use punctuation and grammar	A lot of the time Proper use punctuation and grammar	A most of the time Proper use punctuation and grammar	A some of the time Proper use punctuation and grammar	Doesn't Properly punctuate or use grammar
<b>Shared about Self</b>	Shares pertinent information about self in relation to letter	Shares a lot pertinent information about self in relation to letter	Shares some pertinent information about self in relation to letter	Shares very little information about self in relation to letter	Doesn't share information about self in relation to letter

## APPENDIX C

**The Action Research Rubric: Evaluation and Assessment Explanation**

<b>Dialogue</b>	This section measures the conversation between the student and the pen pal. It measures how often the student asks and answers questions of the adult pen pal. It looks for those statements that put the reader of the letter in the center of the conversation. An example: "If I could read this book a hundred times I would always remember the dog, Sparkie. Which book would you want to read repeatedly? Why?"
<b>Letter Organization</b>	This section looks at the format of the pen pal letter. Is there an opening salutation? [How are you doing, etc.] Does the student tell a bit of self, answers the opening question from the pen pal letter, introduces the book via telling own opinion of the book, talks about the book with no less than four support references from the book, asks questions, makes connections, or asks more questions. Is there a closing salutation?
<b>Sentences</b>	Here, the type of sentences used is evaluated and assessed. It's determined if the sentence is a simple or complex sentence. Based on what is seen, the question, did the student write the simple or complex sentence[s] correctly? If not, the assessment is to revisit the lesson. For example: "I like the book, Jumping Over Cows." "I am reading Sparkie the Dog and I really enjoy the characters."
<b>Flow &amp; Writing Process</b>	This section looks at two points: the writing process and readability. Does the letter have a beginning, middle, and ending? Is the writing process thought pattern in place? Are there transitional sentences that take the reader from one section to another? Is the letter clear and concise?
<b>Connections</b>	Are there connections from the text to the student, text to the world or text to another text made by the student? How frequent are those connections?
<b>Vocabulary &amp; Conventions</b>	Looks at the use of grade level vocabulary and its maturity. Measure the use of correctly spelled words and the usage of those words. This area measures if the conventions were presented in Standard English or not. Example: "I felt the pressure of the storm screaming in the air." "I'd wish he wouldn't go too far."
<b>Evidence of Reading</b>	Here the use of punctuation is measured. Is the student using punctuation correctly?
<b>Mechanics</b>	The evaluation and assessment measures if the student provides supporting text information. How much is determined and its proper or improper use is assessed.
<b>Self</b>	This segment looks for evidence of the student sharing about him/herself with examples showing support. Not the same as in the Connections section. Here, students may say, "I like... because. . ."

## Works Cited

- Allen, J. (2000). *Yellow brick roads*. Maine: Stenhouse.
- Berrill, D. (2000). *Penpal programs in primary classrooms*. Maine: Stenhouse.
- Christenson, T. (2002). *Supporting struggling writers in the elementary classroom*. Delaware: International Reading Association.
- Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (2000). *Craft lessons*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Fletcher, R., & Portalupi, J. (2001). *Writing workshop: The essential guide*. New Hampshire: Heinemann.
- Fuller, C. *Helping your child succeed in public school*. (1993). Illinois: Tyndale.
- Morrow, L. (2002). *The literacy center: Contexts for reading and writing*. Maine: Stenhouse.
- National Research Council. (1999). *Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press
- Risinger, C. F.. (1987). *Improving writing skills through social studies*. Bloomington, IN: Document. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 285829).
- Stillman, P. (1998). *Families writing*. Maine: Calendar Island Publishers.