

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 375 597

EC 303 437

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TITLE Buddy Journals: Writing for Students with Learning Disabilities and Cognitive Impairments.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Dialog Journals; Elementary School Students; Free Writing; Friendship; Intermediate Grades; *Journal Writing; Junior High Schools; Junior High School Students; *Learning Disabilities; Mental Retardation; Middle Schools; *Peer Relationship; Program Implementation; Self Expression; Student Attitudes; *Student Journals; *Writing Exercises

IDENTIFIERS Middle School Students

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the use of "buddy journals" to generate enthusiasm for writing, provide writing practice, and build friendships between two classes of middle school students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments. The buddy journals were introduced to the students as a way to get to know someone better and perhaps make a friend. Journal entries (n=112) made over 16 weeks were examined for content, form, and legibility as well as growth of peer relationships. At the end of the 16-week period, most students felt positive about the journal project. Teachers saw legibility improve in general, but felt that students were not able to write about a range of topics. Recommendations for implementation include: model appropriate entries and monitor journals regularly; note problems with entries and provide direct instruction in needed skills; remind students to consult their list of topics and give them optional topic prompts; occasionally plan time for students to socialize with their buddies; and be careful not to overuse buddy journals. (Contains 12 references.) (JDD)

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Buddy Journals: Writing For Students
With Learning Disabilities and Cognitive Impairments

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Abstract

This article describes the use of buddy journals to generate enthusiasm for writing, provide writing practice and build friendships between two classes of middle school students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments. Journal entries (112) made over 16 weeks were examined for content, form and legibility as well as growth of peer relationships. Both student and teacher reflections on the project are discussed, as are practical implications for the classroom.

Typically, classroom writing is not directed to students, lacks a specific purpose or audience, and has little application to students' everyday lives (Gaustad & Messenheimer-Young, 1991). Most writing assignments focus on mechanics, such as spelling, grammar and paragraph structure, which have little carryover beyond the classroom and result in frustration and limited motivation for writing. It is no surprise then that many students with learning disabilities avoid and dislike writing and often view themselves as nonwriters. To generate enthusiasm for writing and develop writing proficiency, these students need opportunities to write freely in authentic, meaningful and nonthreatening contexts.

Buddy Journals: What Are They?

One writing strategy that accomplishes these goals is the buddy journal, a diary in which two students write back and forth to each other (Bromley, 1989). The buddy journal is an outgrowth of the dialogue journal, a written conversation between a student and a teacher (Atwell, 1987; Bode, 1989; Gambrell, 1985; Kreeft, 1984). For students with learning disabilities, dialogue journals provide motivation and practice in writing (Gaustad & Messenheimer-Young, 1991; Grant, Lazarus, & Peyton, 1992; Staton & Tyler, 1987), and for students with hearing impairments, dialogue journals develop skills in thinking, reading and writing (Staton, 1985).

Buddy journals have similar advantages with the added benefit of a peer audience. In the nonthreatening context of the buddy

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journal, peers not only provide authentic reasons for reading and writing, but also give direct, immediate feedback on the content and form of a buddy's writing. Furthermore, when students generate their own topics, share feelings, ask questions, make requests, describe activities, explore ideas and solve problems together, they build relationships with each other. This social interaction is important for students with learning disabilities who often experience interpersonal problems (Bryan, 1981; Lerner, 1988).

This article describes a project carried out by two special education teachers of students with learning disabilities and other handicapping conditions. The teachers' classrooms were located at the far end of their school and were relatively isolated from the rest of the building. While a few students were mainstreamed into general education classes for part of the day, most were taught exclusively in their special education classroom. The teachers wanted to generate enthusiasm for writing, provide writing practice and enlarge their students' group of friends, so they tried buddy journals. They felt the journals would give their students a safe context and real purpose for writing.

Implementing Buddy Journals

The project involved two classes of middle school (grades 6 to 8) students with learning disabilities in reading and writing. Many students also had cognitive impairments, with IQ scores ranging from approximately 65 to 85. One student had an emotional handicap and another a hearing impairment. Their reading levels ranged from grades 1 to 4 and all had limited writing skills.

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Depending on their academic abilities, students were placed in a class of 12 students with one teacher and one aide (12:1:1), or 15 students with a teacher (15:1). The teachers paired students from one class with students from the other class, matching those who did not know each other.

Buddy journals were introduced to the students as a way to get to know someone better and perhaps make a friend. The teachers compared buddy journals to a conversation with a peer or written letters to a faraway friend. Students brainstormed topics to write about, as well as appropriate greetings, closings and signatures. The teachers modelled sample entries to show students how to create messages. They discussed the importance of legible handwriting after trying to read an illegibly written blackboard message. Students established rules for journal writing that were posted in each classroom: 1) Choose your own topics, 2) Write independently, 3) Spell words the best you can, 4) Do not write anything offensive, and 5) No grades. They were told that journal entries would not be corrected or graded, but would be read by the teachers.

Each student in the 12:1:1 class made a journal by folding and stapling several sheets of 8x11 inch lined paper inside a wallpaper cover. They decorated the covers with artwork and the names of both buddies. Included in each journal was the list of topics to write about and a handwriting guide.

Journal time lasted for about 15-20 minutes as each student read the previous entry and wrote a response. Classes exchanged

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journals every second or third day for eight weeks. Because of attrition and absence, only seven buddy pairs wrote for the entire eight weeks. One student was paired with a teacher because of uneven numbers.

The students were eager to begin, and everyone wrote without prompting or encouragement at the beginning of each day. They were often impatient for their journals to be returned so they could read and respond to what their buddies had written.

Buddy Journal Entries

A typical entry was usually in manuscript and about a page long. The following discussion is based on examination of 112 journal entries made by the seven buddy pairs.

Content. In their early journal entries, students described themselves, from physical looks to the composition of their families and where they lived. In later entries they wrote about hobbies and interests, such as building models of race cars, collecting sports cards, hunting, fishing, animals, football and baseball; and activities, such as making "forts," attending dances, making science projects, reading books and playing video games. They also consulted each other on such topics as who their "best" friends were and who they "liked" or didn't like. Some students occasionally drew pictures.

When students were particularly pleased or excited about a reply from a buddy, they often read entries to each other or one student shared a buddy's entry with the whole class. Clearly, everyone's enthusiasm was high for buddy journals during the first

six weeks and seemed to continue for all but two of the buddy pairs. These two pairs wrote briefer entries as the weeks passed, perhaps because they had lost interest in writing or in their particular buddy.

The two boys who carried on the most consistently substantial conversation with each other in their buddy journals found that they had much in common. At first, Mike B. and Mike C. asked and answered questions about guns and hunting, making go-carts and girlfriends. Then, they explored their reading and writing assignments in school. In one entry, Mike B. said "I am reading The Furry News. It is vear funny. Have you read it Yes or No?" Mike C. answered "No" and went on to describe the book he was reading with a brief plot summary, "My book it is called Charlie the Lost Dog. It is ritten by Ann Dord It is about a dog that gets lost and fights a bare and excaps from it then he saves in a avelanch." At one point Mike B. was curious about Mike C.'s writing and said, "How long did it take you to write your book? I am not done with mine yet but i am geting there." These two boys were well-matched in writing ability, eager to write each day, and developed a strong relationship through the journal.

In all but one instance, the topics students wrote about were appropriate. In Duane's case, he either forgot the rule "Do not write anything offensive," or felt comfortable enough to begin by writing a sexually explicit entry about a girl. Brad showed the entry to the teacher who talked with Duane, and the page was torn from the journal with Duane's apology appearing voluntarily in the

next entry. Brad accepted the apology with "Thank you for saying sorry. Do you like sports? Do you like video games?" and the correspondence continued.

Friendships. In some cases, friendships began to develop both inside and outside school after several journal exchanges. For example, Josh and Allen found they shared interests in model cars, sports cards and computer games, and began to get together during lunch period to trade football cards. They invited each other for weekend sleep overs and used nicknames, eg. Allen became "Slick" and Josh became "Paul." In one entry, Josh described a book he was reading and told Allen, "I thick you sode read it." In another entry, Allen gave Josh a compliment, "You have a good sences of humer." On one occasion, when Josh's mother would not let him stay overnight with Allen, Allen wrote sympathetically, "i am sary that your mom sas no arnt moms a pain." These two boys became good friends and gave each other support and encouragement in their journal.

The most striking example of a developing friendship was between Tina and Laurie. Both girls wrote legibly and shared factual information in their first five entries. Initially, they did not appear to care for one another, but within the pages of the journal they discovered several common interests. They apparently felt comfortable enough that in later entries they revealed personal information and explored peer relationships. They gave each other advice, such as Laurie's to Tina, "I thank you should brake up with duane." Laurie made a suggestion and admitted a

previous misconception about Tina, "You have to do your hair a lot different. But I dont see that much rong with you. You are nice. Evr body sead you act stuck up. You are sometimes. But you are ols. not so much makeup. You would look a lot better if you just be your south." Tina responded with, "I am Not Stuckup thos kids in 6th grad are Stuck up I like you your look very nice everyday And your cool to be with I went you to be my friend..."

After a few weeks of journal writing, the two began to sit together at lunch. Perhaps the focus in their later entries on interpersonal problems and resolutions was related to conversations they had at lunch. Their developing friendship was mirrored in the progressively longer entries they wrote to each other, first filling half a page, then two-thirds and finally ending with full page entries in their last six exchanges.

Another relationship that grew through writing was that of Kristie, a student in the 12:1:1 class, and Mrs. Snyder, the teacher of the 15:1 class. Following Mrs. Snyder's initial entry written in cursive, Kristie wrote "Print please." and thereafter Mrs. Snyder did. She wrote, "I am so enjoying reading your letters. I laughed out-loud when I read about your skating with your sister in the basement. It must have hurt your finger, but it did sound like a funny scene. I like to roller skate too and have also had many a fall!..."

Until the journals began, Kristie, a reluctant writer, had been shy with peers and adults. But, finding an audience in Mrs. Snyder, Kristie eagerly shared information about her family,

friends and weekend activities. Mrs. Snyder typically wrote two pages, asking Kristie several questions, and Kristie wrote a one-page answer, ending with a question for Mrs. Snyder. After four weeks, Mrs. Snyder taped a new pencil in Kristie's journal and Kristie wrote at the end of her next entry "Thank you for the pensll." Kristie then taped a piece of gum in the journal for Mrs. Snyder and when it was not acknowledged, Kristie asked "did you git a pes of gum". Kristie's last three entries were brief and difficult to read, but she had become more outgoing with her peers and had started to write a weekly letter to her own teacher.

These letters either gave Kristie confidence or something to talk about, and she frequently initiated discussions with the teacher.

Form and Legibility. It was interesting to note the form students used in their journals. Six journals were consistently in letter format with a date, greeting and closing, while two journals were inconsistent in this. In every student entry, punctuation was omitted more often than it was appropriately used, giving these teachers valuable assessment data to guide future instruction. While entries were not routinely corrected or graded, in two journals when students asked for help reading entries, the teacher inserted standard spellings to make the message readable.

All students used manuscript in their entries and those who wrote illegibly received prompt reactions with requests for neater writing. Jody and Matt had trouble reading each other's writing and gave direct feedback. Matt wrote, "Can you write neater please." and "Improve on spelling please. I'll try harder on

spelling to." Jody said, "I cannot read your wrighting. Could you right more clearly?" Following these requests, both boys' entries became more legible and neither made any requests for neatness.

For another buddy pair, legibility was also an issue. Mike C. wrote to Mike B., "You have to start writing bigger because I can't really see your writng that good and I can't understand what you are saying." Mike B. apologized and wrote larger and more legibly in remaining entries. Two months later, Mike B. wrote to Mike C. that he was making a poster about a book he had read and "I am put it in my best handwriting," suggesting that he realized the importance of legibility.

Brad also directed his buddy to write more legibly. After a brief scribbled entry near the end of their journal, the request "Duane, Please write neater. Your Friend, Brad" resulted in two clearly written full-page entries by Duane.

In every case but Kristie's, when a buddy commented on handwriting there was an attempt to write more neatly and a visible improvement in letter formation and spacing. After six weeks of writing legible page-long entries to Mrs. Snyder, Kristie's entries shrank to a third of a page and were difficult to read. Mrs. Snyder wrote to her, "I did have trouble understanding some of your words this time, so it's hard to answer your questions." Although Kristie wrote "I will rut nicer nast time," her handwriting in the last three entries was difficult to read. Her teacher felt that home problems were the cause of this change, which also was evident in her behavior and school work.

Looking Back On the Project

These students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments were eager to write in buddy journals and all did so enthusiastically, at least initially. At the end of the 16 weeks, in response to the question "What did you like or dislike about buddy journals?" most comments were positive: "You can write about your likes and dislikes," "It was fun because I found out about someone else," "I looked forward to seeing what my buddy wrote," "It was like getting mail" and "I got to write to another person." Some comments were negative: "It's boring because they wrote the same stuff over and over" and "I had trouble reading his handwriting." Other comments included suggestions such as "I want to switch if I don't like my partner" and "We should get to sit in groups and share what we wrote."

The teachers encountered some problems with these buddy journals. First, while they saw legibility improve in general, they felt the content of entries was not what it might have been. Many students repeated themselves, writing about their hobbies over and over again and seemed not to be able to write about a range of topics. Some students reported difficulty thinking of things to write about. Punctuation and spelling were a problem for nearly every student. Second, a few students reported mid-way that they did not like their buddy and wanted to change partners. Others wanted time to be with their buddies to get to know them better.

In retrospect, the teachers felt that using journal entries for intense direct instruction in punctuation might have improved

this skill. To help vary the writing of those who tended to write about the same thing, the teachers said that reminding students to use their list of topics and supplying them with prompts to get started might have helped. In the future, the teachers decided to allow students to choose their own buddies, shorten the journal exchange time to four weeks and provide time for socializing.

Although improved writing proficiency was not consistently evident in their entries, all students practiced writing to a responsive audience. They all learned to converse in writing with another person and most demonstrated improved legibility in handwriting. In the journals, these students applied literacy in a meaningful and safe context as they wrote to peers about topics of their own choice.

Through these journals the students enlarged their group of friends as they explored relationships and developed friendships that they otherwise might not have. In every journal, students established a relationship with a new person and three buddy pairs developed friendships that continued beyond the project. In many cases, when students shared a buddy's entries with classmates, their peers also learned about another student. In their journal entries, these students supported and affirmed each other, often giving positive feedback and occasional advice. They learned that they possessed similarities as well as differences.

For Mrs. Snyder, who had never kept a dialogue journal with a student, the experience was rewarding. She said she came to know Kristie as a person and learned more about her than she ever

thought possible. In fact, Mrs. Snyder's experience with journals was so positive that the following September she and the school's reading teacher began a home/school journal project in which students, parents and teachers dialogued together.

Practical Implications

For teachers who want to collaborate, this 15-20 minute, authentic, nonthreatening intervention is relatively easy to institute and results in minimal disruption to the daily schedule. Based on the experience with buddy journals described in this article, several recommendations for implementation follow:

- * To help ensure success, model appropriate entries and monitor journals regularly. Modelling the writing of entries weekly or more often as necessary reminds students how to compose good entries and provides needed reinforcement. Regular conferences in which students read self-selected entries orally to the teacher can provide diagnostic information as well as reading practice.

- * Note problems with entries and provide direct instruction in needed skills. Students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments need intentional instruction to acquire and maintain specific writing skills. Copies of actual journal entries, which may be more relevant for students than skill sheets or workbook pages, can be shared on the overhead projector to teach punctuation, spelling strategies and legibility.

- * To help students vary the content of entries, remind them to consult their list of topics and give them optional topic prompts.

Some possible prompts are "My favorite time of day is...because..." or "One of my dreams is to..." or "It's hard for me to... because..."

* To help maintain enthusiasm, occasionally plan time for students to socialize. Besides allowing students to eat lunch together, allotting a special time for them to share entries, talk or play games can encourage the growth of friendships.

* Overuse of buddy journals can lead to disinterest. Writing to students who are older or younger, attend another school or live in another state, or adults in a nearby senior center might also work. Other types of journals can also spark interest in writing eg., home-school journals, draw and tell journals, literature response journals, or learning logs (Bromley, 1993).

Conclusion

While the importance of dialogue journals should not be overlooked as a way for teachers to get to know students better and to model standard spelling, punctuation and form, neither can we overlook the contribution of buddy journals to the literacy development of students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments. Buddy journals can generate enthusiasm for writing and learning about peers as they provide writing practice in authentic, meaningful and nonthreatening contexts.

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