

# USING PEN PALS IN THE CLASSROOM TO MOTIVATE RELUCTANT WRITERS

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## ABSTRACT

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*This article reports on how pen pals can be incorporated into the literacy classroom for engagement and motivational interest. The authors describe a study in which focused, interactive pen pals were implemented in a third-grade classroom, and the influence this practice had on students' writing. Incorporating pen pals during writing instruction provided students the opportunity to engage in authentic reading and writing. Findings suggest that the implementation of the letter exchange correlated with students' (a) growth in writing ability, specifically their ability to mirror letter structures and increased length; (b) changes in attitude towards writing; and (c) progress in reading abilities.*

*Keywords: engagement, writing, motivation. elementary*

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In my first year of teaching, I (Rachel) noticed that many of my students resisted writing. While they seemed to have many good ideas to share, they struggled to stay on task and engaged during writing time. In reflecting on their negative attitudes towards writing, I wondered how I could help spark my students' interest in writing. So, I began to look for interventions that claimed to help motivate children to engage in writing. In looking at the literature, I found that researchers argued for the use of "authentic writing tasks" as being critical in motivating students, (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011). Thus, I decided to try to incorporate authentic writing tasks in my classroom to try to increase motivation and interest in writing. In addition, I conducted an action research study to determine the impact of these interventions. I specifically asked three research questions:

1. In what ways do authentic reading and writing impact student behavior in a third grade classroom?
2. In what ways does authentic correspondence affect third grade writing ability?
3. In what ways do authentic writing practices influence student attitudes about writing?

## AUTHENTIC WRITING TASKS

For decades, theorists have argued that students are more engaged when they are involved in authentic tasks (Dewey, 1934). When applied to writing and composition, this means that students should be allowed to actually engage in writing that has purpose (Wood-Ray, 2001). One way to incorporate purpose into writing is to give students opportunities to write to real audiences (Vasquez, 2014). Further, writing for authentic audiences increases a sense of purpose, which facilitates engagement to complete the task. Researchers have argued that having adult pen pals

provides this authentic experience and piques children's interest in writing (Charron, 2007, LeVine, 2002).

Numerous studies have shown that pen pals, or letter exchanges, during writing instruction increased writing abilities, engagement with activities, and critical thinking (Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011; Michele & McMillion, 2009). When writing to a pen pal, students take and apply what they learned in the classroom into a letter. Multiple school-based studies in elementary grade levels have conducted letter exchanges (Chohan, 2011; Newman & Bizzarri, 2011; Michele & McMillion, 2009; and Hughes, Evering, Malloy, Gambrell, 2014). Consistently, these studies have shown growth in literacy abilities and motivation to write. In addition, this communicative approach facilitates the crossing of cultural bridges (Michele & McMillion, 2009) and promotes self-concept by improving children's views of their own reading and writing (Boyaci & Güner, 2018).

Other benefits of pen pal programs include the acquisition of school based reading and writing in elementary school classrooms (Newman & Bizzarri, 2011). Michele and McMillion (2009) found that letter exchange programs allow for improvement in a variety of literacy abilities including penmanship, vocabulary and sentence structure, and reading comprehension and composition skills.

## PEN PALS IN MY CLASSROOM: DESIGNING MY STUDY

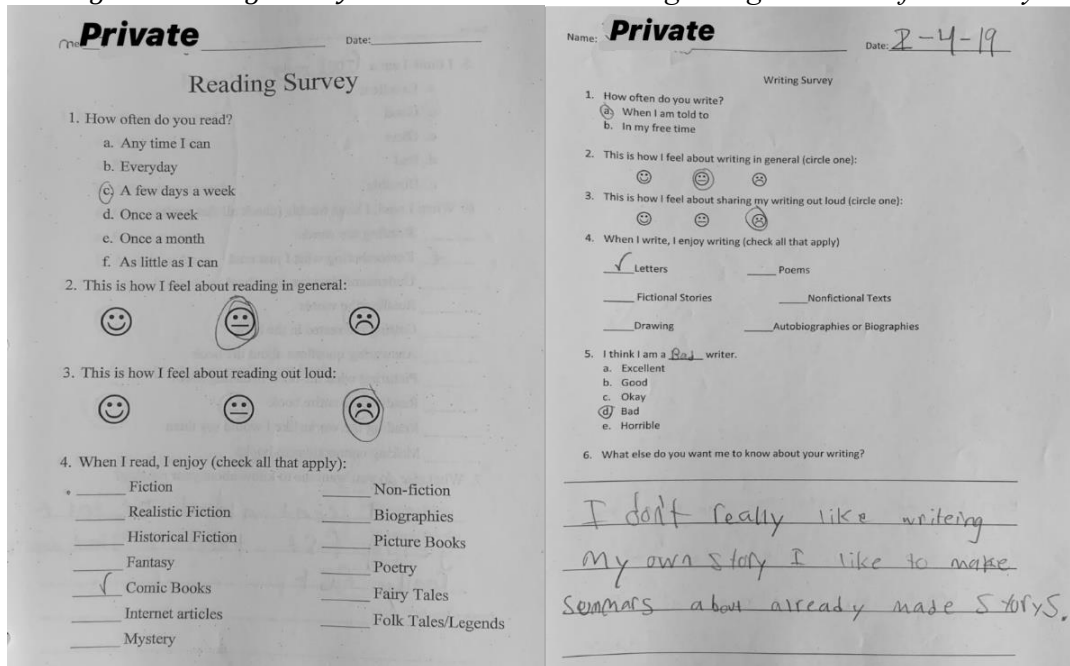
In considering the literature about pen pals and authentic writing tasks, I designed a correspondence program in which my students wrote to a group of preservice teachers who were taking a class focused on teaching reading. To spark conversation, I arranged for my students and the preservice teachers to read the same set of novels. I assessed my students using a Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA) (Beaver & Carter, 2020) and found I had two distinct reading groups. Students with a lower reading level of 20's and 24's were grouped together and assigned *Junie B. Jones Cheater Pants* (Park & Brunkus, 2004). The second group of students had reading levels ranging from 38 to the 50's, and they were assigned *Because of Winn-Dixie* (Dicamillo, 2000).

In addition, I gathered information about students' writing proficiency using a baseline writing prompt about their knowledge of pen pals in a letter to me. Students answered the questions "What is a pen pal?" and "Why are pen pals important?" I found that numerous students were unable to format a letter correctly (greeting, closure, signature, etc.) and write more than a paragraph. From this initial prompt, I was able to create a rubric to use on each letter that students submitted. Students' work was evaluated based on the length, the format of a letter, topic and meaning, and basic orthographic and grammatical conventions.

Students were partnered with preservice teachers at the nearby university who were completing a field-based course. The pen pal pairs corresponded over six weeks and wrote letters during independent writing time once a week. To monitor student progress, I documented how long students maintained sustained attention on writing tasks. I also collected and analyzed the letters students wrote, noting changes in spelling, grammar, and organization. I compared students' work

chronologically across the data collection period. I also constructed and administered pre and post surveys to understand how students felt about the pen pal task and writing in general. Survey questions (Figure 1) included how they felt about reading and writing in general, what genres they enjoyed, and how they viewed themselves as readers and writers, on a scale of *horrible* to *excellent*.

**Figure 1**  
*Reading and Writing Surveys Administered at the Beginning and End of the Study*



## FINDINGS

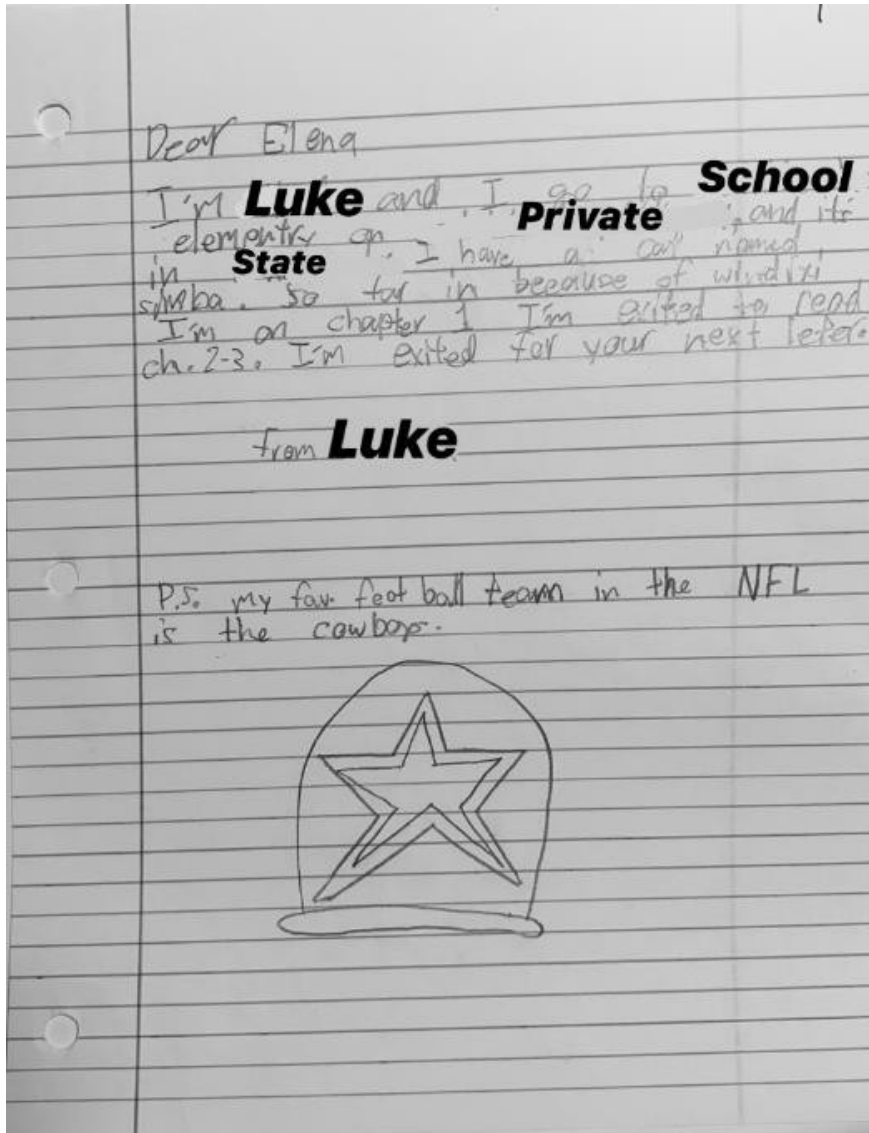
Over the course of the intervention, I noted an increase in student motivation to write. Analysis of letters revealed that implementing pen pals coincided with an improvement in students' writing skills. Throughout the program, I also documented increased engagement in literacy activities by recording the amount of time students spent on letter writing and the letters' length and contents. In addition, students' competency with writing skills also increased across the six weeks. In the following section, I provide specific examples from the data that support these findings.

### CHANGE IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

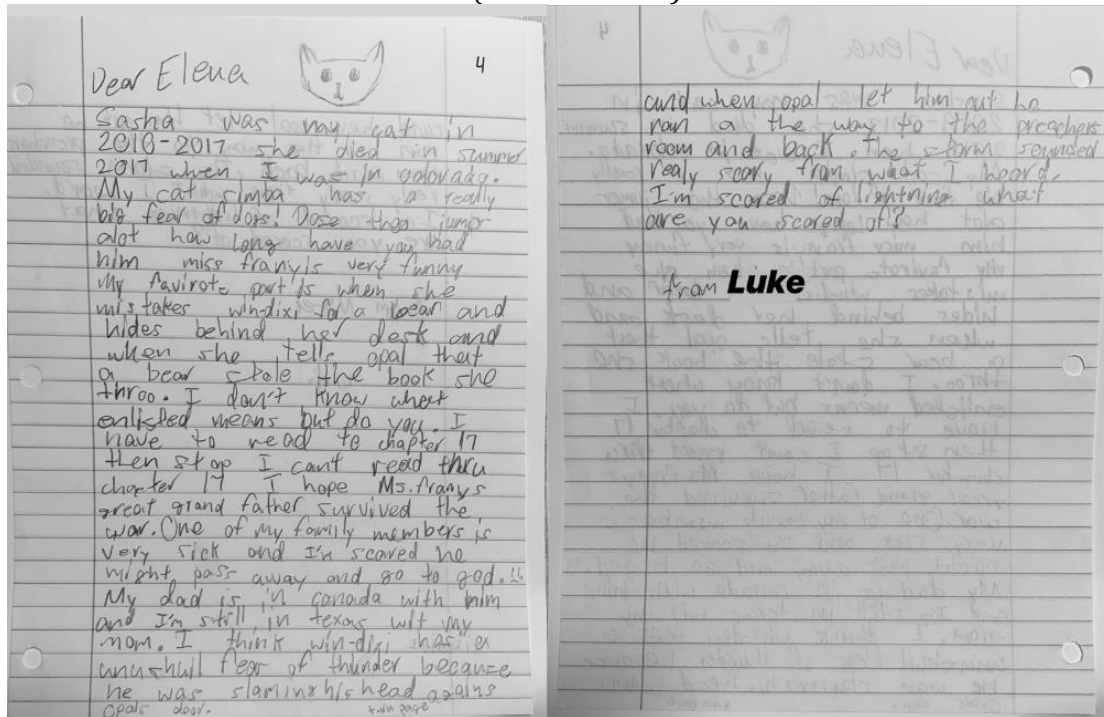
Data suggested a general increase in focus and engagement when students were writing to their pen pals. Over the course of the study, students seemed to write for longer periods of time and used more organized letter structures. These findings were most evident in students who initially resisted writing. Writing from one such student, Luke (all names are pseudonyms), is shown in Figures 2, 3, and 4. In the first letter (Figure 2), Luke wrote a total of 8 lines that were vaguely related to the text. Figure 3 shows Luke's letter from Week 4, where he demonstrated his longest letter, with 32 lines of connected thinking about the book. In both letters, the student wrote about personal things at home and mentioned the chapters they read.

**Figure 2**

Luke's Initial Letter to his Pen Pal.



**Figure 3**  
 Luke's Letter to his Pen Pal on Week 4 (Front and Back)



The amount of time Luke spent writing increased when he was engaged in pen pal writing. Luke's letters developed in organization holistically and at the sentence level. In addition, he used proper capitalization and punctuation marks in his later letters. There is also evidence that he used a level of self-monitoring, as there are various eraser marks where he had initially flipped b's and d's and had misused punctuation marks for contractions.

Figure 4 shows evidence of Luke's focus during pen pal writing time. This excerpt contains anecdotal notes written about two students, Tyson and Ethan, who attempted to interact with Luke during our writing time. In this interaction, Luke, who previously would have engaged in off-task behaviors, chose to ignore his classmates to focus on his letter. The highlights from the table show Luke, who initially resisted writing and would have typically jumped at the chance to avoid completing it, ignored two students who tried to distract him.

**Figure 4**

*Anecdotal Notes about Luke*

Date	Tyson and Ethan are done working.	Even though they are friends, Luke makes the
2/14/19	Tyson approaches Luke to show him a	decision to keep writing instead of stop and
Week 2	sketch. Luke ignores and continues to	interact. He is engaged at the task at hand,
	write letter.	writing to his pen pal, and does not want to
		be distracted. Luke is focused and wishes to
		keep writing instead of talk to friends.
	Moments later, Ethan brings a folded	Upon further discovery, the folded note is an
	paper to Luke. Luke moves it off his letter	apology letter from Ethan to Luke. 'Sorry
	and keeps working.	that I spilled your jello at lunch'.

Even though they are friends, Luke made the decision to keep writing instead of stopping to interact. Upon further discovery, the folded note was an apology letter from Ethan to Luke saying, “Sorry that I spilled your Jell-O at lunch.” In these instances, Luke demonstrated engagement in writing with both the length of the letter, and the choice to stay on task instead of talking to his friends. Ethan also showed his understanding of the power of writing when he chose to write an apology to his friend, Luke, instead of just talking to him. Research has shown similar instances where students’ writing practices shifted within the context of letter exchanges. The willingness and attentiveness, or attention to the task at hand, was noted when students were given a chance to practice their writing skills (Newman & Bizzarri, 2011). When approached by peers, Luke chose to focus on writing his letter and was willing to write more than before. Changes in his writing abilities parallel the observations of Michele and McMillion’s (2009) pen pal study where students improved writing abilities included sentence structure and writing skill.

Another student, Peter, who had been labeled with a learning disability and dyslexia, also demonstrated increased stamina and his ability to focus his writing on his pen pal. At the beginning of the study, he struggled with getting his thoughts down on paper and became easily frustrated with his own spelling. Through this study, his writing stamina increased from short, 10-minute intervals to writing for 40 minutes. Figures 5 and 6 show Peter’s progression across the six-week data collection period. Figure 5 shows Peter’s initial pre-letter baseline, written to me (Rachel), his teacher. Figure 6 shows Peter’s writing at the end of the pen pal project. The second letter is notably more structured, and it mirrored his pen pal’s more traditional letter-writing style. For instance, he used knowledge of letter writing form in signing his letter, “talk to you soon” followed by his name, and a post scriptum (P.S.). His writing in the second letter is more conventional in that he was able to stay on the lines more consistently, producing text in a standard format used for letters. Peter demonstrated he was more focused on the task and had more legible handwriting.



**Figure 5**

*Peter's Pre-letter Baseline to the Teacher*

**Peter**

pin / ms. H S p d k b s m  
the next story in  
given 20 minutes  
jungle of James  
cheater king  
pin pin dat a  
you are old  
yes becus.

**Figure 6**

*Peter's Final Letter to his Pen Pal*


DEAR G ralle

I want to watch on Mon  
and the wash. With  
my mom my favort  
is ice wind. The  
icewind series. I had  
never heard of wind of  
dragon. I think erin  
ten man me laugh.

talk to you soon

**Peter**

P.S. YOU ARE UNESING



## CHANGE IN STUDENT ATTITUDE AND MOTIVATION

Another theme evident throughout this pen pal study was the change in motivation and attitude towards writing. As students built relationships with their pen pals, they began coming up before Writer’s Workshop and eagerly asking if today was the day they got their letter back so they could respond. Students’ commentary and engagement with the authentic writing task and their decreasing number of off-task behaviors also suggest their changing attitudes toward writing.

Figure 7 shows field notes and analysis across the study. In Week 1, the students were still unfamiliar with the concept of a pen pal and seemed surprised to receive a letter. By Week 2, students began to ask about their pen pal and started to share their thoughts in writing. The anecdotal notes also suggest an increase in children’s excitement in attitudes toward writing across the six weeks.

Evidence from these notes supports the notion that authentic tasks in writing, such as authentically responding to pen pals, influence students’ attitudes toward writing. Students in my class demonstrated an increasing interest and desire to write to their pen pals. Specifically, Garrett displayed this interest when he asked his tablemate to refrain from off-task references, and Lucy shared her willingness to remove distractions. Sally also made the choice of moving to stay focused on letter writing, and furthermore, she produced a longer letter. Through pen pals, students were able to use writing to communicate, and they seemed to develop positive attitudes about writing.

**Figure 7**

### *Anecdotal Records about Attitudes toward Writing*

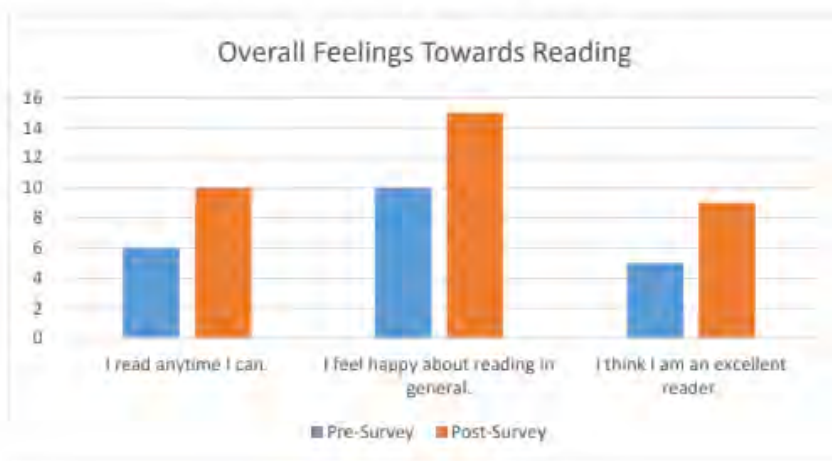
2/14/19 Week 2	Sally takes her paper and moves away from her table. She finds a spot on the floor on the opposite side of the room with a clipboard. She begins to curl so her head is closer to the clipboard and begins writing. Observed that she is writing the entire 45-minute length of time. She has two complete pieces of paper.	Sally relocates from her table to remove herself from the talking and distractions. She finds a spot that is secluded, with no one near her. Her want to write overpowers her want to socialize.  By writing the entire length, [redacted] is on task and engaged with the assignment. She is rereading it over to ensure she has every piece of the letter answered.
2/21/19 Week 3	Carl: "Look at that!" Starts to walk to teacher. Garrett stops him and hushes. "Shhh, she is writing." Carl returns to desk. "Dear Big Chungus!" Garrett: "Please don't bring up Big Chungus while we are writing."	Garrett refocuses Carl's behavior independently. He doesn't want to talk about other topics (Big Chungus- internet meme) while writing. Garrett is displaying the want to focus on the task at hand.
2/21/19 Week 3	Lucy: "Can we close the door?"	Lucy is self-monitoring that the noise from the hallway is interfering with her own ability to write. She asks to close the door and when she does, she is able to focus and is observed looking around less. The less noise, the better conditions to respond to her pen pal.

I collected a pre and post survey to determine how students felt generally about reading and writing. Students scored themselves on a scale that included the options of "Excellent," "Good," "OK," "Bad," and "Horrible." I aggregated the number of students who marked themselves as either being "Excellent," "Good," or "OK," and put them into a graph to show the number of students with positive attitudes towards reading. At the end of the study, more students reported having positive



feelings about themselves as readers and felt more positive about reading generally. Figure 8 shows the pre and post survey data.

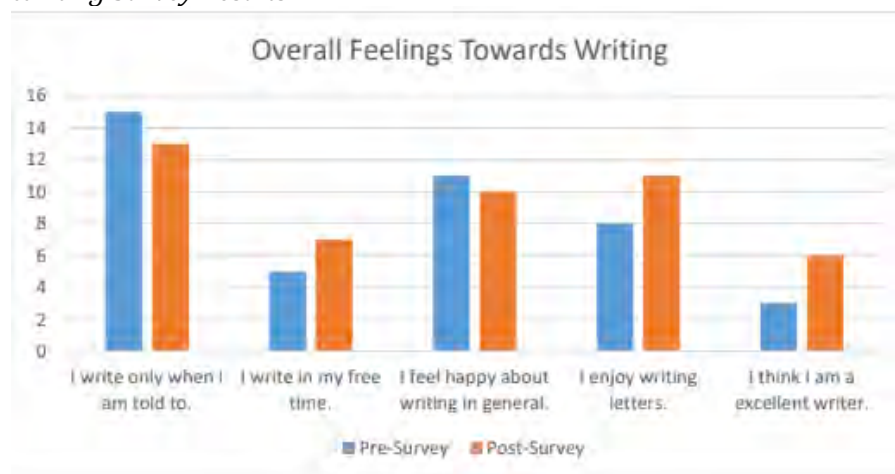
**Figure 8**  
*Reading Survey Results*



By the end of the data collection period, students indicated that they felt happier about reading and liked reading at “any time of day,” rather than just when they were assigned reading.

I also gave a pre and post survey to determine students’ views towards writing before and after the pen pal intervention. I used a similar scale to determine students’ attitudes, likes, and preferences about writing. Figure 9 illustrates the differences between how students felt about themselves as writers before the study and after the study.

**Figure 9**  
*Writing Survey Results*

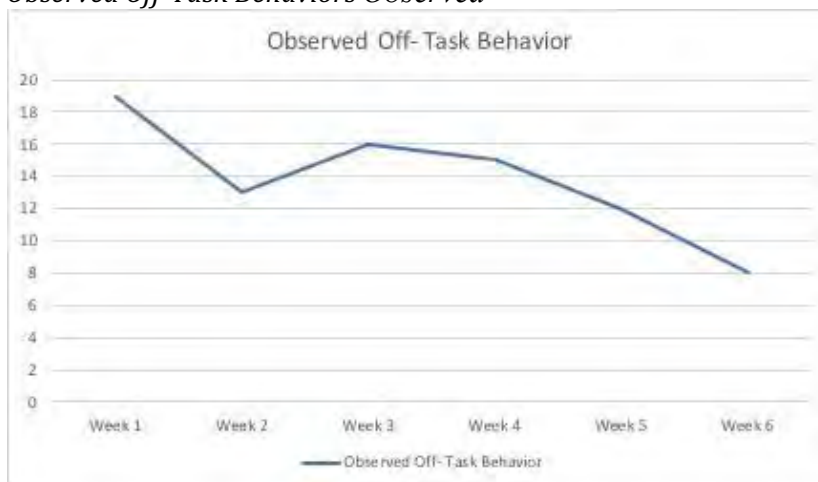


This data shows that students reported more confidence in their ability to write, though they didn’t seem to feel as happy about writing in general. Data here does show, however, that students enjoyed writing letters more by the end of the study than they did initially, and they were more likely to choose writing as a free time activity.

Over the course of the study, I collected a running tally of off-task behaviors that included times when students stopped to talk to neighbors about unrelated topics not pertaining to the book, writing, or their pen pal. Other behaviors included looking around and pausing from writing for an extended time and playing with items at their desk. These tallies were only collected during Writer’s Workshop, and not any other time of day. Across the six weeks of the study, students exhibited a decreasing number of off- task behaviors. Table 1 shows the overall decrease of observed off- task behaviors throughout the duration of the study when students wrote letters to their pen pals.

Data suggest that off-task behaviors diminished after the implementation of the pen pal project. Overall, the behaviors decreased from 19 observed off-task incidents to 8, a decrease of 50%. In this study, writing letters to a real person who was set to respond appeared to create an environment that made the children excited about writing. Similarly, the authentic task made writing seem real, which seemed to increase the students’ sense of purpose as they responded (Boyaci & Güner, 2018).

**Table 1**  
*Observed Off-Task Behaviors Observed*



## CONCLUSION

Upon reflection, integrating pen pals and letter writing as authentic writing correspondence seemed effective for improving student attitudes, motivations, and conventions in writing. Having a letter exchange program allowed students to practice their writing skills and enhance the length and structure of their writing. It also seemed to influence their feelings about reading. Using pen pals encourages students to communicate about their reading and interact with writing as a means of authentic communication.

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