

Pen Pal Letter Exchanges: Taking First Steps Toward Developing Cultural Understandings

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Pen pal letter exchanges can support the development of literacy and cultural understandings.

In our increasingly global community, it is essential that schools support children in developing productive and meaningful relationships with others at home and around the world. “Getting to know each other requires a personal touch. It is not enough to have knowledge about one’s race, one’s ethnicity, one’s country or region of the world. We must come to know each other person to person” (Hayes, 1998, p. 5). A productive method for assisting students in developing personal understandings of other peoples is through pen pal friendships.

The writing of pen pal letters has been a popular practice for generations. Pen pal relationships are most likely to develop during childhood and adolescence, and they serve the purpose of providing safe arrangements in which children can form close and open relationships with peers (Shulman, Seiffge-Krenke, & Dimitrovsky, 1994). There has been little research on pen pal writing; however, the potential benefits of opportunities for authentic and meaningful writing in support of literacy development are well documented. As students participate in responsive letter writing within the framework of an organized pen pal project, they are engaged in a literate activity for the tacit purpose of mutual communication with another individual from whom they expect to receive a response (Elmary, 1980). Vygotsky (1934/1978, 1981) established that children learn more effectively through experiences that are meaningful and relevant

to them. Through letter exchanges with others, children have an authentic opportunity to develop strategies for determining the meaning of written language (Baker & Brown, 1984) and to construct written language in return that reflects their intended meanings (Wells, 1996).

Pen pal friendships have been shown to be effective in supporting cross-curricular learning. Lemkuhl (2002) engaged her students in Toledo, Ohio, in a pen pal writing project with students from Tucson, Arizona, finding that the students made learning gains that cut across all of the curriculum areas: reading, language, spelling, writing, math, social studies, science, and technology. In writing, the students were motivated to learn correct forms of punctuation, grammar, and spelling. After they began the pen pal project, the students became interested in reading about the areas in which their pen pals lived and they gained related new vocabulary. In math, they learned about time zones, temperatures, and sunrise and sunset differences. Social studies involved examination of topics such as culture, religion, and language, and the children practiced map skills in locating places mentioned in the letters. In science, the children examined differences in weather, and they studied the kinds of animals that live in climates such as the desert in Arizona. In a similar pen pal project, Farley (1994) established that children could have rich personal experiences with children from cultures unlike their own. As one teacher reported, “It helped the children understand other cultures and to realize that all people can work together” (p. 41).

As participants in pen pal activities, children develop personal roles through the culturally valued communication practice of letter writing (Barton, 1994). Understanding the role of language within one’s own

culture allows children to develop ways to communicate effectively with a pen pal outside their culture (Johnston, 1992). Pen pal relationships establish the role between author and writer as friends of equal status. In addition, letter writing requires that participants construct meaning solely from written text, and usually without the aid of illustrations or other clues (Beach, Saunders, & McElroy, 1997).

Pen pal relationships afford many learning opportunities, including supporting literacy development and content learning in all of the curricular areas. Furthermore, pen pals provide students with a safe context for forming personal friendships during stages of development in which the desire for close friendships with peers is high. Finally, participation in a letter exchange provides the opportunity for students to learn about and value cultures different from their own.

In this study, we examined pen pal letters written between partners in Malawi and the United States. This article focuses on the nature of the student communication that occurred through this international pen pal exchange.

The Study

Our study involved content analysis of pen pal letters between students in the United States and Malawi. Ninety children in an American school and 85 children in a Malawian school participated in the pen pal project.

The Children, Contexts, and Logistics

This pen pal project started with a request from a head teacher in a primary school in Domasi, Malawi. He wished to offer the students in his school an opportunity to practice using their second language of English and to expose these students to an international culture very different from their own. Opportunities for student-to-student communication with the outside world had not previously been available to these students in Malawi, one of the world's poorest and least developed countries (Infoplease, n.d.). The families of most children in Malawi do not have the financial means for anything above survival. Writing supplies and postage are not affordable, and digital communication is impossible. Thus, letter writing was necessary for a pen pal exchange. All of the

participating children from Malawi lived in the Zomba Plateau region. The school is located about a mile off a major paved road in Malawi. This school is about 15 miles north of a small town. There is a local trading center and a teacher training college close to the school. Almost all of the Malawian pen pal partners lived in extreme poverty.

Following the request from the head teacher in Malawi, two Malawian doctoral students and a U.S. professor who had visited Malawi made a presentation about the African country to the students in third and fourth grade in a small school in rural southwest Virginia, USA. All of these students wrote letters to Malawian pen pals. The students were all Caucasian, English speakers who lived in an isolated part of Virginia. The area is mountainous, and there is one large industry in the area that serves as the hub of the community. Many of the children's parents work in this industry or in small businesses that serve the community. The majority of the children are from lower socioeconomic status families.

University faculty members traveling back and forth between Malawi and Virginia several times each year as a part of a USAID grant facilitated the project. These professors hand carried 85–90 student-composed letters in each direction and delivered them to a contact person at each of the two schools to be distributed to the students. Later, they picked up return letters to deliver to the contact teachers.

When the first letters arrived in Malawi from Virginia, the head teacher was very excited and enthusiastic about the project but surprised that it had happened, and he became concerned about how to handle the replies to the first letters that arrived. The head teacher felt that it was essential that the letters be well written and that they represent Malawi admirably; thus, he wanted proficient English users to participate.

English is either the second or third language for Malawian children. The people of Malawi include Chewa, Nyanja, Tumbuka, Yao, Lomwe, Sena, Tonga, Ngoni, Ngonde, Asian, and European cultural groups. English is the official language of the country (meaning that it is the language of government, newspapers, and official business documents), and Chichewa is the national language. Approximately 20% of the nation's children speak native languages such as Tumbuka and Yao prior to entering school. They encounter Chichewa and English when they en-

ter school at age 6. Chichewa is the focus of language study in standards (grades) 1–4. English instruction, however, is introduced in standard 1, and a much more intensive English-language study begins in standard 4.

The head teacher decided that the standard 8 students, who were the most proficient in English, could not participate in the project because they were preparing to take a high-stakes test that would determine whether they would be eligible to attend secondary school. For this reason, standards 5, 6, and 7 were selected for the project. At this age, most students have some facility with spoken English, and, to a lesser degree, they are able to read in English. Written English is generally their weakest area of usage.

Over a period of almost three years, pen pal letters were exchanged seven times. Naturally, there were times when a letter came to Virginia for a child who had moved away from the school—and the same thing happened in Malawi. In these cases, the letters were passed on to other children. In the majority of cases, one child corresponded with one other child for each letter exchange. In about 30% of the cases, there was a change in the partners responding across the three-year time span in which we collected the letters. There were several cases of children who were very motivated by the exchange and who chose to write additional letters in order to get more than one pen pal with whom to correspond.

The pen pal project was coordinated at the Virginia school by third-grade teachers Susan Byer and Patty Howard. In Malawi, the project was coordinated by Ralph Chikhwaya, who was both a standard 8 teacher and the vice principal of the school.

For the purpose of studying the communication between the students, each time that letters were written in Virginia, copies were made of them before they were taken to Malawi. Then, after return letters were brought from Malawi, copies were made. Copies of all correspondence between partners were kept in separate folders. The letter sequences were treated as data sets collected over a period of three years.

Analysis of the Letters

To study the sequences of pen pal letters between the United States and Malawian students, we used an inductive method of identifying common themes or characteristics, following the guidelines provided by Bogdan and Biklen (1998). We met repeatedly for

long afternoons to analyze the data. In the early meetings, we simply read letters and discussed components of them. Next, we had several meetings in which we orally read sequences of letters between partners to one another. As we read, we stopped and discussed themes that seemed to be repeating themselves across the letters and made note of them. The themes that emerged from children's letters were identified, compared, and then coded into tentative conceptual categories. For example, an initial reading of one child's letter revealed the development of an understanding of a different culture, so we noted "cultural understandings" as a possible theme. The researchers compared further evidence that either challenged or supported this conceptual category in other letters. We continued this process until we reached a point at which we had a solid list of themes with no new themes emerging as we read additional letters. This list was initially organized into six major themes, with subcategories for each of them. Upon further analysis, it became clear that all of the themes were closely interrelated, making it hard to find distinctions between some of them. After addressing this problem by combining several of the original six themes, three distinct themes with subcategories were identified. The data are reported in these three major theme groups: (1) understanding and comparing cultures and daily life, (2) language, and (3) connections.

Results

Understanding and Comparing Cultures and Daily Life

Many of the letters included descriptions of daily life for the students in both cultures. Primarily, the children seemed to be sharing personal information and looking for commonalities with their pen pals. In the case of unfamiliar names, the children identified their genders for one another in the first few letters, as in "Dear Chimwe, Please tell me in your next letter if you are a boy or a girl." Some of the Malawian pen pals identified themselves as unmarried; for instance, "I am an eleven year old unmarried girl in standard 6." The U.S. pen pals never made note of their marital status. Conversations expanded from basic personal facts into community and cultural issues, such as favorite foods, popular sports, music, regional physical features, weather and seasons, holidays celebrated, hobbies, and school issues.

Family. Family was an important topic, and the children often provided the names of their parents, their parents' jobs, and the ages of their parents. They shared the numbers of brothers and sisters they had and their names and ages. The children also discussed their friends, the names of their friends, and activities in which they engaged with friends. The Malawian pen pals often began or ended their correspondence with a formal greeting from the whole family to their pen pal partner's whole family; for example, "Best regards to you, your parents, and your brothers." In one instance, the parents of a pen pal wrote a letter directly to the parents of the other pen pal.

Pets. Pets were an extremely popular topic of the letters. The children named the kinds of pets they had, the names of their pets, and sometimes the ages of their pets. They discussed pets that had died, and it was common for the children to write one another and express sorrow about the death of a pet. Pets are somewhat different in the lives of Malawians and Americans; however, the children didn't realize this. Pets in Malawi roam freely, and they don't come indoors. Also, the Malawians often named animals such as chickens, rabbits, and goats as pets. Differences in understandings of pets did not seem to matter because the point was that the children shared a love of animals.

Religion. Religion was a topic of conversation for some of the pen pals. Some stated that they went to church each week, and there were discussions of prayers and hymns. For instance, following the mention of hymns by a Malawian child, a U.S. child wrote, "I bet the hymns you sing are some of my songs." This became a theme of the letters between these partners, with the Malawian child replying, "I am very glad to hear that you sing same hymns I used to sing. I will be glad if you make one for me." In the next letter, the U.S. child wrote back, "I am making you your hymns," to which the Malawian child replied, "I will be glad to receive the hymns when you are making for me."

While there was more discussion of religion among the Malawian students, there were also U.S. students who discussed religious activities and asked questions such as "Are you a Christian?" Some children asked one another about their denominations. For instance, a Malawian child wrote,

In our whole family we are Catholic followers, and I joined a legio groups in the church which I always go for

prayer every Wednesday. May I know your denomination in your next letter. Being a Catholic follower, our family always go for prayer in our house every 5:00 am and 7:00 pm after super.

In some cases, there were Christian children from the U.S. writing to Islamic children in Malawi. There were no discussions of differences in religious beliefs and practices; it seemed meaningful for the children to know that they both had religious beliefs as a commonality.

Food. Favorite foods were a common topic of discussion in many letters. American students named various types of food as favorites, some recognized by the Malawian students and some not. One U.S. child wrote, "We like to eat pizza here in Virginia. I like pepperoni on mine." The Malawian student replied, "We don't know this pizza. Here in Malawi, we eat chambo fish." Nsima and chambo were listed consistently as favorite Malawian foods, sparking exchanges to find out what these foods were like. Sometimes, students would anticipate that their pen pal might not have the background knowledge for understanding a particular food, so an explanation was included. A U.S. child wrote, "My favorite food is spaghetti. Spaghetti is noodles with meat source. Some people might put chesses on it." The Malawian replied, "My favorite food are rice and nsima. I don't know if you know nsima is came from maize flour."

Favorites. Discussions of the children's favorites centered on subjects in school, colors, sports, and activities. Discussions of topics such as favorite colors and subjects in school were very straightforward and only occurred once in the letter exchanges. The discussions of sports were sometimes filled with questions. Of course, there was some confusion over the differences between football and soccer. The Malawians call football what the U.S. children call soccer, and some of the U.S. children made references to American football. Many of the Malawian children said that their favorite sport was "netball," and the U.S. students wrote back to ask about that sport. In some cases, the Malawian children attempted explanations, but these conversations were given up fairly quickly. One Malawian child wrote, "Here in Malawi, I like to play netball." The American child replied, "My hobbies are basketball, football, soccer, and swimming. How do you play netball? In the United States, we

don't play netball." (The Malawian child did not mention netball in the next letter.)

Some descriptions of sports involved climate as well. For instance, a U.S. student attempted to explain a winter sport unfamiliar to a Malawian pen pal:

I don't know if you know about ice skating, so I'm going to tell you a little bit about it. First you get on ice. Then you get some ice skates. Ice skates are skates that have sharp blades on the bottom of them. Next, you just go out and skate.

Ice skating was not mentioned in the Malawian reply, presumably because the Malawian pen pal could not construct meaning from this description.

Physical Features and Climate. The students were curious about the weather, climate, seasons, and geographical features of their respective countries. The children commonly provided proud descriptions of lakes, mountains, or forests—beautiful scenery in their own regions. Responses often offered similar information about the alternate partner's country or region and were also expressed with national pride. A Malawian child wrote, "Our biggest lake is Lake Malawi. Have you got a lake there in America? What about mountains? Here in Malawi we have got a big mountains called mulanje mountains which is 3,001 km high." The U.S. child responded,

Where I live we have a big lake called lake moomaw. In fact I went fishing there a couple of days ago. We have many mountains. I'm not sure if we have a special one. Virginia is a beautiful state. The mountains are green, and there are many beautiful flowers that bloom. I often see deer in my front yard.

When many Malawian pen pals wrote about the rainy and dry seasons, Virginian students responded with a description of U.S. seasons including snow and a variety of activities associated with it. One U.S. child wrote, "In the United States there is four seasons. They are spring, summer, fall and winter. Spring is hot. Summer is burning hot, fall is kind of cold and winter is freezing clod." The Malawian replied, "There is three seasons. They are coolwet, hotwet, and raining season. The coolwet season is very cold and the hotwet is also hottest and rain is medium."

Students noticed the commonality of the sequential cycle of seasons and, at the same time, the differences in the nature of the seasons in each location. Some of the U.S. children discovered the time differ-

ence between their southwest Virginia region and Malawi. For example, a U.S. child wrote, "Did you know that when I go to bed, you are going to school?" The Malawian students did not mention the time difference in their letters.

Technology. A great many of the American children stated that they liked to watch TV. In some cases, the Malawian children wrote back that they liked to watch TV also. This was interesting, because most Malawians don't have televisions (and if they do, they are unlikely to be able to watch broadcast channels in the rural areas where they live).

Some American pen pals made references to items such as computer games, CD players, video games, and other electronic devices. The Malawian children had no frame of reference for this type of technology or entertainment. Some asked questions about these "games," but many simply did not respond to these statements.

Language

There were examples in the letters in which the students used language in specific ways for the assumed purpose of supporting communication with their partners.

Writing Styles/Matching of Patterns. Many of the children used similar writing styles and patterns in their correspondence in order to ensure that they communicated well. For example, one U.S. child wrote, "My favorite animal is a snake. If you haven't seen a snake before they are scaley reptiles." The Malawian child replied, "My favorite animal is sheep. If you haven't seen a sheep before and after birth they are mammals they produce young ones alive." Another U.S. child wrote, "I'm having a good time in America." The Malawian student replied, "I am having a good time in Malawi."

In numerous cases, whole letters were close matches to one another. In the following example, the U.S. child follows a very similar pattern to that of his Malawian partner and adds a little information about the area in which he lives.

Malawian child: My name is Kevin. I am 9 years old. I have 1 dog and 2 chickens. My brother 15 years old, mother 30, and father 35 years old. Many people is 7 boys, 3 girls. I have a little brother, do you. by me writing to hear more from you. I am Kevin. thank you very much.

U.S. child's reply: Dear Kevin, I got your letter. I am 8 years old and my mother 21 years old my stepfather is 27

years old and my brother is 2 years old. I have 2 dogs and their names are Lucky and Shadow. Virginia is a good place to live in. There are restaurants and stores and houses. Kevin what is Malawi like? Your friend, Robert (Note that Robert does not respond to part of the letter he perhaps did not understand in which his pen pal said, "Many people is 7 boys, 3 girls.")

Standard/Grade. Before writing their first letters, the U.S. children learned that the term for *grade* level in Malawi was *standard*, so in many of the first letters, the U.S. students wrote that they were in "standard 3" rather than in "grade 3." In these cases, the Malawian children wrote back and reported on their current standards in school. In other cases, the U.S. children wrote letters in which they told the Malawian children their current grade level. The Malawian children understood the relationship between the terms *standard* and *grade*, so they replied to the U.S. students about their grade levels. Some of the children also used the abbreviation "STD" for "standard."

Use of Chichewa. One of the U.S. teachers taught some words in Chichewa to her class so they could use them in their letters. This led to one group of very interesting letters to the Malawian pen pals. These letters were the most recent letters sent, and the children have not yet received their Malawian replies. Nonetheless, it was interesting that the U.S. children enthusiastically used Chichewa words in their letters. For instance, one student wrote,

We went to a phanga that was at Dixie Caverns. Do you have any phangas? They got the name Dixie Caverns from a galu falling in a hole in the phanga. Some mnyamata dug the galu out and the galu's name was Dixie, so they named the phangas Dixie Caverns. In the phanga we saw bats. (phanga = cavern, galu = dog, mnyamata = men)

Misspellings. Both the U.S. and Malawian children made spelling and grammar errors in their letters, but these did not often hamper communication. When these errors occurred, in most cases, the children simply did not reply to that part of the letter. For instance, in one case, a U.S. child wrote, "Have you ever seen a loin?" We assumed he meant to ask about a lion. The Malawian pen pal made no response to this question. In a similar manner, a Malawian child wrote, "Our food crop, maize, is now tusselling and by the end of April it will be ready for harvesting." We believed this child meant to say that the maize was "now tas-

selling." The U.S. pen pal did not question or comment in reply to this part of the letter.

There were also cases in which information was provided, allowing the children to understand misspellings. For example, a Malawian child wrote, "I have some rappid the same as hare but was killed by dogs." The U.S. child understood the meaning and replied, "I am sorry your rabbit died." Likewise, there were instances in which the children understood misspellings and used them in their replies. For example, a U.S. child wrote, "My favorite colors are bleu, black, and red," Her pen pal responded, "My favorite color are bleu red and pink."

Children also addressed some spelling problems in their letters. For instance, one U.S. child misspelled the name of his pen pal, who made note of the mistake. In his next letter, the U.S. child wrote, "Sorry I spelt your name wrong. It is hard to spell your name." The Malawian pen pal wrote back, "Of course you have spelt my name wrongly but that to me is not a crime because my name is not an English name but a Chichewa name. So don't worry about that."

Connections

The third theme was less obvious but, nevertheless, a very clear trend. The students' strong desire for the establishment of any sort of connection with their pen pal was evidenced in many different ways. There was anticipation and excitement as the letters were sent; then there were anxious questions about when response letters would arrive. The smiles and wide eyes on faces when return letters actually reached the hands of each child truly surprised the teachers at both sites. At both locations, the event turned the school day into a holiday atmosphere. Student talk centered around amazement that the actual item they held in their hands had come from another student close to their age across the ocean on the other side of the world. Students expressed some of these feelings in their letters. For instance, one student said, "I am very grateful for your letter. I appreciate so much for what you have written and it has given me strength."

Making Connections. Throughout all of the letters written by the Malawian and the American pen pals, there seemed to be a constant struggle to identify commonalities in order to make a connection. Statements such as "Any way, you and me have something in common. I like to read too!" and "It's good and amazing to

see that you sometimes like what I like!" were very common in many conversations between pen pals from both countries. Over and over again, when personal information was offered, it was addressed with appreciation if the recipient thought or felt the same way. Children usually followed up on topics from letter to letter, always seeking connections or similarities in one another's lives. The following exchange was very typical of the letters and demonstrates several efforts at making connections between two partners.

Malawian pen pal: Hello Levi, I haven't apple juice. I have oranges. I do no where we can play pacmah video games and I haven't it. My sister's name is Tisunge, Maclalitso and Aginess. My grandmother and father's name is Hussain. Do you have a coconut tree? And a baobab tree? If you finish your education you wont to become what? What you kind of initiation ceremonies? I have got Jando for boys Chiputu/nsondo for girls. Please Levi I want you to sending your picture. Greetings to your parents as well as your friend Cody. I remain your friend Fazira.

U.S. student reply: Hello Fazira, How are you? Is your family well? No, I don't have any coconut or orange trees. We have apple, pear, cherry, and peach trees that have fruit. We have other trees that are oaks, pines, walnuts, hazelnuts. The walnut's fall off and are good to eat when the nuts dry. I don't know what I want to be when I finish school. My mom says I have to go to college or trade school. What would you like to be? I do like airplanes though. We don't have any initiation ceremonies. But when we turn 16 we can get our Driver's License and when we turn 18 we are allowed to vote. Greetings to your family. Your friend, Levi. P.S. Would you be able to send me a picture of your family and you?"

Visual and Tactile Connections. Another method of communication between pen pal partners was in the sharing of visual and tactile items. Requests for photographs were ongoing in almost every letter (as can be noted in the previous letter exchange) until they were fulfilled. Most of the U.S. pen pals sent a picture of themselves. With virtually no means at their disposal to acquire a picture, somehow, many of the Malawian pen pals were able to send a photograph sooner or later. Few things were more exciting in pen pal classrooms than to receive a letter and find a picture of one's counterpart included. Both groups of pen pals also spent a lot of time drawing pictures that were representative of their lives in different ways, and these drawings were included as gifts and visual communication.

The Malawian children were warned that they should not ask the American children to send them money and other items. Perhaps it was an irresistible opportunity, because there were a number of requests made. For instance, one Malawian child wrote,

My dear Robert. I would like you to send me some crayon. I am good in art. And if possible with a ball as I told you that football is one of my favorite sprt. I will be happy to receive these things from you.

This child's pen pal used a Chichewa term he had learned in his reply:

I got you some crayons at my *nyumba* it has 24 crayons in it and I will get them to you as soon as I can. Want do you next time pencil paper if you do let me know next year or when I'm in fifth grade.

Small gifts of various types were included with written communication in many letters from both countries. Some examples sent to Malawi from the U.S. pen pals were flavored tea bags, sets of U.S. coins, artificial flowers, school supplies, books, and a piece of coal. Examples sent to the U.S. from the Malawian pen pals included bottle caps; paper labels; pieces of candy; cookies; and colorful, intricately drawn pictures. These items were highly treasured and carefully kept by their recipients.

Compassion. Emotions such as sympathy, generosity, and compassion were often shared in a very open way. In some cases, this occurred in the form of U.S. children making offers of gifts. For instance, a U.S. child asked her pen pal, "Do you need anything like paper, scissors, or crayons? I will share what I have with you." It was no surprise that the Malawian pen pal wrote back, "Yes I need what you have said like papers, scissors and crayons." There were also cases in which children shared difficult real-life events with one another and were offered words of support in return. One Malawian child wrote, "My dad passed away two years ago. Now I am being kept by my uncle." The U.S. student replied, "I'm sorry to hear about your father. I'm glad you have your uncle to live with."

Connections Without Comprehension. In several instances, the overwhelming desire to make a connection with a pen pal proved to be stronger than the cultural blockades sometimes faced in this project. When students found themselves in a situation where one or both simply did not have the knowledge base or

language skills needed in order to comprehend the intended meaning of the communication sent to them, they were able to create a kind of connection in spite of the situation. For instance, in attempting to share information about a Dr. Seuss day at his school, a U.S. child's letter read, "Today is Docter Susse day in Virginia and I think that it is Docter Susse day over in Africa. Do you celabrate Doctor Susse day were you are." The Malawian pen pal replied, "Thank you for your letter in which you are informing me about Doctor Susses day. Unfortunately I did not heard about this great day of Doctor Susse." (Note that the Malawian child understood "Docter" and correctly spelled the word in the reply.)

One of the most striking examples of connecting with a pen pal partner was found in the closing wishes between one pair of pen pals who had been involved in an ongoing conversation for over a year. The Malawian pen pal ended his letter saying, "I wish you good leaning!" His Virginian counterpart, who presumably had no understanding of the intended meaning of this seemingly very strange wish, replied with the only thing he knew to write in order to preserve the connection with his pen pal. He closed his response letter with, "I wish you good leaning too!"

Discussion

Our purpose in studying the letters between the U.S. and Malawian students was to examine the nature of student communication in an international pen pal exchange. We identified three primary themes within the pen pal letters: daily life and culture, language, and connections. The students enjoyed sharing information about all aspects of their daily life and culture with their pen pals, and they were able to communicate effectively with one another on these topics. In the area of language, we noted that the students followed the language patterns established by one another in their letters, and they made attempts to use terminology that would be readily understandable to one another. Finally, the students were determined to establish communication with their partners, and they made every effort to ensure that they demonstrated understandings of their letters and made connections or established similarities with one another. It was common for the children to express emotions such as compassion and sympathy.

From a literacy perspective, the pen pal project was somewhat different for Malawian and U.S. students. For the Malawian children whose second or third language was English, there was motivation to comprehend the pen pal letters and ensure that their responses were well written in English and fully understandable for their pen pal peers. In English classes, Malawian students often read short English passages in texts and worked to comprehend meanings. One of the Malawian teachers said, "They don't enjoy trying to read these passages in the books, but they were always excited to try to comprehend their pen pal letters." The pen pal letters were authentic texts for the Malawian children to read, and they were highly motivated to make sense of them and respond. The head teacher stated,

This has given the children a different view of English, as it isn't just a class to them now. They now really understand that communicating well in English can have advantages in their lives. They are reading and writing better, and have more positive perspectives about learning English.

Perhaps because English was the first language of the U.S. students and because the letter exchanges happened infrequently, the U.S. teachers did not notice gains in English that could be attributed to the pen pal project. However, as was the case with the Malawian students, the teachers noted that the children were highly motivated about reading their pen pal letters and writing responses. One teacher explained that many of the U.S. children were "turned off about writing" because the focus in the school was on writing essays in response to prompts in preparation for a mandated state testing program. This teacher thought that the pen pal project was wonderful because it allowed the students "to just write and enjoy writing." The Malawian teachers saw evidence of growth in appreciation for and the written use of English in their students, and the U.S. teachers saw students enjoying writing. In both contexts, the teachers noticed literacy gains in the areas of motivation and enjoyment of writing. Malawian and U.S. students worked hard at making their letters understood by their partners, and they expressed interests in ensuring correct punctuation, grammar, and spelling.

As was the case in Lemkuhl's (2002) pen pal project, the exchange of pen pal letters between the Malawian and U.S. students resulted in classroom dis-

cussions in all curricular areas. For instance, the U.S. students examined the geography of the Great Rift Valley and its formation, and the Malawian students studied the Blue Ridge and Appalachian Mountain chains. Students in both countries worked on map skills and had discussions of the languages of the world. In math, the students studied the denominations and values of foreign coins sent to them in letters, and the U.S. students studied time differences around the globe. In science, both the Malawian and U.S. students studied seasonal differences and their astronomical and meteorological causes. The Malawian students discussed snow, what caused it, what it might be like, and what problems it might cause. The U.S. students studied the rainy season, what caused it, and its impact on the lives of Malawians. There were classroom discussions on the kinds of animals that live in the United States and Malawi and the reasons for different kinds of animals living in differing climates and on different continents. Both the Malawian and U.S. teachers reported that the pen pals were highly motivated to learn content area subject matter that helped them understand and connect with their partner pen pals.

The benefits of participation in this pen pal exchange have extended well beyond the original purpose of providing an opportunity to practice written language. The participants at all levels and in both locations of this project gained unique understandings that could not have been taught. The student pen pals continue to be motivated to take the initiative to learn more about their counterparts in a different culture. As their communication and investigation continue, students express a strong desire for connectedness as they gain an appreciation for both the similarities and the distinctions that define their native cultures.

The classroom teachers involved have not only taken advantage of this opportunity to extend the knowledge of their students and themselves, but also they have taken the initiative to expand the project to include parents, administrators, other teachers, and the surrounding community in various ways. They effectively used the pen pal project as a tool to motivate, instruct, and model attitudes toward learning, culture, and people. Ralph Chikhwaya (in Malawi) established an ongoing after-school pen pal club for participants to share letters with one another and discuss the similarities and differences between cultures. Communication and involvement with parents of

Malawian students increased as they became involved with the project by helping their children compose responses and, in a few cases, by writing separate letters to the parents of their child's U.S. pen pal. Susan Byer and Patty Howard (in Virginia) sparked an effort to collect books and other school supplies to send to the Malawian pen pals. Parents of the U.S. pen pals often became involved with helping their children design responses to their pen pals in the same way as the Malawian parents.

The value to the three teachers who have served as facilitators of this project is extensive and ongoing. The Malawian and Virginian facilitating teachers exchange letters among themselves and they have developed close friendships. Like the students, they can't wait to find their letters, tear them open, and start reading. They share information as colleagues, including teaching ideas and resources and initiation of new programs at the Malawian school.

For the Malawian children, the pen pal project promoted improved writing in English and increased motivation for and enjoyment of writing. The project also promoted the development of conceptual knowledge and cultural understandings for the children in both contexts. Letter exchanges only occurred two or three times per year, so it was not very time consuming. The teachers reported that it had a huge impact on motivation for writing and learning about other countries and cultures. We wholeheartedly recommend that teachers work to establish pen pal relationships in national or international contexts.

Our experience is that any Malawian primary school would love to have a pen pal arrangement for students, and Malawi is just one of many African nations where English is taught and English-language connections for students would be appreciated. However, there are some complexities. This pen pal project was made possible by a USAID teacher education grant. University professors carried the pen pal letters back and forth as they made grant-related trips. The Malawian schools cannot afford postage for international mailings, and we do not recommend that U.S. teachers put money in the mail and hope that Malawian schools receive it. One good bet for developing a pen pal project in a country like Malawi is to work with a local church that has a mission in or an affiliation with a church in Africa. (There are many Presbyterian, Catholic, and Seventh-Day Adventist churches and Moslem Mosques in Malawi.) These

churches often have relationships with public or private schools and may be happy to help arrange pen pal projects.

To establish pen pal projects in more developed countries, there are several helpful websites geared toward students, teachers, or classrooms. Many of these pen pal websites contain e-mail links to individuals who are seeking electronic pen pals, and some of these potential pen pals are young adults or adults; thus, we do not recommend that teachers share these websites with children. Instead, teachers could use these websites to contact teachers in other locations and work together to develop either electronic or hard copy pen pal projects.

When establishing a pen pal arrangement with students in other parts of the world, it should be remembered that letter writing is no longer a cultural norm in the digital world. For many U.S. children, e-mailing is a common practice but letter writing is not. In less developed countries like Malawi, where computers are not available to most of the population, hard copy pen pal letters are necessary and are genuinely valued. In starting a pen pal relationship with students from another area, it may be helpful to get U.S. students interested in letter writing, and there are a number of children's books that can provide a good starting place.

We wish to point out that the most important feature of the project was the fun. The children on both sides of the globe were enthusiastic about getting letters, writing replies, making friends in another country, and learning about the lives of their new friends. Both groups of children gained understandings of the cultures, geographies, languages, and lives of their peers. Through their letters, the students traveled far, reminding us of what a Chinese philosopher once wrote: "A journey of a thousand miles begins with one step" (quoted by Hayes, 1998, p. 7).

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Helpful websites for locating potential pen pals

Intercultural E-mail Classroom Connections:
www.iecc.org

E-Pals.com Classroom Exchange: www.epals.com

Kids' Space Connection: www.ks-connection.org

Kidlink: www.kidlink.org

International Pen Friend Service: www.ipfs.org

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