

Emily Thomas. CORRESPONDENCE JOURNALS: THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE CREATIVE WRITING OF FIRST GRADE STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN RETAINED. (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Caron) Department of Curriculum and Instruction, May 2007.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of correspondence journals on the creative writing of first grade students who have been retained. Data was collected using quantitative and qualitative approaches through the use of pre and post test rubric scores and anecdotal notes. The rubric scores were analyzed to measure growth in creative writing conventions, while the anecdotal notes analyzed students' behavior and attitude towards writing and the correspondence journals. This study suggests the implementation of correspondence journals could have a positive impact on students' writing and should be considered as a helpful tool to implement in the classroom when planning writing instruction for primary students.

CORRESPONDENCE JOURNALS:  
THEIR POTENTIAL IMPACT ON THE CREATIVE WRITING OF FIRST GRADE  
STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN RETAINED

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Masters of Education in Reading Education

by

Emily A. Thomas

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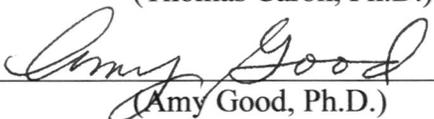
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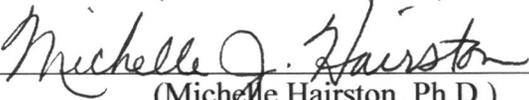
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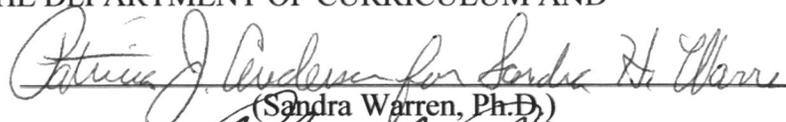
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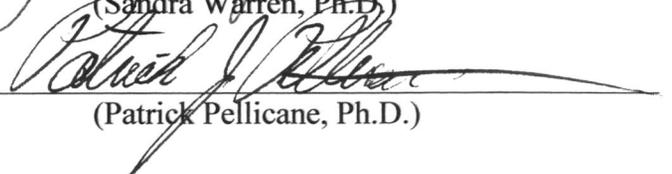
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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“We’re currently wasting a lot of time by giving unreal writing tasks in our classrooms. You and I don’t engage in meaningless writing exercises in real life- we’re far too busy doing the real thing” (Fox, 1993, p. 4). As adults, when we engage in everyday writing, we are writing for a purpose. Whether it is to write a letter to a friend or write down a grocery list, our writing experiences are meaningful to us. However, we often leave out authentic writing activities when teaching our students to write. A typical writing lesson in elementary schools today involves an interactive writing activity followed by an independent writing activity in which students provide a written response to a prompt given by the teacher. While this type of writing instruction allows students to learn the mechanics of writing, it does not provide students with an authentic reason to write.

### *Statement of the Problem*

With an increasing emphasis being placed on the State Writing Tests, students' writing seems to be limited by overly scripted directives. The pressure of high stakes testing is forcing many teachers to remove the additional, and often more enjoyable, lessons out of daily instruction in order to cover all the material needed for state assessments. Students also appear to be losing the joy of writing and the creativity in their writing due the strict writing prompts given by the state. Teachers are constantly providing students with practice writing prompts, rather than real life writing activities, in order to prepare them for state writing tests. According to Mabry (1999), writing instruction and students' writing are being influenced by testing and rubrics. It is



imperative that we find a tool to bring back the excitement and creativity in students' writing.

### *Research Question*

This action research project is based on the following research question: In what ways will correspondence journals promote creative writing in first grade classrooms? Specifically, will correspondence journals increase the frequency of creative writing elements in students' writing?

### *Definitions*

For the purpose of this study, the following terms and definitions will be used:

1. **Authentic writing:** Writing that has a real purpose. Authentic writing tasks usually consist of writing for an actual reason, such as to correspond with others.
2. **Scripted writing:** Writing influenced by a prompt. Scripted writing often occurs when students are asked to write based on the given prompt that does not allow for choice when writing.
3. **Limited writing:** Writing that does not contain varied sentences or descriptive language.
4. **Creative writing:** Writing that contains varied sentences, descriptive language, and takes on the voice of the author. Creative writing occurs when students are given choice in the way they want to present their writing and the freedom to write what they would like to about the topic.
5. **Correspondence journals:** Journals used for communication.

6. Buddy: Refers to the fourth grade partner the first grade student is corresponding with.
7. Rubric: Tool used to evaluate writing.
8. Growth: Increase in writing achievement.
9. Writing conventions: Includes spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, etc.
10. Retained students: Students who repeated an entire year of either kindergarten or first grade.

#### *Importance of Study*

The results of this study might promote the implementation of correspondence journals into classroom instruction to increase creativity in students' writing. Although studies have been conducted using correspondence journals (Bloem, 2004; Bromley & Parker, 1993), previous studies have not measured creativity in writing. This study also hopes to encourage the implementation of writing journals in order to provide students with a non-threatening writing environment where writing is not assessed. This study might also promote the implementation of additional authentic writing activities into classroom instruction to encourage creativity and enjoyment in students' writing.

#### *Limitations*

This study has its limitations. Research bias is present due to the fact that the researcher is the students' teacher. Clearly, the researcher would like to see students succeed; therefore, writing instruction and evaluation may have been influenced. Also,

additional authentic writing activities may have been implemented in the classroom to promote authentic and creative writing.

This study is also limited to one first grade classroom located in rural North Carolina. The majority of students are of low socioeconomic status. The participants in this study consist primarily of two ethnicities: African American and Hispanic. Therefore, the findings may not be comparable to other primary students and classrooms. The study had a limited time span, as well, due to the fact that the correspondence journals were implemented for merely two and a half months.

Another limitation pertains to assessing writing. Writing assessments and rubrics can be very subjective. Each teacher tends to have different expectations of their students' writing (Spandel, 2001); therefore, assessment results in this study may be considered inaccurate due to a difference in expectations. Creativity is also difficult to define and measure. The creativity conventions measured in this study may be different from additional creative writing rubrics.

Different teaching structures also lead to limitations due to the fact that each teacher has a different approach to delivering writing instruction. The teacher of Retained Group A used a combination of authentic writing tasks and prompt writing in the classroom, while the two teachers of Retained Group B focused solely on prompt writing.

## CHAPTER 2: SELECTED RELEVANT LITERATURE

### *Introduction*

The following chapter presents selected relevant literature relating to the topic of study. Since there is little research on the effects correspondence journals have on students' creative writing conventions, this chapter will discuss several topics of significance to writing and journals including research on the effects of retention, writing assessment, journal writing, and correspondence journals.

### *Retained Students and the Effects of Retention*

Due to the drive for academic success and achievement of benchmarks, the number of students being retained continues to increase. The grade retention rate has risen almost forty percent in the last twenty years (Rothstein, 2000). In 1974, 17.4% of eight year old males and 12.2% of eight year old females had been retained; in 1989, 28.1% of males and 21.7% of females had been retained (Byrd & Weitzman, 1994). Looking specifically at the retention rate for children in kindergarten through third grade, 2.7% of students were previously retained in 1992 and the percent increased to 5.5% in 2002 (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2006). According to the "Grade Retention" article, "This means that 22,343 children were retained in kindergarten, first, second or third grade in 2001-2002" (p. 1).

Several factors that may contribute to grade retention. According to Byrd and Weitzman (1994), students who are more likely to repeat a grade level if they are "living below the poverty level, not living with both biological parents at age six, black race, birth to a teenage mother or mother with low educational attainment, male gender, and

younger age cohorts" (p. 483). Grade retention can also be connected to health and behavior problems including "deafness, speech defects, enuresis, very low birth weight and low birth weight, asthma, household exposure to cigarette smoke, frequent ear infections, and behavior problems" (Byrd & Weitzman 1994, p. 483). While the above factors do not necessarily mean a student will be retained, they do contribute to the likelihood that a student may repeat a grade level.

Given that the number of students being retained continues to rise, it is imperative that education professionals determine the effects grade retention has on students. This information will be valuable to teachers attempting to decide if retention is in the best interest of the student. Not only is grade retention costly, costing an estimated \$5000 per student in 1991, grade retention early on in a student's education career may cause low self-esteem and a greater risk for school dropout (Byrd and Weitzman, 1994). According to a study by Roderick (1994), "nearly 80% of students who repeated a grade dropped out of school compared to only 27% of those who were never retained" (p. 724).

Studies have also been conducted on the effect retention has on future academic achievement. Jimerson and Kaufman (2003) reported on several studies to determine if grade retention had a positive or negative effect on academic achievement later in students' educational careers. They found that a "reported fifty-four studies showed negative achievement effects when retained children went on to the next grade level. Of nine studies that reported positive short-term achievement effects, the benefits were shown to diminish over time and disappear in later grades" (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003, p. 625). The report also concluded that low-achieving students who were promoted to the

next grade level outperformed the students who were retained in reading and language arts (Jimerson & Kaufman, 2003).

The above information suggests that while some students may benefit from retention, grade retention may have a negative impact on a student's future academic success. As a result, teachers of retained students must be aware of the possible negative effects retention might have on their student and adapt instruction accordingly. This study hopes to provide teachers with a strategy to assist their retained students succeed academically.

### *Writing Assessments*

Assessing writing is very subjective; each instructor assesses writing conventions and content differently. However, the majority of educators are consistent in using three tools to assess writing: observation, writing portfolios and writing rubrics. Observation often involves teachers taking anecdotal and mental notes on what they see in their students' writing. Observations are usually informal and assist instructors in adapting instruction and/or planning new writing topics to introduce.

Writing portfolios are a compilation of writing samples. Portfolios are often used for assessment in one of the three following ways: to document a student's finest writing samples, to illustrate the change in a student's performance over time, and to display a student's self-assessment of growth, which may include their strengths and areas of improvement. Portfolios can be used solely as a tool for sharing a student's achievement or they may be used for assessment purposes to measure growth in a student's writing.

Rubrics are the most frequent tool used when assessing writing. According to

Mabry (1999), “rubrics are translations of visions of desirable performance into specifications of exactly what is desirable” and “descriptions of student performance that clearly articulates the requirements for each of the score points” (p. 674). Therefore, rubrics provide students with a guideline for what is expected of their writing. However, rubrics can also “serve as arbiters of quality and agents of control” (Mabry, 1999, p. 674). They may limit students’ writing due to their strict guidelines.

There are two main types of rubrics: holistic and analytical. Holistic rubrics “give a single score or rating for an entire product or performance based on an overall impression of a student’s work” (Arter and McTighe, 2001, p. 18). Essentially, these rubrics combine several factors to reach one judgment of a student’s work. Analytical rubrics, on the other hand, “divides a product or performance into essential traits or dimensions so that they can be judged separately” (Arter and McTighe, 2001, p. 18). Instructors who use these rubrics hone in on each individual feature to give feedback on every issue. While there are benefits to both, this study uses an analytical rubric in order to provide students with specific feedback on each writing convention addressed.

### *Journal Writing*

Journal writing can take on many forms. Journals can be used to write daily thoughts in, respond to given prompts, correspond with others, or reflect on learning in the classroom. Graham (2003) conducted an action research project on the implementation of writing journals to provide freedom of choice in writing. The study found that “the freedom to ‘write what you like’ in writing journals enabled them (students) to develop confidence and verse in their writing” (Graham, 2003, p. 39).

When students are given a choice of writing topics and are aware that their writing will not be graded, they begin to take pleasure in writing.

According to Harste (1988), who also used journals as an additional writing tool where writing was not critiqued, found that "their (journals) function was to create a very low-risk, informal means for children to explore, among other things, the recording function of language" (p. 153). In this case, journals were used as an exploration tool for students to explore language on their own instead of through teacher directed lessons. While there is little research on the use of journals to promote writing conventions, it is appears that journals do provide students with a non-threatening writing environment where they are free to express themselves and investigate writing independently.

#### *Correspondence Journals*

Correspondence journals are one of the many ways teachers use writing journals in the classroom. Bloem (2004) conducted a study on the effects of using correspondence journals with fifth grade students and pre-service teachers. This project provided the fifth grade students a way to communicate and learn in an authentic way. Bloem (2004) stated that "the correspondence journal is an especially important tool because it creates a convenient and powerful place for reflection without making students feel they are merely fulfilling another routine, imposed, or formulaic assignment" (p. 54). Since correspondence journals give students an audience to write to, instead of merely having their writing read and graded by their teachers, they are more willing to develop the desire to write. She found that the correspondence journals promoted discussion that is usually squeezed out of instruction due to high stakes testing (Bloem, 2004).



According to Marshall and Davis (1999), who conducted a study on the use of correspondence journals with first grade students and pre-service teachers, authentic audiences “heightened motivation and created a meaningful social context for writing development” (p. 56). They also found that the correspondence journals provided students with many teachable moments (Marshall and Davis, 1999). The use of the correspondence journals allowed students to explore the writing of experienced writers, which in turned allowed them to learn more about writing from hands on experience.

While there is little research on the effects of correspondence journals, it is evident from the studies above that correspondence journals are capable of having positive effects on students’ writing and attitude towards writing. Correspondence journals give students an audience to write to and provide an authentic writing task. They also allow students to explore written language through communication. This study hopes to confirm the above, as well as, validate the need to implement correspondence journals in the classroom to increase the frequency of creative writing elements in students’ writing.

## CHAPTER 3: METHOD

### *Introduction*

This research method follows a combination of similar relevant studies (Bromley & Parker, 1993; Bloem, 2004). These students may not have used the exact data sources; however, writing was measured following the use of correspondence journals. In the study by Bromley and Parker (1993), middle school students with learning disabilities and cognitive impairments used correspondence journals to create passion and practice for writing. Similar to the following research method, the journals in Bromley and Parker's (1993) study were presented to the students as a means of making a new friend and teachers stressed the importance of using legible handwriting and understandable language when writing to their friend. In the study by Bloem (2004), fifth grade students used correspondence journals to communicate with pre-service teachers. This allowed students to reflect and discuss what they were learning about in school without the pressure of being assigned a reflective task. This study extends the current literature by examining the use of correspondence journal.

### *Setting*

This research study was conducted at two elementary schools within the same school system located in rural, Eastern North Carolina. The school system consists of five schools, serving approximately 3,250 students in all. Of the 3,250 students, approximately fifty-five percent are African America, thirty-four percent are Caucasian, and eleven percent are Hispanic. Twenty-five percent of the student population is also identified as having special needs. Thirty-six percent of the fourth grade students in this

school system met or exceeded expectations on the North Carolina Writing Assessment while twenty-seven percent of seventh grade students met or exceeded expectations on the North Carolina State Writing Assessment.

Elementary School 1 is a K-2 school currently serving 912 students. Fifty-one percent of the students are male, while forty-nine percent are female. Twenty-two percent of students are Hispanic, fifty-one percent are African American, and twenty-seven percent are Caucasian. Seventy-six percent of all students are on free or reduced lunch.

Elementary School 2 is a 3-5 school currently serving 812 students. Fifty-four percent of students are male, while forty-six percent are female. Seventeen percent of students are Hispanic, forty-eight percent are African American, and thirty-five percent are Caucasian. Eight-two percent of all students are on free or reduced lunch.

### *Participants*

#### *Retained Group A*

Retained Group A contains six students from a first grade classroom at Elementary School 1. The group contains one female student and five male students. One student is Caucasian, one is African American, and four are Hispanic. Two students have a learning disability in reading and receive special services for one hour a day. All students in Retained Group A were retained in first grade at the end of the 2005-2006 school year.

#### *Retained Group B*

Retained Group B contains six students from two different classrooms at

Elementary School 1. The group contains one female student and five male students. Four students are Hispanic and two are African-American. Two students have been diagnosed as having a learning disability in reading and receive special services for one hour every day. Two students in Retained Group B were retained at the end of their kindergarten year, while four students were retained at the end of first grade.

#### *Correspondence Group C*

Correspondence Group C consists of eighteen first grade students who used correspondence journals to communicate with fourth grade students. There are eight girls and ten boys. Nine of the students are African-American, seven students are Hispanic, and two students are Caucasian. Six of the eighteen students in this group also represent the students in Retained Group A.

#### *Correspondence Group D*

Correspondence Group D participated in the study by corresponding with the first grade students; however, data was not collected on these students. These students are referred to throughout the study as "buddies". This group contains twenty-five students. There are thirteen girls and twelve boys. Twelve of the students are African American, seven students are Caucasian, and six students are Hispanic.

The above groups are a convenience sample. They were selected based on convenience and availability (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2003, p. 103). The sample is convenient due to the fact that all participating students are located in the county the researcher teaches in, plus the students in Retained Group A are the researcher's students. Correspondence Group C was also chosen based on the large number of students who had

been previously retained.

### *Procedure*

Each first grade student in Correspondence Group C was issued one wide-ruled, one-subject spiral notebook to share throughout the study with their fourth grade buddy. The notebook contained their name and their buddy's name on the outside cover and inside cover. Buddies were randomly paired by the first and fourth grade teachers. Students' names were placed in two containers: one container filled with fourth grade students' names and the other container filled with the names of the first grade students. Names were randomly drawn out of the containers and paired together. This was to insure that gender, race, and socioeconomic status did not influence the pairing of buddies. Given that there were more fourth grade students than first grade students, several first grade students had two buddies. The students kept the same buddies throughout the entire study.

The buddy journals were introduced to the first and fourth grade students by their classroom teachers. The classroom teachers told the students that they would each be assigned a buddy to correspond with throughout the school year. They were informed that the buddy journals would not be graded, but would be used to develop a new friendship. Students were instructed to write to their buddies for approximately twenty to thirty minutes a week. Each journal entry used a basic letter format including the date, salutation, body of letter, and closing. The following journal entry topics served as a guide throughout the implementation of the buddy journals but allowed for flexibility if other timely topics arose such as birthdays, holidays, and weather events:

Journal Entry 1: Tell your buddy about yourself.

Journal Entry 2: Tell your buddy about your favorite thing to do.

Journal Entry 3: Tell your buddy about your favorite place to visit.

Journal Entry 4: Tell your buddy about your family.

Journal Entry 5: Tell your buddy about your friends.

Journal Entry 6: Tell your buddy about what we are learning in school.

Journal Entry 7: Tell your buddy about your favorite book.

Journal Entry 8: Tell your buddy about your grade level (first or fourth).

Prompts were given to students who had difficulty determining what they wanted to write about. Fourth grade students were not given a prompt, but were instructed to respond to what the first grade students had written. Teachers monitored the journals and assisted with journal conversation as needed. The journals were used independently and did not coincide with daily writing instruction that was already in place.

First grade students kept the journals Monday through Thursday of every week and fourth grade students had the journals on Fridays. The instructors exchanged the journals on a regular schedule beginning on December 4 and ending on February 22 for a total of eight exchanges. If a week arrived where school was not held on Friday, journals were exchanged on the afternoon before the last day of that school week. While fourth grade students were able to independently read the first graders' letters, the first grade teacher read the fourth graders' letters to the first grade students each week when the journals arrived.

First grade students in both retained groups were given a pretest and posttest

writing prompt to measure their growth throughout the study. The writing prompt was as follows: Tell about someone you know. A rubric was used to assess the growth in creativity and writing conventions between the pretest and posttest. The first and fourth grade teachers both kept a correspondence journal, as well. The journal recorded thoughts the instructors had about the correspondence journals, as well as, notes about their students' reactions and comments while corresponding with their buddies.

### *Data Sources*

Data will be collected from the correspondence journals, writing prompt pretest and posttest, and anecdotal notes.

### *Correspondence Journals*

The correspondence journals served as a communication tool for first and fourth grade students. The purpose of the corresponding journals was to give the first and fourth grade students a real audience, as well as, an authentic purpose for writing. Students used the correspondence journals to write letters to each other discussing topics such as themselves, things they like to do, and subjects they were learning about in school.

### *Pretest/Posttest*

Students were given a pretest before the correspondence journals were implemented into classroom instruction. The writing prompt was as follows: Tell about someone you know. The same writing prompt was given as a posttest at the end of the study to measure growth in creativity and writing conventions. A rubric was then used to measure the growth and compare the pretest writing samples to the posttest writing samples.

### *Anecdotal Notes*

Anecdotal notes were written by both the first and fourth grade teachers to observe student behaviors and attitudes towards writing and the correspondence journals. The teachers kept their own journal that was exchanged with the students' journals. In this journal, the teachers discussed the students' attitudes towards writing and the writing journals. Each teacher also kept their own notes on themes present in students' writing, conventions and craft that were present and/or missing, and any changes in the creativity of writing.

### *Instruments*

#### *Rubrics*

Following a review of several rubrics measuring creativity, an analytical rubric was selected to measure the growth in creative writing throughout this study. The validity of the rubric has been tested and peer reviewed. It was selected to be a credible part of the triangulated data because it analyzes several conventions of writing. While holistic rubrics give a single score, this study uses an analytical rubric which analyzes several components in a piece of writing. It has been a dependable rubric in the past when measuring various aspects of writing.

The rubric evaluates the following conventions: varied sentence structure, detailed sentences, descriptive language, expressive writing, and basic grammar. Varied sentence structure includes the use of extended and/or combined sentences, as well as, the use of a variety of terms in each sentence. Detailed sentences contain more information about the topic and answer at least three of the following five questions: who, what, where, when,



and why. Descriptive language includes the use of adjectives and language that 'paints a picture.' Expressive writing can be defined as writing that conveys personal ideas and feelings, as well as, writing that contains voice and displays the author's personality. Finally, basic grammar, such as punctuation and capitalization skills, will be evaluated. [See Appendix B: Creative Writing Rubric]

### *Researcher as an Instrument*

In qualitative research, the researcher may also serve as an instrument. Since the teachers of Retained Group A is the researcher of this study, as well as the individual collecting and analyzing the data, the researcher is considered to be an instrument. Data is collected daily as a basis for planned instruction.

### *Data Analysis*

Data were collected over a five month period during the school year of 2006-2007. The rubric scores yielded quantitative responses. The anecdotal notes and the correspondence journals provided qualitative responses. Thus, dual methods of analyses were used. Quantitative data were analyzed using basic statistics and comparison of pre and post test scores. Qualitative responses were analyzed using content analysis (Merriam, 1998). Excerpts of the students' journals are provided in Chapter Six.

### *Conclusion*

The method presented describes the setting, participants, procedure, data sources, and data analysis. The following chapter, Chapter 4, will present the results of this research study.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### *Introduction*

This chapter presents the results of the data collected throughout this study. Data was collected from the pretest and posttest using the Creative Writing Rubric [see Appendix B: Creative Writing Rubric] designed specifically for this study. Data was then analyzed using quantitative approaches consisting of descriptive statistics. The first section, Rubric Results, presents the results from the pretest and posttest scores. The second section, Conventions, describes the analysis of changes in each writing convention measured in this study.

### *Rubric Results*

In regards to the average pretest and posttest scores (Figure 1), Retained Group A scored a 5.3 on the pretest, while Retained Group B scored an average of 6.3. Retained Group A increased their scores by an average of 2.3 points for a final posttest average of 7.6. When the scores were averaged together for Retained Group B, there was not an increase in their pretest scores. Therefore, Retained Group B scored an average of 6.3 on their posttest, as well.

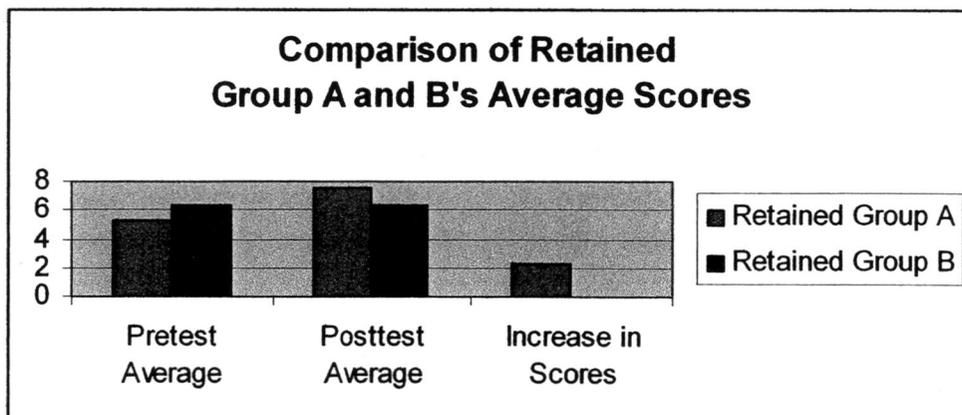


Figure 1: Comparison of Retained Group A and B's Average Scores

Each student in Retained Group A increased their rubric score by at least one point from the pretest to the posttest (Figure 2). Student D had the most significant change with an increase of five points. Students C, E, F all increased their scores by one point. Students A and B both increased their scores by three points.

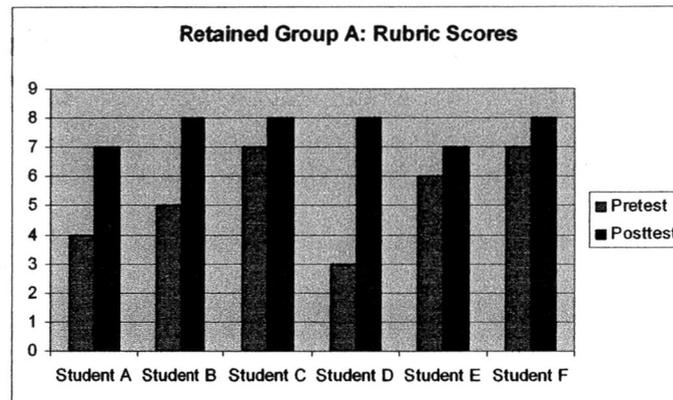


Figure 2- Retained Group A: Rubric Scores

The students in Retained Group B did not have a significant change in their pretest and posttest scores (Figure 3). Student V had an increase of one point, while Student Y had a decrease in one point. Students U, W, X, and Z had no change in their scores.

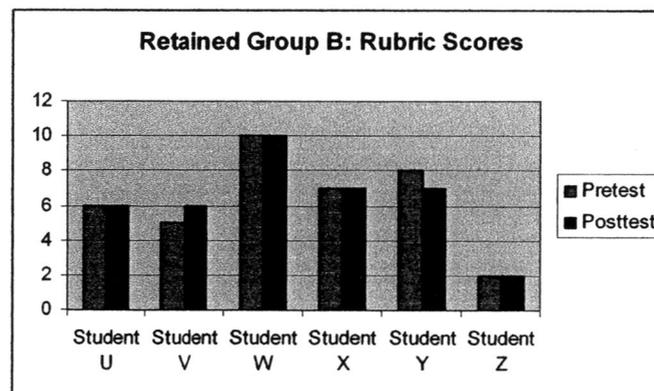


Figure 3- Retained Group B: Rubric Scores

### *Conventions*

Varied sentence structure was measured by analyzing the use of extended and/or combined sentences and the use of a variety of terms in each sentence. Figure 4 displays the change in scores when looking specifically at the varied sentence structure convention. Students in Retained Group A scored an average of .83 points on the pretest and an average of 1.67 on the posttest for an increase of .84 points. Students in Retained Group B scored an average of 1.3 on the pretest and an average of 1.5 on the posttest for an increase of .20 points.

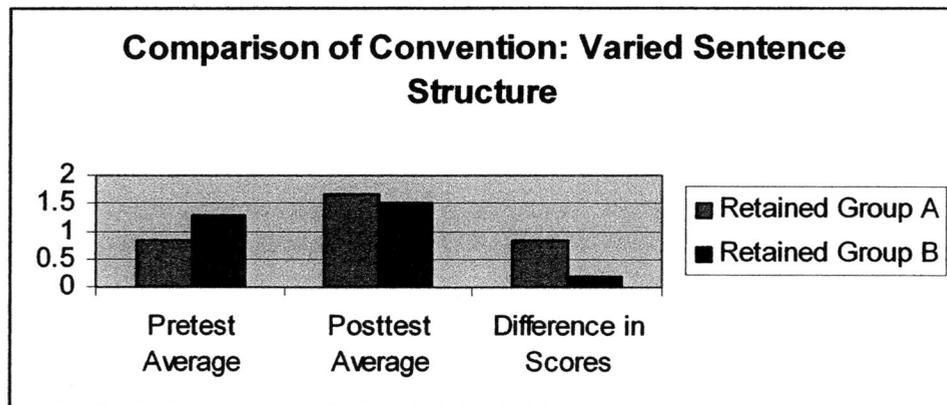


Figure 4- Comparison of Convention: Varied Sentence Structure

The majority of students in Retained Group A (Figure 5) increased their score on the varied sentence structure convention. Students A, B, and F each increased their score by one point, while Student D had an increase of two points. Students C and E's scores stayed constant. Five of the four students in Retained Group B (Figure 6) remained the same. Student X, however, decreased his score by one point. Overall, Retained Group A had a greater increase in scores on the varied sentence structure convention than Retained Group B.

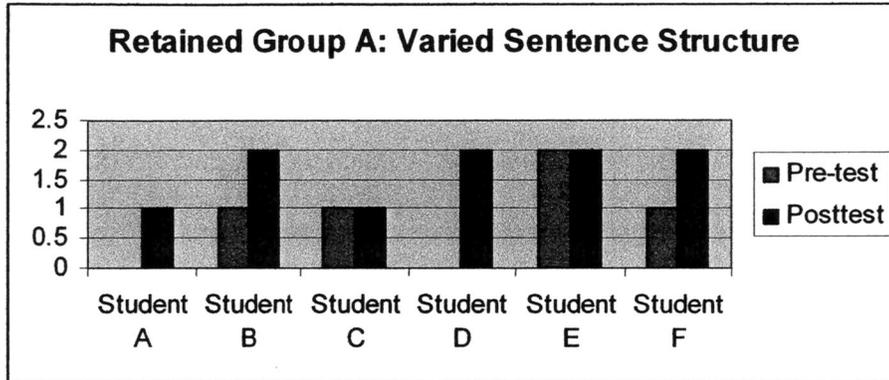


Figure 5- Retained Group A: Varied Sentence Structure

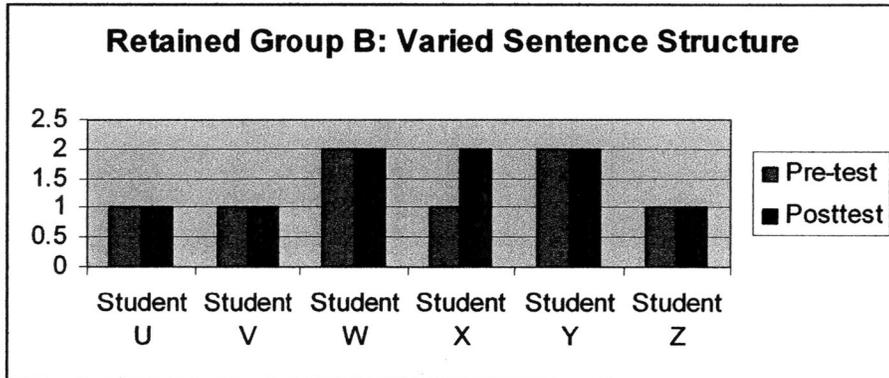


Figure 6- Retained Group B: Varied Sentence Structure

Detailed sentences were measured by analyzing the number of questions students answered in their writing. Sentences that answered at least three of the following questions: who, what, when, where, and why, received two points on the rubric. Figure 7, presents the change in scores when specifically looking at detailed sentences. Students in Retained Groups A and B both received an average of 1.17 points on the pretest for detailed sentences. Retained Group A increased their score by an average of .66 points for a score of 1.83 on the posttest, while Retained Group B increased their score by an average of .16 for a score of 1.33 on the posttest.

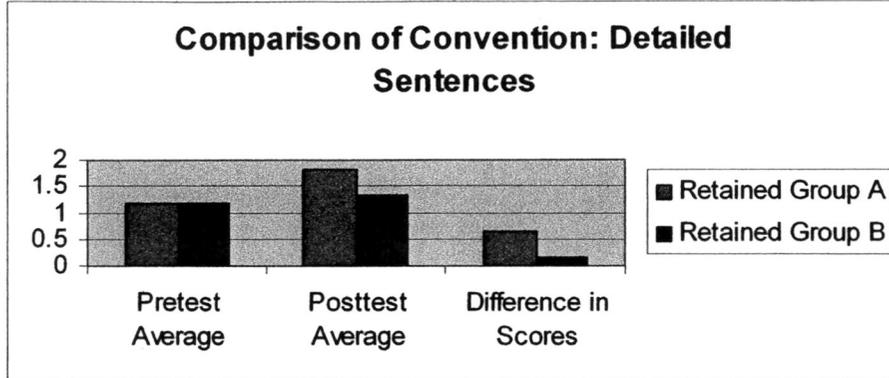


Figure 7- Comparison of Convention: Detailed Sentences

Three students in Retained Group A (Figure 8), Students C, D, and E, increased their scores by one point on the detailed sentences writing convention. Student A had an increase of two points, Student B's score remained constant, and Student F had a decrease in scores by one point. The scores of five students in Retained Group B (Figure 9) remained constant, while Student U increased their score by one point on the posttest. Overall, Retained Group A showed a greater increase in scores on the detailed sentences writing convention than Retained Group B.

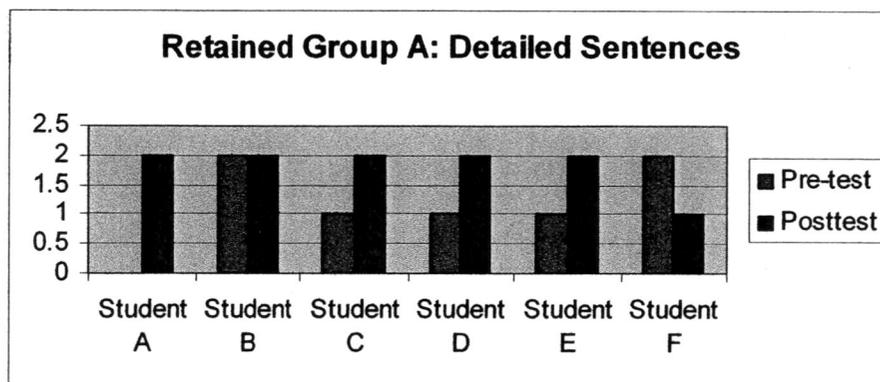


Figure 8- Retained Group A: Detailed Sentences

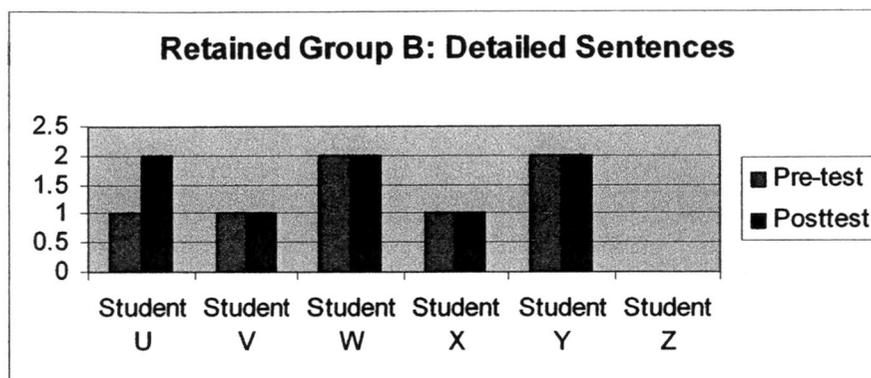


Figure 9- Retained Group B: Detailed Sentences

Descriptive language was measured in students' writing by analyzing the use of adjectives in their sentences, as well as, the use of language that 'paints a picture.' Figure 10 displays the change in scores when looking specifically at descriptive language in students' writing. On average, students in Retained Group A increased their score by .33 points. Students in Retained Group B decreased their score by an average of .34 points.

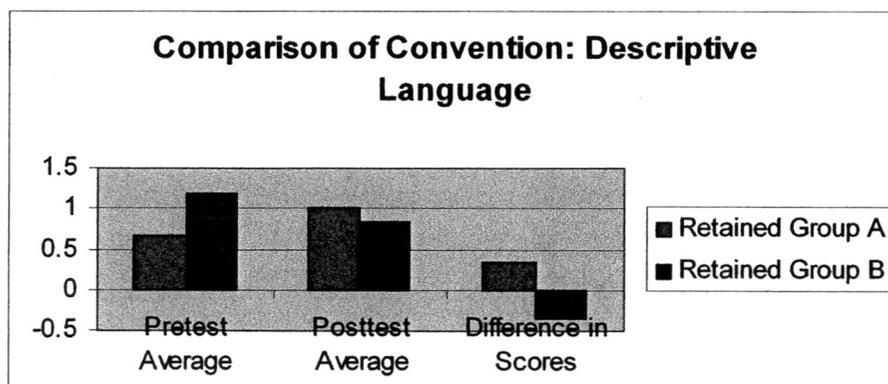


Figure 10- Comparison of Convention: Descriptive Language

The majority of students in Retained Group A (Figure 11) remained constant in their scores as far as descriptive language is concerned. However, Students B and D increased their scores by one point each. Several scores in Retained Group B (Figure 12)

decreased from the pretest to the posttest. Students U, X, and Y each had a decrease in their score by one point. The scores of Students W and Z remained constant and Student B's score is increased by one point.

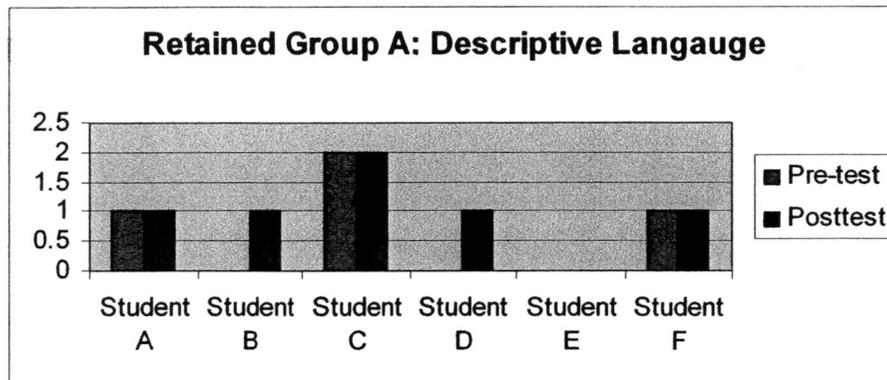


Figure 11- Retained Group A: Descriptive Language

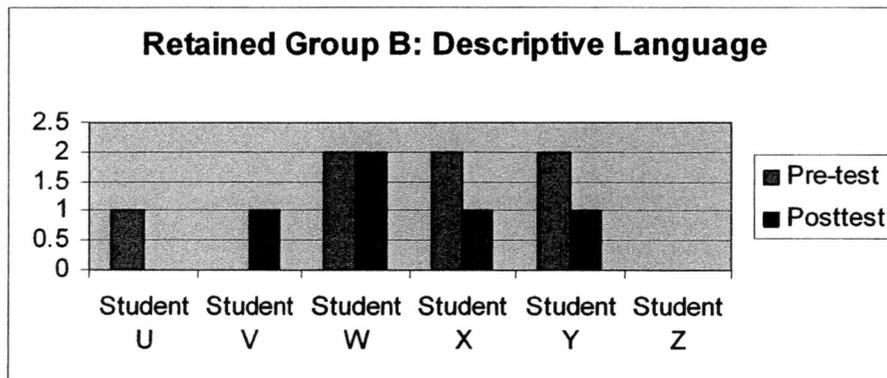


Figure 12- Retained Group B: Descriptive Language

Expressive writing was measured by analyzing the author's ability to convey their personal ideas and feelings. Figure 13 presents the results of the pretest and posttest average score for the expressive writing convention. Retained Group A scored an average of .67 on the pretest and an average of 1.17 on the posttest. Retained Group A had an overall increase of .5 points. Retained Group B scored a one on both the pretest and posttest; therefore, they showed no increase in expressive writing.



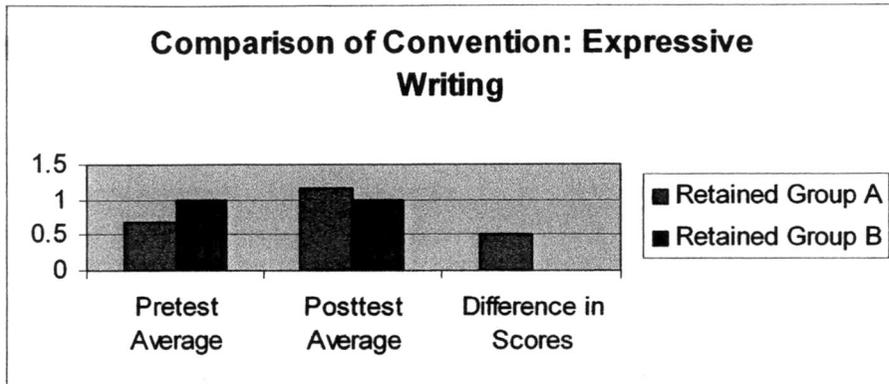


Figure 13- Comparison of Convention: Expressive Writing

Three students in Retained Group A (Figure 14) increased their scores by one point, while the other three students' scores remained constant. All scores in Retained Group B (Figure 15) remained constant.

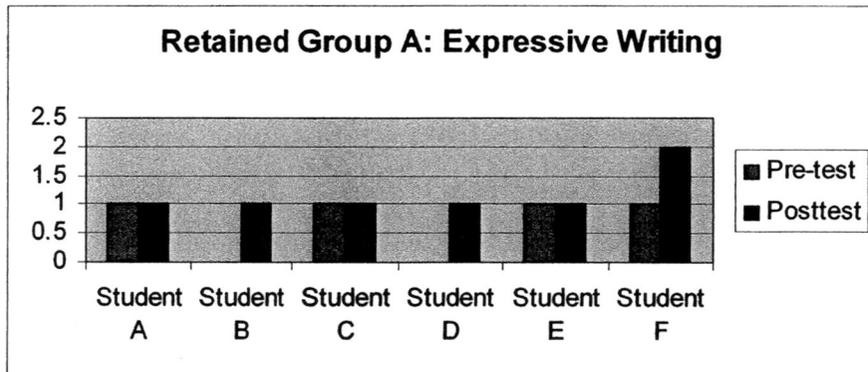


Figure 14- Retained Group A: Expressive Writing

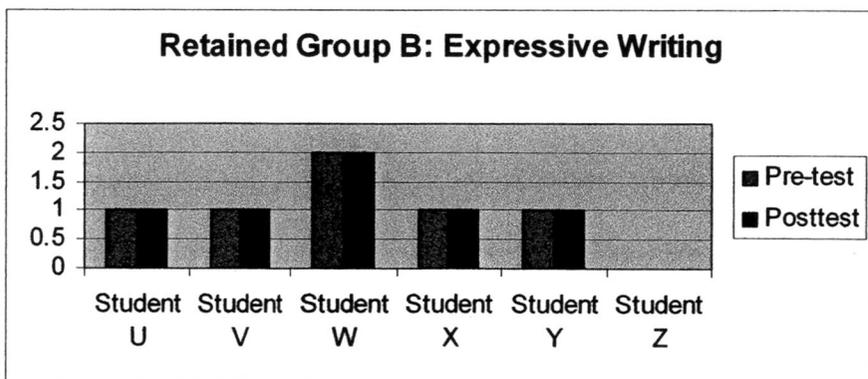


Figure 15- Retained Group B: Expressive Writing

Grammar was measured by evaluating the use of correct punctuation and capitalization throughout the piece of writing. Figure 16 displays the average rubric score for grammar on the pretest and posttest. Retained Group A averaged two points on the pretest, as well as, the posttest for an increase of zero points throughout the study. Students in Retained Group B averaged a 1.67 on both the pretest and posttest for a gain of zero points, too.

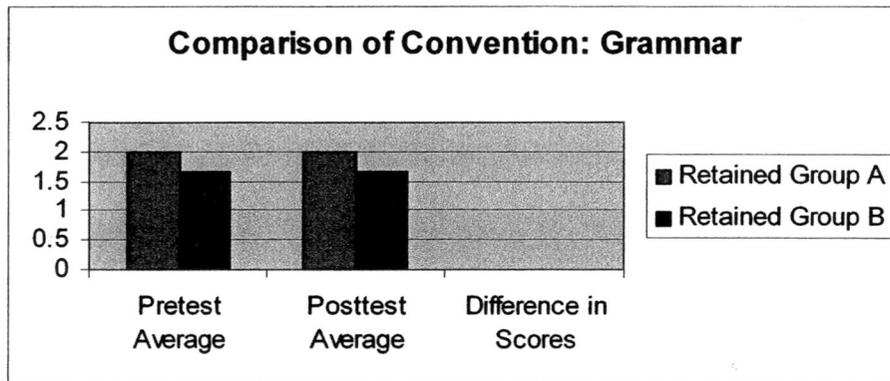


Figure 16- Comparison of Convention: Grammar

Students in Retained Group A (Figure 17) all received a rubric score of two points on the pretest and the posttest. Although all the students' scores in Retained Group B (Figure 18) remained constant, there was a difference in rubric scores for the students. Students U, V, W, and X received two points on the pretest and posttest, while Students Y and Z received one point on the pretest and posttest.

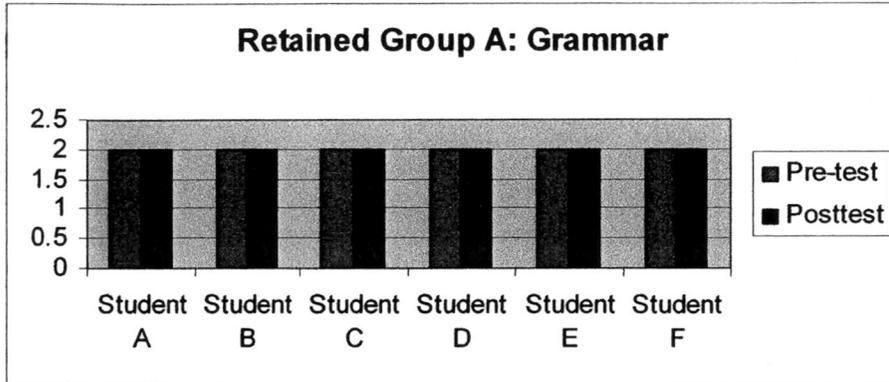


Figure 17- Retained Group A: Grammar

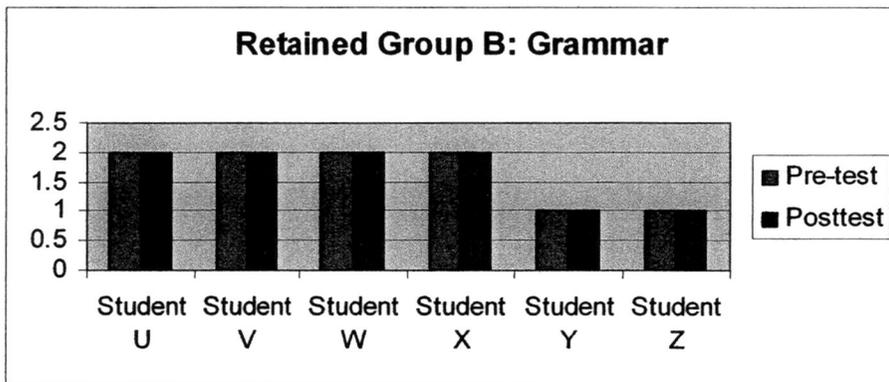


Figure 18- Retained Group B: Grammar

*Conclusion*

The tables presented in this chapter display the results of using correspondence journals, in addition to writing instruction currently in place, within a first grade classroom. The next chapter will discuss and conclude the findings and offer implications for further research and practice.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### *Introduction*

The following chapter discusses the data results presented in the previous chapter, offers implications for practice, presents this study's limitations, and provides implications for further research.

### *Interpretation of Rubric Scores*

After using correspondence journals for approximately two months, students in Retained Group A increased their rubric scores by an average of two points. Students in Retained Group B, whose method of writing instruction stayed constant, did not show an average increase in rubric scores from the pretest to the posttest. While students in Retained Group A scored one point lower on the pretest than students in Retained Group B, students in Retained Group A obtained 1.3 points higher on the posttest than the students in Retained Group B.

The data results indicate that correspondence journals did increase creative writing elements in retained first grade students who used the journals to communicate with fourth grade buddies. Several factors that may have contributed to the growth in creative writing elements might include the following: the correspondence journals provided students with additional writing practice, gave students an audience to write to, offered a non-threatening, informal means for writing, and gave students a real, authentic purpose to write.

Students in Retained Group A used correspondence journals in addition to daily writing instruction that was already in place. On the other hand, students in Retained

Group B did not have this additional writing practice. Therefore, students in Retained Group A may have seen an increase in their rubric scores throughout the study due to the fact that they were receiving an additional writing activity each week. This additional writing activity provided students in Retained Group A further writing practice, as well as, extra guidance and feedback on their writing. Guidance and feedback were given to the students by their teacher, who supervised and offered suggestions as they were corresponding with their buddies. Their fourth grade buddies also offered feedback by writing comments such as the following: “I love your hand written (*writing*) it is so pretty” (excerpt written by Student C’s buddy).

Students were given a target audience to write to through the correspondence journals. Students were informed that an older student would be reading their writing; therefore, students would be expected to take special care of their journal entries. In other words, students were aware that they needed to use legible handwriting, correct grammar including the use of proper punctuation marks at the end of their sentences and capital letters in the correct places, and accurate spelling in order for their buddies to read their writing and respond to them. Therefore, students in Retained Group A took their time and were less apt to make careless mistakes when writing in their correspondence journals.

Given that the correspondence journals were being used solely for communication with their fourth grade buddies, the first grade students in Retained Group A were aware that their journal entries would not be assessed. Consecutively, the correspondence journals served as a non-threatening, informal means for writing. While the teachers

were present to offer assistance as needed, they did not critique students' writing nor did they make requirements for students' journal entries. Due to this relaxed writing environment, one student in the Correspondence Group C felt comfortable enough to write the following: "I love school. I do not really like school. My teacher was standing over me so I had to write that" (excerpt taking from a fourth grade students journal entry).

The correspondence journals also gave students an authentic purpose to write. Instead being given writing prompts, students in Retained Group A were allowed the freedom to write about self-selected topics. According to anecdotal notes kept by the teachers of Retained Group A and Correspondence Group C, students' attitudes towards their correspondence journals were positive due to the fact that they were given a choice in writing. One first grade student said with excitement in his voice, "You mean you aren't going to tell us what we have to write about?" With the combination of an additional writing activity a week, an audience to write to, a non-threatening writing environment, and an authentic purpose for writing, it is not surprising that the students in Retained Group A would show an increase in creative writing elements in their writing.

#### *Interpretation of Conventions*

In addition to the rubric scores, each convention was analyzed to determine if it were influenced by the use of correspondence journals. Of the five conventions, students in Retained Group A achieved an average increase in scores on every convention except one: grammar, which remained constant. Retained Group B attained an average increase in scores on two of the five conventions. Scores decreased by an average of .34 points

for descriptive language and scores remained constant for expressive language and grammar.

To further explain how the conventions were analyzed and affected by the implementation of correspondence journals, Student 1's and Student 7's pretest and posttest writing sample is included below. Student 1 is from Retained Group A, while Student 7 is from Retained Group B.

Student 1's pretest writing sample:

“My mom she can go to woy (*work*). My mom she get a car. My mom she get a dog.”

Student 1's posttest writing sample:

“My dad wry (*works*) for the har (*chair*) copne (*company*). We cyot (*cut*) grass too. We have fun. We go to Wall Mort to dieya (*buy*) toy. We sew (*saw*) my cosen (*cousin*).

Student 1 received zero points for varied sentence on the pretest due to the fact that the same sentence structure, “My mom she can/get”, was used in every sentence. However, Student 1 increased the rubric score by two points on the posttest because varied sentence structure was included such as extended sentences. Student 1 received one point for detailed sentences on the pretest since each sentence answered the questions who and what. On the posttest, the student received two points because two of the sentences answered three questions. The first sentences answered the questions who, what, and where, while the fourth sentence answered who, what, and why. As far as descriptive language and expressive writing are concerned, Student 1 scored zero points on the

pretest and one point on the posttest. The posttest painted a picture of what the dad does during the day and why they go to Wal-Mart. The posttest also conveys personal feeling in that the student has fun with his/her dad. Student 1 received two points in grammar on both the pretest and posttest since there were no grammatical errors in either writing sample.

Student 7's pretest writing sample:

"I loving Mrs sheppard. She is a gun (*good*) techr (*teacher*). Mrs sheppard is pertty (*pretty*). Mrs sheppard take friend in slide."

Student 7's posttest writing sample:

"Me and my mom went to hoces (*Jose's*) hes (*house*). She play weth (*with*) me. Me and my mom went to the zoo."

Student 7 received one point for varied sentence structure on the pretest because the writing contained only one extended sentence. Although there were two extended sentences on the posttest, the score for varied sentence structure remained constant due to the fact that the extended sentences were similar: "Me and my mom went to." Student 7 received one point for detailed sentences on the pretest since one sentence answered the questions who, what, and where: Mrs. Sheppard (who) takes friend (what) in slide (where). Student 7 increased his/her score on the posttest by one point because two sentences answered who, what, and where. Student 7 received one point on the pretest for descriptive language for describing what kind of teacher Mrs. Sheppard is and that she is pretty. However, Student 7 decreased his/her score to zero points for descriptive language on the posttest since there was no descriptive language used. Student received



one point for expressive language on the pretest because the student expressed his/her feelings of love towards Mrs. Sheppard. Student 7 received zero points on the posttest since no personal feelings were expressed. Finally, Student 7 received two points on the pretest and posttest for grammar due to the fact that there were no grammatical errors throughout either piece of writing.

It appears that grammar stayed constant throughout the study due to the fact that the majority of students, ten out of twelve, received a perfect score for grammar on the pretest. Therefore, there was no opportunity for improvement. The overall increase in Retained Group A's scores for conventions were possibly due to the fact that students were writing to an audience. Students had the tendency to take more care when writing in their correspondence journals than writing for a prompt. This extra concern for their writing eventually carried over to their daily writing instruction. The increase in scores could also be contributed to the extra writing practice they received throughout the study.

#### *Analysis of Anecdotal Notes*

The participating teachers wrote anecdotal notes in a correspondence journal to monitor student behavior and attitude towards writing and the correspondence journals. Overall, students in Correspondence Group C and Correspondence Group D had positive attitudes towards the correspondence journals. Students were anxious and excited to receive the journals each week and enjoyed writing in them. Students in Correspondence Group D, the fourth grade students, did feel moments of frustration when questions were not immediately answered by their buddies. However, after the teacher of

Correspondence Group D reminded the students of their buddies' age, the fourth grade students became a little more understanding.

### *Implications for Practice*

This research study suggests that correspondence journals will increase creative writing elements in retained first grade students. Therefore, it is recommended that correspondence journals be implemented in addition to daily writing instruction currently in place within the classroom. Correspondence journals may be used for correspondence between students of different grade levels, students of the same grade level, and for students and adults to communicate. If this exact study were to be implemented into a classroom, it is recommended that the instructor of the fourth grade students take time to remind them of their buddies' age and capabilities to eliminate possible frustration felt by the older students.

This research study also recommends authentic writing activities be implemented in addition to daily writing instruction. Additional authentic writing activities could consist of the following ideas: student mailboxes, where students write letters to peers and staff members at school; classroom journals, such as animal journals where students could write about what the class pet is doing; and notes and reminders which could consist of the student writing themselves a reminder to bring a left item from home.

Students should be given the opportunity to write to an audience in a non-threatening, informal environment where they have the freedom to choose what they want to write. Although teacher guidance is recommended, assessment is not. Authentic writing experiences occur when students are writing for a real purpose. In real life our

writing is not graded; therefore, students should be given an outlet where their writing is not assessed, as well.

### *Limitations*

This study is limited to one first grade classroom in rural, Eastern North Carolina. The study is also limited to a small sample consisting of twelve first grade students who have previously been retained. The majority of students consist primarily of two ethnicities, Hispanic and African American, and are of low socioeconomic status. Consequently, the findings may not be comparable to other primary students and classrooms. Research bias is also present due to the fact that the researcher serves as Retained Group A's teacher and would obviously like for the students to succeed. Time was limited, as well, due to the fact that writing journals were only implemented for two months.

Another limitation pertains to the difference in instructional methods of the participating teachers. Retained Group B consists of six students from two different classrooms, while Retained Group A consists of six students from one classroom. Therefore, three teachers are participating in this study, each with their own method of instructing writing. The teacher of Retained Group A incorporates several authentic writing tasks in the classroom including classroom journals and student mailboxes. The two teachers of Retained Group B, both incorporate writing journals into their daily writing instruction. Nevertheless, writing prompts are often given and students do not have the freedom of choice in writing topics.

A final limitation pertains to the assessment of writing, as well as, the definition of creative writing. This study is limited to the researcher's definition of creative writing. While there are several definitions present that define creative writing, the researcher analyzed specific creative writing conventions that pertained to this study. The researcher also developed the rubric used to assess the writing. Again, several rubrics to assess writing are present; however, the researcher developed a rubric specifically designed for this study.

#### *Implications for Further Research*

This research study focused solely on the creative writing elements of retained first grade students. The study was conducted in a short amount of time and data was analyzed on a chosen group of students. Therefore, it would be beneficial to conduct a study involving a large group of primary students over an entire school year that analyzes more aspects of writing such as students' attitudes towards writing and improvement in basic writing skills. It would also be valuable to conduct future research studies on the effects authentic writing tasks, such as student mailboxes and classroom journals, have on writing development. A final implication for further research pertains to the effects correspondence journals have on the development of language for English Language Learners due to the fact that the journals provide English Language Learners practice in written conversation.

#### *Conclusion*

This study suggests that using correspondence journals will increase the frequency of creative writing elements, as defined by the researcher, in retained first

grade students' writing. Although the findings may not be comparable to other primary students and classrooms, the data indicates that the implementation of correspondence journals could have a positive impact on students' writing and should be considered as a helpful tool to implement in the classroom when planning writing instruction for primary students.

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**APPENDIX A**

**IRB APPROVAL LETTER**



**University and Medical Center Institutional Review Board**  
 East Carolina University  
 Ed Warren Life Sciences Building • 600 Moye Boulevard • LSB 104 • Greenville, NC 27834  
 Office 252-744-2914 • Fax 252-744-2284 • [www.ecu.edu/irb](http://www.ecu.edu/irb)  
 Chair and Director of Biomedical IRB: Charles W. Daeschner, III, MD  
 Chair and Director of Behavioral and Social Science IRB: Susan L. McCammon, PhD

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TO: Emily Thomas, BS, Elementary Education, ECU  
 FROM: UMCIRB  
 DATE: November 21, 2006  
 RE: Exempt Category Research Study  
 TITLE: "The Effects of Correspondence Journals on the Creative Writing of First Grade Students Who Have Been Retained"

UMCIRB #06-0737

This research study has undergone expedited review on 11/15/06. This research study meets the criteria for an exempt status because it is research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods. Dr. S. McCammon deemed this **unfunded** study **no more than minimal risk**. This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are changes in this study.

The following items were reviewed:

- Internal Processing Form (dated 11/7/06)
- Letter of Support—West Greene Elem. & Snow Hill Primary
- Parental Permission Form

Dr. S. McCammon does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

**The UMCIRB complies with 45 CFR 46, 21 CFR 50, 21 CFR 56, ICH Guidelines, UMCIRB operating policies and procedures, institutional policies and other applicable federal regulations.**

**APPENDIX B**

**CREATIVE WRITING RUBRIC**

## Creative Writing Rubric

Student's Name \_\_\_\_\_

1. <u>Varied sentence structure</u> : uses extended and/or combined sentences; uses variety of terms in each sentence.	
2. <u>Detailed sentences</u> : contains more information about the topic; answers at least three of the following questions: who, what, when, where, and why.	
3. <u>Descriptive language</u> : uses adjectives and language that 'paints a picture.'	
4. <u>Expressive writing</u> : conveys personal ideas and feelings; contains voice and displays author's personality.	
5. <u>Grammar</u> : correct punctuation and capitalization.	
Total Score (out of 10 points)	

### Scoring Guide

2 points: Evident

1 point: Little Evidence

0 points: No Evidence

**APPENDIX C**

**RAW DATA**

**RAW DATA**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	3	8
Student 2	5	8
Student 3	7	8
Student 4	4	7
Student 5	6	7
Student 6	7	8

**Retained Group A: Rubric Scores**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	6	5
Student 8	5	6
Student 9	10	10
Student 10	7	7
Student 11	8	7
Student 12	2	2

**Retained Group B: Rubric Scores**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	0	2
Student 2	1	2
Student 3	1	1
Student 4	0	1
Student 5	2	2
Student 6	1	2

Retained Group A: Writing Convention-Variied Sentence Structure

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	1	1
Student 8	1	1
Student 9	2	2
Student 10	1	2
Student 11	2	2
Student 12	1	1

Retained Group B: Writing Convention- Variied Sentence Structure

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	1	2
Student 2	2	2
Student 3	1	2
Student 4	0	2
Student 5	1	2
Student 6	2	1

Retained Group A: Writing Convention- Detailed Sentences

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	1	2
Student 8	1	1
Student 9	2	2
Student 10	1	1
Student 11	2	2
Student 12	0	0

Retained Group B: Writing Convention- Detailed Sentences



Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	0	1
Student 2	0	1
Student 3	2	2
Student 4	1	1
Student 5	0	0
Student 6	1	1

**Retained Group A: Writing Convention- Descriptive Language**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	1	0
Student 8	0	1
Student 9	2	2
Student 10	2	1
Student 11	2	1
Student 12	0	0

**Retained Group B: Writing Convention- Descriptive Language**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	0	1
Student 2	0	1
Student 3	1	1
Student 4	1	1
Student 5	1	1
Student 6	2	2

Retained Group A: Writing Convention- Expressive Writing

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	1	0
Student 8	1	1
Student 9	2	2
Student 10	1	1
Student 11	1	1
Student 12	1	1

Retained Group B: Writing Convention- Expressive Writing

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 1	2	2
Student 2	2	2
Student 3	2	2
Student 4	2	2
Student 5	2	2
Student 6	2	2

**Retained Group A: Writing Convention- Grammar**

Student	Pre-test	Posttest
Student 7	2	2
Student 8	2	2
Student 9	2	2
Student 10	2	2
Student 11	1	1
Student 12	1	1

**Retained Group B: Writing Convention- Grammar**