

# Writing with Study Buddies

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## Keywords

Chadwell writing program, fifth grade, first grade, study buddies

## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to see if fifth grade buddies could be effective tutors for first grade writers. The study was piloted for 6 weeks at the end of the 2003-04 school year. After piloting the study, I developed a training program to use with the fifth grade tutors. I then completed my study during the 2004-05 school year. As I observed interactions between pairs of buddies, I took observational notes. My observations yielded five findings. The fifth graders were able to help the first graders focus on the Focus Correction Areas (FCA's). The fifth graders were able to support the first graders' developing writing skills. The first graders were able to publish more writing. I also found the pairing of the students and the mini-lesson were very important elements of the program. Overall, I felt this was a very productive program that I will continue to utilize in my classroom.*



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# Why Writing?

“Writing is so hard to do that human society existed for untold eons before anyone gave it a try... Today we



expect everyone to write, and not only that, we expect them to do it before they are nine years old” (Kaye, 1995, p. xi). “Children want to write. They want to write the first day they attend school” (Graves, 1983, p. 3). These two statements seem to contradict each other. In fact they are complementary. Learning to write is a difficult task. The English language and its grammar are very hard to master. Yet, children do have a desire to learn. As teachers, our job is to help them learn in a way that supports their new skills and their desire to learn. “Most students entering first grade (about ninety-five percent) believe they can write” (Graves, p.18). That is why in the early years we need to use that desire and willingness to write, to help students learn the formal writing process. We need to accomplish this task without quelling the student’s desire and willingness to write.

## My Writing Program Prior to the Study

Prior to this study, my writing curriculum consisted of a mini-lesson, individual writing and teacher conferences, followed by a sharing time (Calkins, 2003). A mini-lesson involved my modeling a specific skill or strategy. Sometimes I would think aloud (Cunningham & Allington, 1999) as I wrote using the strategies that the children were expected to accomplish. At other times I used storybooks to help teach different writing strategies (Spandel, 2001).

After the mini-lesson, the students were given time to write on their own. During this time, the students were expected to remember the focus areas they had already mastered and work on the current focus areas that I had chosen for the mini-lesson (Chadwell, 1999). I walked around and had a conference with 4-5 students during this time. After the allocated time had passed, then four or five students shared what they had written for the day.

## My Buddy Writing Program

After seven years of teaching writing in this manner, I decided to add a new piece. Many

classes in my school use “study buddies” to help children with reading. I realized that my children also needed support in writing. Many of the upper grade



teachers also were looking for ways to review the basics of writing with their students. I decided to combine the two. This study focused on using the fifth grade students to support my students in the writing process. The fifth graders sat in on the writing process from mini-lesson to sharing once a week. This allowed them to review the basics of the writing process in a meaningful way.

In their book *Transforming Literacy Curriculum Genres*, Pappas and Zecker

(2001) argue that teachers need to attempt explicitly to share power and authority with

During the study I jotted down the interactions of my students using my buddy book.

**Buddy Book**

What project are the students working on?

Fifth Graders	First graders
Okay, My (paused while he wrote)	I want to write my favorite game is...
Favorite	How do you spell that?
Begin to sound out slowly.	Writes 'favorit'
Good, now the next word is game.	

What off task behaviors do I see?

Ideas for improvement next class setting

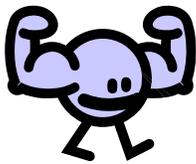
their students in order for *collaborative teaching* to occur. During this study, I used this form of collaborative teaching with the fifth grade students and my first grade students. I wanted the students to have power over the writing process. I also wanted the students to work with someone on their level so that they could express their feelings openly without just telling me what I wanted to hear. Teachers have many students and it can be very hard to meet with each student everyday. Most teachers only hope to meet with each student once or twice a week during the writing process (Wiener, 1990). By adding the fifth grade buddies, I was able to add another one-on-one conference with each of my students.

During the development of my study, I was intrigued by writing programs such as Chadwell's (1999) and Cooper's and Kiger's (2003). These programs use peer conferencing during the writing workshop. They suggest using peers from the classroom.

Leu and Kinzer (2003) also suggest using Internet peer conferences with other schools. I decided to expand this same concept by having fifth grade peers listen to the first grade students read and offer questions and ideas for improvement. Chadwell also talks about using focused instruction for learning. Using The Collins model for writing, Chadwell (1999) discusses teaching students just a few focus areas at one time rather than focusing on all the concepts at once. Collins (1988) calls these the Focus Correction Areas or FCA's. Chadwell and Collins both suggest that teachers use no more than 3 FCA's at one time. I modeled the FCA's that the first grade students were to practice. Then the fifth grade buddies were to help the first graders stay focused on these FCA's while supporting the writing.

## Peer Learning Can be Powerful

“Peer learning is a potentially powerful instructional tool” (Cooper, 2002, p. 56).



The teacher needs to use this powerful tool to help the students learn more during the time given. When the students are more engaged in the activity, they will learn more from the activity. The students not only need to be engaged; the quality of that engagement is also important (Chinn, O'Donnell, & Jinks, 2000). Peer learning can also help some students (women and minorities) gain more success than traditional practices. “Peer learning values cooperation over competition and greater respect for the varied experiences and backgrounds of participants...” (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 1999, p. 415).

## Challenges of Peer Learning

Two potential pitfalls from peer learning are the student that relies too much on the other in the pair, as well as socially dysfunctional pairs. The teacher needs to be very diligent in setting up and watching the groups. “Interactions that are largely dysfunctional

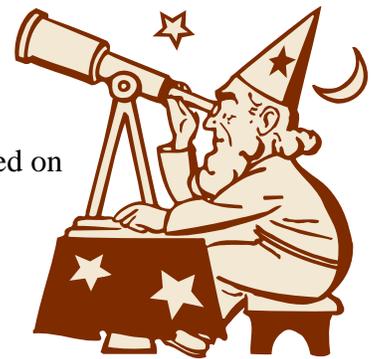
and cannot be repaired work against the goal of teaching children to respect each other and to accomplish that task” (DeLisi, 2002, p. 10). The teacher will need to decide if the students need more explicit strategies for conflict resolution, or if the pair needs to be reassigned. If possible, we want the students to learn about the writing process and the art of working with others. So we need to teach the children “negotiation strategies and conflict resolution explicitly” (DeLisi, p.10). The teacher also needs to set up the responsibility of the “help-seeker and the help-giver” (Webb, Farivar, & Mastergeorge, 2002, p. 15). Webb points out that the “help-seeker” (in this study, the first grade student) must be “willing to seek help.” The help-giver must then be willing and able to help (Webb, 2002). Again the teacher must be careful in the pairings and not put a student that may need more support with a less able helper. This kind of collaboration takes a lot of effort that is easier said than done (Pappas & Zecker, 2001). However, with a lot of effort and vigilance the teacher can set up a classroom for success.

Keeping this in mind, I developed a training program for the fifth grade students. I started by looking at what teachers can say and do during writing conferences to help students. In her article, *Ideas in Practice: Assessing Writing in the Developmental Classroom*, Zinn (1998) “encourages instructors to look for opportunities to give meaningful praise when responding to students’ work. Generic, vague compliments can have a negative effect, since they are viewed as being passed out freely to all” (p. 29). I did not want the fifth graders to simply tell the first graders they did a good job. I wanted them to have specific type of questions and comments. I also did not want them to try to “fix” everything on the student’s paper. “Young children are usually not critical readers; they need simple suggestions to help get them through these two stages (revising and editing)” (Poindexter & Oliver, 1998, p. 421). “A well-developed writing check list can

help guide a student writer toward successful completion of a specific writing task” (Hodgson & Bohning, 1997, p. 138). I developed a comment and questions checklist to use with the first grade students. Many of the comments and questions I chose for the buddies were adapted from suggestions Calkins (2003) gives in her book, *The Conferring Handbook*.

## Findings of the Study

In my research I looked at how peer learning can be an instructional tool. As I observed the pairs, I took notes on the interactions I saw. Then after each setting, I stopped and reflected on what happened. I then used these observations to help give direction for the next mini-lesson. During the project, I discovered five very powerful findings.



	<p><b>YOUR ROLE AS A STUDY BUDDY</b></p> <p>Your Job is to coach the first graders. <u>NOT</u> do the writing for them. (Remember you have already passed 1<sup>st</sup> grade and you don't want to do that work over, no one did your work for you! ☺ )</p> <p>Help them sound out words they don't know. Try not to just spell them.</p> <p>Ask them questions about their writing.</p> <p>Last, you will help them publish. You can do the typing while they read to you.</p>	<p><b>TYPES OF GOOD QUESTIONS TO ASK</b></p> <p>Where does your story take place?</p> <p>Who are the characters?</p> <p>What are they doing?</p> <p>Wow! That sounds really interesting, what else happened?</p> <p>So what happened was..... then what happened?</p> <p><b>QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE PUBLISHING</b></p> <p>Does the story make sense?</p> <p>Did we cover the 3 FCA's?</p> <p>Did we edit?</p>
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This is the booklet I used with the fifth graders to train them to work with the first graders.

- **The fifth grade buddies were able to reinforce the first graders' attention to the FCA's in their writing.**

I was surprised at how quickly the fifth graders caught on to using questions to guide the first graders, rather than just telling them what to do. During the second session I heard one pair working and the fifth grader was asking tons of questions so the student could get down three details (including details was one of the FCA's.).

*Fifth grader 1*-So what should we write about?

*First grader 1*-Christmas

*Fifth grader 1*-Okay, what did you do for Christmas?

*First grader 1*-Me and my Mom opened presents.

*Fifth grader 1*-Okay let's start with that. What are the sounds you hear in 'me'?

*First grader 1*-m, e

*Fifth grader 1*-Okay write that, now what about 'and'?

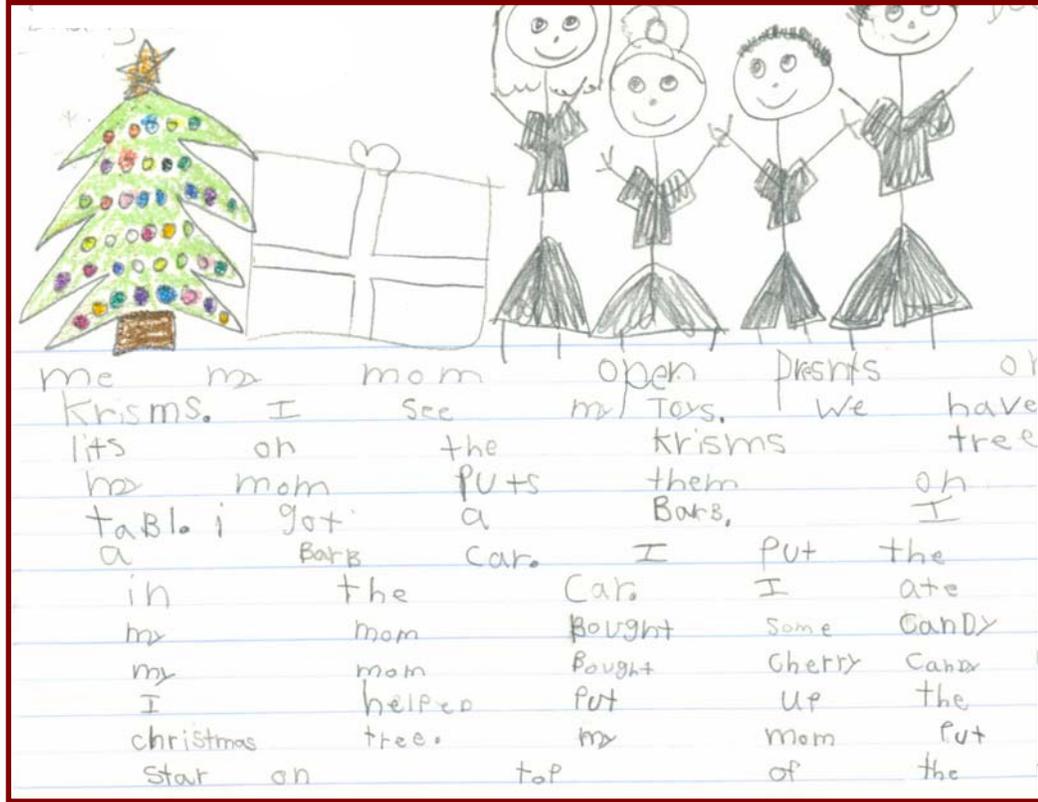
This continues as the first grader starts to write the sentence.

*Fifth grader 1*-Now let's sound out Christmas, |c| |r| |i| |s| |m| |a| |s|

*First grader 1*-I hear k r i s m s

*Fifth grader 1*-good write that down.

The pair continued until the first grader was actually able to get down more than 3 details in the story.



In a second group the fifth grader was able to help the first grader gain a better understanding of just what a detail was.

*Fifth grader 2-I think we may be done.*

*First grader 2-What I don't have 3 details. (This was a focused area so he knew that I wanted to see 3 details.)*

*Fifth grader 2-Yes you do, this counts because it is telling the specific time it takes place.*

*First grader 2-Oh, I see.*

The boys then continued to add to the story.

- **The buddy program actually allowed my students to publish more writing than before, which got them more energized about writing.**

In a typical school year I would probably only get one or two stories published on the computer with each student. During this program, each student was able to publish



three or four stories in a school year. When we got to the publishing stage, the fifth grade buddies interpreted their roles in unique, but effective ways. I had expected the fifth graders to type as the first graders read the story aloud. Some of the pairs did just what I expected the students to do. However, others decided to share the keyboard and they both typed parts of the story. Then a few of the groups actually had the fifth graders sitting back and helping the first graders find the keys and type the story themselves. The first graders enjoyed this so much! When it was time to switch groups, the students who at the beginning had not liked the thought of writing were now enthusiastic about writing.

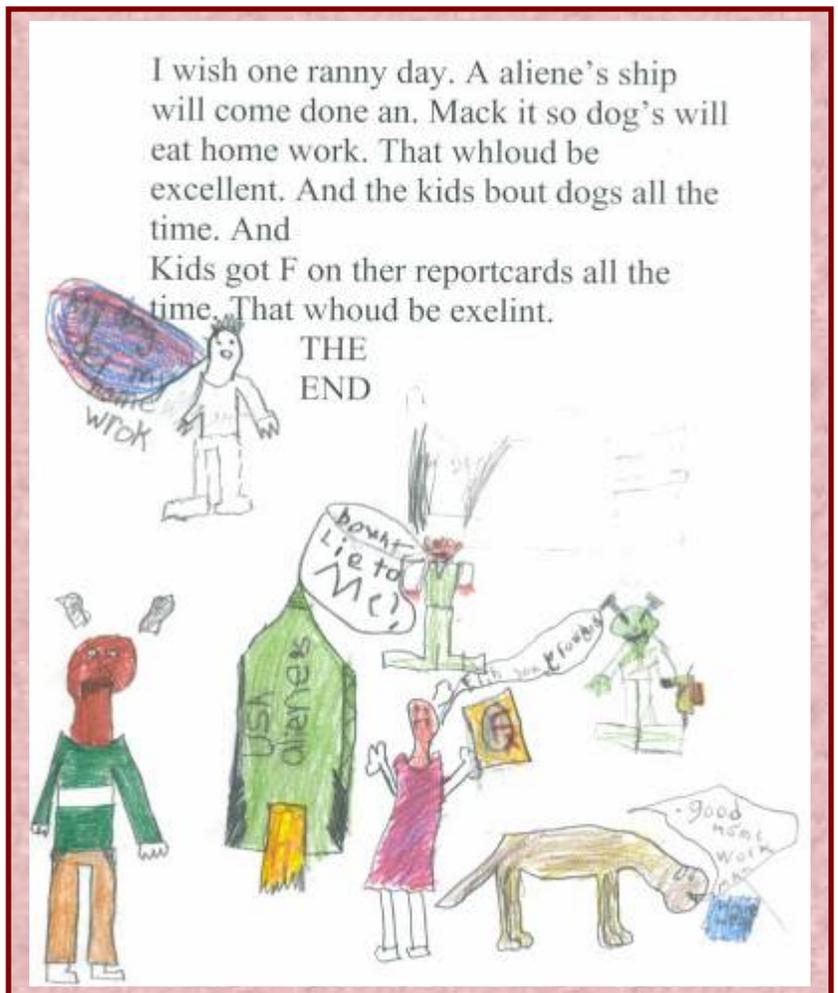
- **The fifth graders were able to give the proper level of support to their writers, with some surprise interactions developing.**

As I watched the pairs, I noticed both ends of the spectrum. Some were helping the first graders with every word, and others would ask questions and sit back and watch as the first grader was writing that part of the story. The more help the first grader needed, the more the buddies offered.

*Fifth grader 3-* One day aliens came down and ate all the homework.

First grader 3- Yeah, that sounds good. (She begins to write, one rainy day.)

*Fifth grader 3-* (He restates the sentence adding her change as she pauses, then continues), an



alien space ship came down and brought a ray so all the dogs would eat the homework.

They continue with the fifth grader reading and adding, and the first grader composing what she liked in the story.

I also had one pair of girls that decided to take on a different role of writing the story together, instead of the first grader doing all the writing and idea creating. They actually shared the pencil and wrote the story together. The first grader wrote the first sentence. Then they discussed the next sentence and the fifth grader wrote that one. Then they discussed the next sentence, and it was the first grader's turn to write again. This continued until they finished the story. I truly enjoyed watching the girls write.

- **The assignment of the pairs and the physical placement had an effect on the quality of their work together.**

The buddies were allowed to pick with whom they were going to work, instead of being assigned by the teacher.

For the most part this worked well, but I had trouble with a few of the pairs initially. The older boys were sitting with their friends. So, instead of writing, they were busy being social. After I split up the



pairs, they seemed to do better. After we switched groups, I saw this happening again.

This time I was quick to split them up. Again, once the older boys were away from their friends, they were more focused on the writing.

However, I still had two fifth graders not being as helpful as the rest of the group. I realized that these gentlemen were also paired with two of my higher functioning writers. Since the first graders did not require as much direct support, the older boys often found time to talk. I liked that the buddies were able to pick their pairs, but I needed to allow myself the power to switch the pairs within the first two weeks. I let the pairs read together for a month before we started writing, so I felt that switching the pairs after that amount of time would not be fair to the pairs that were not having problems. If I watched the pairs closer in the first few interactions, I could move the pairs before they were too attached.

- **The mini-lesson was a critical ingredient in reminding the fifth graders of their role and teaching the first graders what I expected.**

I had hoped to have more time to do a more detailed mini- lesson that lasted ten to fifteen minutes. I quickly learned that with all the transition time involved in merging two classes to start and complete the task, very little time remained for writing with a longer mini- lesson.



We only had thirty minutes to work with, so my mini-lessons were cut down to about five minutes. I think a forty-five minute block of time would have given me the needed time. Unfortunately that was not available. However, even the five minute mini- lesson was very powerful.

The first meeting I noticed it took the students a long time to think of something to write about. The fifth graders were just sitting back and waiting for them to decide what to write about. During the next mini-lesson I reminded the first graders that the

fifth graders were there to help them, but they might need a topic to ask questions about.

I also reminded the fifth graders that they could brainstorm ideas that the first graders could write about. Together we brainstormed ideas and then they went back to write. The next week they were all on task and quickly writing.

During the next mini-lesson I discussed adding details to the first graders' stories and ways for the fifth graders to help the first graders accomplish this.

*Fifth grader 4* -What position do you play?

*First grader 4*- I don't really have one.

*Fifth grader 4* -Okay, what positions do you like?

*First grader 4*- Goalie!

*Fifth grader 4* - Why do you like that one?

*First grader 4*- Well, I don't know.

The boys continued talking until the first grader was able to begin writing his story and adding details along the way.

## Suggestions for Trying This in Your Classroom



I really enjoyed this program. I am planning on continuing to implement it in the future. Below I make some suggestions for any teachers who might like to try something similar.

- I needed more than thirty minutes to give the students adequate time to develop his/her writing. You might try a 40-45 minute block of time.
- Since we did not have the space, we split the classes into two groups, each consisting of ten first graders and ten fifth graders. The other teacher took a group and I took a group. This made the two groups more manageable.
- You can still try this approach to study buddies if your colleague is willing to collaborate on study buddies, but not interested in working on writing. The split

groups make it easy for one teacher to do writing with the students while the other teacher can take on the more traditional approach, allowing the buddies to read with each other.

## **Conclusions**

I really enjoyed doing this study. My students were energized about writing. I found that the students that were not excited about the prospect of writing at the beginning of the program were the same ones that were sad to switch back to reading. I will continue to use this program in following years to help develop my students and support their early writing skills. They come to me with a desire and willingness to learn. I plan to support them and help them grow.

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