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

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Abstract

This article describes a qualitative research project that examined pen pal letters exchanged between children in Virginia, USA, and Malawi in Sub-Saharan Africa. The goal was to study the nature of communication between students living in these two very different cultural contexts. The results of this study indicated that there were three primary themes within the pen pal letters between the primary and elementary students: 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 meaningfully with one another on these topics. 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. Each theme found in the study is explored, and the value of using pen pal exchanges to support the development of literacy and cultural understandings is discussed. Recommendations are made for establishing pen pal exchanges in international contexts.

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