

Overcoming Obstacles Posed by *NCLB*: When Preservice Teachers and Special  
Needs Children Pen Pal with Each Other

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### Abstract

Describes a pen pal partnership experience wherein undergraduate teacher education candidate enrolled in a Reading Language Arts Methods course exchanged a series of 6-8 letters with elementary level children designated as having special needs. The project resulted in a number of benefits for both the children and the teacher education candidates. For the children, a variety of literacy skills were achieved along with an improved outlook on with respect to written communications. For the teacher candidates, a deeper understanding of Brian Cambourne's model of literacy learning was acquired.

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### Overcoming Obstacles Posed by *NCLB*: When Preservice Teachers and Special Needs Children Pen Pal with Each Other

In schools all over America, educators are faced with the challenge of accelerating the pace of literacy development in their classrooms. Under the *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* legislation of the Bush administration, educators have been mandated to raise the bar of expectations for students' academic achievement. Held accountable for implemented curricula, school districts must now provide yearly assessment reports of children's performance in reading, writing, and other areas of the curriculum. Grade level standards are to be met by all children regardless of preschool experiences, socioeconomic background, and a host of other factors that impact norm referenced performance.

Ideal in intent, *NCLB's* goals for school districts have never-the-less given rise to a host of concerns from various sectors of the educational community. For teachers and administrators charged with the education of children who have special learning needs, for instance, the challenge has become magnified. Learning disabilities, physical issues, emotional problems, and other such disadvantages make it difficult for special needs children to progress toward a standard at age appropriate rates. Districts that draw greater numbers of children with such problems find it next to impossible to produce assessment reports commensurate with districts that are more fortunate.

Entwined with issues posed by children with learning challenges, is *NCLB's* unbending support of prescriptive teaching approaches that claim a scientific research base. Mandated adoption of such approaches has given way to one-size fits all reading programs --a condition that has become more prevalent in school districts most in

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need of federal funding. In such situations children with learning needs that cannot be addressed by mandated approaches are bound to fall further behind.

Additional opposition to *NCLB* mandates arises from curriculum theorists whose educational philosophies demystify research that is without external validity. Child centered / constructivist approaches stemming from notions that learning is best achieved through engagement in authentic tasks (Dewey, 1997), and through spiraled curricula (Bruner, 1960) that speak to multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1993) or learning styles (Kolb, 1984), are inconsistent with notions that support prescriptive/ whole class approaches. That constructivist approaches have support in the findings of numerous qualitative/ action research investigations has been virtually ignored by *NCLB* proponents.

This article describes the pen pal project that is currently implemented in an urban based charter school located in a Western New York District. Held in conjunction with a program supported by *NCLB*, the project allays some of the obstacles arising from its mandates – particularly as they effect children with special needs.

Because the school serves as a professional development site (PDS) for Childhood Education majors (hence called junior practitioners (JPs)) at a nearby college, the project provides a field based opportunity for the JPs to experience the effects of a semester long child- centered constructivist activity in action.

### **Research Basis for the Project**

Several action research studies have been conducted over the past two decades examining the effects of pen paling activities between university students and elementary grade students. While not considered scientifically based by the *NCLB* proponents

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(NRP), these studies have noted positive benefits for involved children, as well as pre and in-service teachers regardless of overall ideologies of classrooms where these studies were conducted. For example, Crowhurst (1990), Rankin, (1992) and Austin, (2000), each found pen pal activities to be highly motivating for participating groups. Ceprano and Garan,(1998) documented how first graders who engaged in extended pen paling with reading specialist candidates displayed signs of improved motivation and development in various areas of reading and writing. Friendly letter texts produced by the children over eight exchanges with their pen pals revealed substantial enhancements in composition, organization, and voice, as well as discrete skills such as sound blending, spelling, letter formation, penmanship, and mechanics. Moreover, the in-service teachers who engaged in the exchanges also revealed significant adaptations in their approaches to teaching young children how to write.

Wham and Lenski (1994), and Bromley (1994) likewise revealed how written dialoging between classes of pre-service teachers and elementary students positively impacted understanding of writing processes; and Wells (1992-1993) showed specifically how dialogue journals contributed to students reading development. Reviews of such projects, along with recurrent observations of the effects of pen paling at different PDSs over the years have noted the activity to be highly reflective of Brian Cambourne's child centered model of language and literacy development (1988). In its implementation the project has been used to promote understanding of the model among JPs enrolled the English Language Arts Methods course facilitated at the PDS. As for the pre-service teachers who engaged in bi-weekly pen paling with young children, an awareness of the conditions of learning (Cambourne, 1988) that optimize language

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and literacy learning became apparent. Along with discussing the benefits such a project provides for special needs children, this article shows how involved JPs acquire a deeper understanding of the Cambourne model and the constructivist teaching strategies the model supports.

### **The Context for the Project**

The K-8 charter school where the project is implemented enrolls approximately 400 children over 90% of whom are eligible for free and reduced lunch. By way of financial necessity for the school and evolving ideologies on the part of teachers, a diversity of approaches exists within the school. In general, the teachers at the school utilize a basal reader program with *NCLB* backing to guide a systematized reading curriculum for the children. Concurrently however, and in line with the school charter, the teachers at the school also utilize a modified writers workshop model implemented within the context of a project approach curriculum. Within these programmatic facets, letter exchanges are established each semester between 14 to 16 JPs completing an English Language Arts Methods field experience and varying numbers (20-22 on the average) of special needs children in grades 1-4. The children involved in the project are assigned to two self-contained classes-- one containing first and second graders and the other, third and fourth graders. All of the children in these classes have been noted as performing below their expected levels of achievement for various reasons including learning disabilities, lack of motivation, and /or emotional problems.

As for the JPs each is assigned to a regular K-6 cooperating teacher in the school who, along with the course instructor, mentors them through pre-student teaching experiences in lesson planning, assessment, learning center creation, and

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classroom management. The three credit hour mentoring segment of the methods course coexists with a three hour lecture component during which the instructor debriefs with the JPs on their classroom experiences and further develops their understanding of ELA methods and materials. It is within this latter segment that the pen pal project is facilitated. Noted as an integral course requirement, the pen pal project enables the JPs to take part, observe, and discuss the effects of a writing activity that, in its child centeredness, exemplifies a constructivist ideology. In terms of implementation, each pre service teacher is assigned one or two children with whom they exchange 6- 8 letters throughout a semester. Requirements for each JPs with respect to this assignment (among others) as outlined in the ELA course syllabus are:

- to analyze letters written to them by their assigned children to determine the children's level of proximal development with regard to writing needs. This would include the children's skill needs as they pertain to the New York State Standards in terms of content, organization, and mechanics and a checklist of writing skills attainable by children throughout the elementary grades. [www-leav.army.mil/dca/cdsresource/write42.html](http://www-leav.army.mil/dca/cdsresource/write42.html)
- to write response letters to their assigned children that demonstrate and or/ scaffold to the needs the child written correspondences display. The content of written responses for the JPs should be intentional in
  - (a) connecting with an interest or issue expressed by the child, and
  - (b) encouraging discussion on a curriculum based activity that is occurring or a text that is being read by the child.

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- to reflect and/ or question the effects of what they observe or implement in terms of modeling and scaffolding with their assigned children.

Reflections are maintained in a dated journal within which a copy of each letter written to and received from the child is displayed.

- to assist on at least one occasion with conferencing the special needs children at a time when they will be receiving and/or writing to their assigned pen pals. For this purpose a rotational schedule for visits to the participating classes is maintained for the JPs.
- to share and discuss their observations and questions about the letters they receive from the children during periodic class debriefings.
- to acquire an understanding of the Cambourne model as it is reflected in the pen pal experience

### **Experiencing Cambourne through the Pen Pal Project**

According to Brian Cambourne (1988), literacy and language processes are best developed in learning situations where eight conditions are present. These conditions as reflected in his model of learning are engagement, immersion, employment, demonstration, expectation, responsibility, approximation, and response. These conditions are reciprocal and interactive, and when present in a learning environment, they support both children and teachers in their developing understanding of language and literacy (Rushton, Eitelgeorge, & Zickafoose (2003).

In its ideal, Cambourne's model, and its effects on children and teachers is observed in classrooms where teachers are committed to child centered/constructivist ideologies. Therein, the conditions of learning are operant throughout the school day.



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On a more limited basis, however, the conditions can also be observed in classrooms where teachers are eclectic in their educational beliefs and/or where commitments to constructivist ideologies are evolving.

Pen paling over the span of a semester lends itself specifically to the personal communication facet of **immersion**. Among other writing assignments, each child in our pen pal sample, regardless of developmental level receives six to eight friendly letters written by their assigned JP. Over the semester, with some guidance from the course instructor, the letters written by the JPs each become more and more fitted to their assigned child's level of proximal development -- or that level at which the child can **engage** in with appropriate instructional assistance.

The letters written by the JPs are in direct **response** to what the assigned child chooses to/ or takes responsibility for saying in his/her letter. As the semester progresses and more letters are exchanged, the JPs recurrently note in their reflections or at debriefings how the children seem to write more and/or with voices that seem more personal and authentic. This emergence of voice in the children's letter writing would seem to stem from what Cambourne alludes to as "the bond" that is created between each child and the JP who has become a trusted mentor.

A dramatic incidence of the emergence of voice is a letter by Devon, a fourth grader who was considered as generally uncooperative. Before the project was initiated written assignments produced by Devon gave no clue to his real writing ability. Asked to initiate the letter exchange with an assigned JP (Sal) Devon scrawled the following

Dear sal<sup>1</sup>,

Bla, bla, bla, bla, bla

---

<sup>1</sup> Children's letters are rendered with their errors and approximations.

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devon

An exploration of Devon's interests prior to writing informed Sal of the child's interest in sports. Consequently, Sal wrote to Devon telling him of his own passion for football and most notably the Buffalo Bills. "When he (Devon) gets my letter, he will hopefully) at least read what I have written, and that's better than not reading at all," Sal wrote in his reflective journal. To his surprise Devon responded:

Dear Sal,

I got your letter & I was glad to see my pen pal is a Buffalo Bills fan. I **hop** I can play for the Bills some day. My **Dad plade** football when he was in school. My **Dad say** he **migth** get tickets to the game. Write again.

Devon

Devon's second letter revealed considerably more about himself, his writing ability, and his skill needs at his level. It also reflected Cambourne's contention of how important it is to empower children and make them responsible for "when, how, and what 'bits'" to focus in on or share during the process of learning.

Further reflecting the **engagement** that occurs through pen paling, the children, regardless of grade level assignment and or development are always excited to receive a letter personally addressed to them. In its mirroring of "everyday life," the children enjoy the experience of receiving mail just as their parents receive mail at home. They are anxious to read (or have someone help them read) a message that is meant for them alone, reading it a second or third time, sharing it with peers and teachers and/or (later) their parents at home. The repeated reading which the letter text activates supports

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the development of fluency, and comprehension in ways that other reading tasks might not (Dowhower,1987). The children are immersed, too, in a writing to communicate frame of mind as they each time respond as best they can with texts and or pictures they draft, edit, and revise.

In line with the reciprocal nature of the conditions, the children's written letters provide the JPs with an immersion experience of their own. When the JPs meet as a class, the children's letters became the subject for active class discussion and analysis and, over time, the impetus toward a deeper understanding of writing development, the need for appropriate scaffolding, and an appreciation of the diversity and individual differences within heterogeneous environments. In the reflection that follows, Lindsey displays her awareness of the impact of strategic questioning within the context of her communications with the child as well as her appreciation of the child's emerging self direction and voice.

### (Week 5 Reflection)

... In the beginning, I asked Alejandra very specific questions. She usually answered with short sentences and sometimes one word answers. This made her letter sound disconnected and strange. Alejandra had a hard time when I first started writing "Tell me" statements in my letters to her, but she is now making progress. In my last letter I asked her to tell me about her family. In her response she wrote five complete sentences about her sister's likes and dislikes. I think she wrote more than if I had asked her specific questions about her sisters.

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To allow for the condition of **approximation** to occur, teachers in participating classrooms allow their children to send the first drafts of early letters to their pen paling JPs. As the weeks pass, however, second and or third (revised and edited) drafts are received by the JPs. These revised and edited drafts still exhibit some approximations (errors in sentence structures, punctuation, organization or spelling), although the quality and developmental nature of them often show improvement. As the semester develops, the JPs will make progressive adaptations in their modeling and/ or scaffolding; and in the process observe whether or not their efforts are having any effects on the children. In the following example, a second grader (Rokeya) writes to a JP using invented spellings while confusing the proper use of several words:

Dear Tiffany,

I am 8 years old. My **favorid** subject in school is Math.

Yes I am excited that school **is** started again. The bad thing is that I will be moving to North Carolina, **Rolie next** month. Yes

I had a pet that **dide** I had two **one** name **was pauley** and the other one sky.

Love,

Rokeya

Writing as she speaks, Rokeya's phonemic awareness resulted in her approximated spellings of favorite, died, and Raleigh. To her credit, she took the risk that was needed for her to invent the spelling of words she needed to use in her first draft. For Tiffany, it was clear, that regardless of her next message to Rokeya, the correct spelling of certain words, the need to use punctuation and attend to word usage

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certainly warranted **demonstration**. Also important for Tiffany was her need to **respond** to the content of the message itself (what Rokeya had to say); for as qualitative research on writing development suggests this response to content is what encourages children's development of voice and expression (Calkins, 1994.)

Dear Rokeya,

Thanks for your letter. You certainly had lots of news to share even though some of it was sad. I love newsy letters.

I am sorry that one of your pets died. You said you had two birds: one by the name of Pauley and the other by the name of Sky. Which one died? It is very sad when a favorite pet dies.

I was also sorry to hear that you will move to Raleigh. Raleigh is a very nice city though, and I'm sure you will like it there once you have started school and make new friends.

Love,

Tiffany

According to Cambourne, learners need to observe how texts are composed and used. The diversity of learning abilities, disabilities, as well proclivities in a heterogeneous classroom make recurrent demonstrations of concepts imperative. It is the rare child who, after one demonstration, will acquire perfect understanding and ability to apply what is inherent in well constructed, voice- laden letters.

The pen pal experience allows for repeated demonstrations of the friendly letter genre along with its various purposes. Concurrently it allows for demonstrations

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responsive to subordinate skills of each participating individual (See Tiffany's letter to Rokeya)

At specific intervals throughout the semester, each JP experiences rotational visits to a participating classroom during writing workshop time. These visits provide the JPs with opportunities to engage in conferencing with children with drafting, revision, and editing needs as they occur. Later, when the JPs meet as a class, those who have had the most recent experience as facilitator's recount how different children responded to the letters they received. On this score, JPs recurrently cite observations of children who read and reread the letters they have received from their JP to find the correct spelling of words they need to use in the response they were currently drafting. Herein, too, the social interactive view expressed within Vygotskian theory (1967) becomes apparent for the JPs as they note the children's need to share their letters with each other and to ask their teachers and each other questions that will help them better formulate the letters they are writing.

As the project progresses and more letters are exchanged, the JPs raise questions about what to do when children don't respond to modeling. Hence the opportunity arises to discuss the necessity of providing feedback and other forms of **response** to the children's writing.

It is this sort of interest on the part of JPs that provides the springboard for discussion on the value of direct instruction as opposed to modeling. Further, some JPs start to create ways for giving their pen pal directives within the context of the letters without impinging on the personal message exchanges the children have learned to love. One of these cuing devices is the use of the "PS" at the end of a chatty letter – sufficient

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in asking a child to attend to one or two skills that need to be addressed. For example after writing several paragraphs telling Reggie about his trip to Washington, D.C., Craig added this PS to his letter to the child:

PS. Reggie, could you remember to check your letter before you send it to me? You seem to leave out your periods and question marks at the end of sentences. This makes it hard for me to get through your message without getting confused.

With regard to the same issue, some JPs who receive letters devoid of punctuation, have found success doing nothing more than color coding the punctuation marks in their own letters to the children. In such cases the children's response letters to the JP have often contained highlighted punctuation marks, more often than not in their proper place – a sign that the color coding in this matter received appropriate attention .

In an attempt to draw children's attention to their need to keep similar thoughts together in one paragraph, some JPs have made their own paragraphing apparent by accentuating each the main idea with related thoughts within a quadrangular shape. The PS then provides a cue pertaining to the figures for the child.

Hi Chris,

**My brother and his wife decided to give me a surprise party for my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday.** They invited my mom and dad and some of my friends from school to

the party. I was so surprised. I was even more surprised when I saw they bought me a ticket to Florida for my school break.

**I heard you went to the Buffalo Zoo last week.** That trip should give you lots of ideas on what animal to do project. Have you picked one out yet? I'd really love to hear about your trip and how your project is going.

Your friend,

Michael

**PS. Can you tell why I have an outline around each paragraph and why the first sentence is highlighted?**

During lecture segments of the ELA methods classes the children's response to such cuing provides cause for celebration when children for whom they are intended reciprocate with in-kind highlighting that shows they understood the cue. Of course, the teachers in participating classrooms knows of the JPs' experimentation with cueing mechanisms and often support their recognition by conferencing as the children write. Thus the pen pal project provides impetus for Cambourne's condition of response. Relevant and readily provided feedback from "knowledgeable others" on letter content, as well as grammar, punctuation and structure all take place for the children within the context of this semester long experience.

Cambourne notes that learners need time and repeated opportunity to employ or use/ practice their learning in "functional, realistic and non-artificial ways. When children have this condition present, they develop confidence and control over what they



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have learned. This became apparent over the span of the pen-pal project as some of the JPs typically begin to receive two and even three letters in response to one of theirs. The children, as do the JPs, became truly engaged in the friendly sharing of events that occurs in the lives of those with whom they have connected.

Conversations with JPs early in a semester generally indicate some disconnect with Cambourne's meaning of *expectation*. It is not unusual for JPs used to a grading system, to infer that having expectations for a class of children means that all of them should quickly and easily perform to a grade level standard. As the semester progresses, this concept of expectation take on a more sophisticated and rational understanding on the part of JPs. That is, that the learning of how to read and write advances in stages, that the pace at which those stages emerge varies for each child, and that expectations for each child should be made with reference to their zone of proximal development and not necessarily the grade level to which the child is assigned. It is this expectation that allows a child to comply and proceed with engagement. Informed by Cambourne's theoretical framework, the pen pal project enables JPs to acquire a deeper understanding of learning as a social, interactive process; that each child regardless of level can construct or develop his literacy in authentic / relevant situations, and that learning transcends arbitrary grade levels and developmental stages.

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