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Broadening Sense of Self as Writer through Pen-Art-Pal Exchanges

by S. Rebecca Leigh, Ph.D.

I write better when I know someone's going to draw my story 'cause I think about what they might see and that helps me to see my story better.

– Emilie, 4th-grade student

In this interview, Emilie (all names are pseudonyms), reminds us of the importance of having an authentic audience in writing (Calkins, 1994). In the traditional elementary classroom, the only perceived audience for children's writing is the teacher. In contrast to this tradition, 18 children in grades three and four in Canada and the United States were a genuine audience for each other's writing in this six-month qualitative study which investigated how pen pal and pen artist exchanges (hereafter PAP) support sense of self as writer. Children self-selected topics that mattered to them, wrote stories for peers of similar age, read each other's stories, visually responded to their peers' writing, and waited with bated breath in anticipation of seeing artwork that accompanied their stories. Through this exchange process, children discovered their own written and visual voices as well as how peers used language and art to express theirs.

What makes the PAP appealing to the writer is how it personalizes the writing experience. Writing with an art pal in mind makes the process of brainstorming, drafting, and revising feel more relevant because the audience is a peer, rather than the teacher, and peers, generally speaking, "get one another" (Calkins, 1994; Fletcher, 2013). Anonymity also delivers a safe space to develop personal voice, whether in writing or art-making. Comparatively, what makes the PAP appealing to the teacher is how the pal-exchange affords students the opportunity to authentically experience what teachers of writing have long taught and observed: audience matters; word choice and voice matter; so, too, does organization (of ideas) and sentence fluency (Graves, 1983).



S. Rebecca Leigh, Ph.D.



This research investigated the questions, "What happens when students visually respond to someone else's writing?" and "How does writing influence art-making/art-making influence writing?" In this article, I focus on how writing and visually responding to someone else's writing allowed elementary children to experience three visual/verbal connections: intention, invention, and interpretation. Through these literacy connections, children discover that the artist, not the writer, controls meaning-making and that the level of detail in writing can affect visual response. In addition, children discover that personal lived experiences significantly affect not simply what partners write about, but how they choose to visually respond to a piece of writing as well. These literacy connections are important because access to art, when experienced meaningfully with language, helps expand children's perceptions of writing and what it means to be a writer.

How the PAP Came About

The PAP study was inspired by an existing study (Hopkins & Kammer, 1992) in which 100 college students in graphic design courses were paired with students in writing, to understand students' perceptions about the

writing process as influenced by the artistic process. What caught my attention was how art students always made art and students in writing courses always wrote. These roles never reversed. I wanted to investigate a study in which roles were more fluid, where students with varying comfort levels with art and language, as modes of expression, could both write and make art in response to someone else's writing. Having more fluid roles widens students' abilities to describe and access their world and possibly influence "flow experiences" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996), in which "pals" become motivated to pursue directions in their writing that they could not have anticipated on their own.

I also wanted these pals to rotate so that art pals could experience different forms of writing from more than one pen pal, and where pen pals could experience different visual interpretations of their writing from more than one art pal. Finally, I wanted a study in which children could experience how the act of writing is "also an act of identity" (Kabuto, 2014, p. 24)—that is, develop a sense of self as writer as they invent, negotiate meanings, go deep with their own words and ideas (Elbow, 1998), etcetera.

Art and Writing Relationships

Art and language, as complementary forms of expression, have been well researched (daSilva, 2001; Olshansky, 2008; Ray, 2010). Studies also exist on the paired writing method or collaborative peer writing groups as a framework for effective collaboration (Hovan, 2012; Roberts & Eady, 2012; Topping, Nixon, Sutherland, & Yarrow, 2000), including how utilizing various forms of communication such as photography with writer's workshop, provides children opportunities to expand their ability to process and express understanding (Dunn & Finley, 2010; Gulla, 2015; Levine & Franzel, 2015; Wiseman, Makinen, & Kupiainen, 2016). However, few studies exist in which students are paired as writers and artists as a process for understanding the writing process—especially in the lower grades. There is also little information in regard to children's perceptions of how the visual and the verbal work in concert (Orr, Blythman, & Mullin, 2006).

What we know from paired writing research, however, is that students improve as writers when they are paired with others. Rosberg and Streff (1989), for example, paired sixth-grade students with college students in a language arts methods course. Within this setting, teacher candidates were able to implement pedagogy to support the middle school students whose writing improved in length, accuracy, and complexity. Dale and Traun (1998) also explored a cross-age mentorship but through a high school/university partnership. Juniors and seniors learned how to refine meaning from having immediate email feedback from their college partners to their chapter reflections on Fitzgerald's (1925) *The Great Gatsby*.

When collaborative writing studies include some art or visual design experience, students are more aware of the distinct process differences between the visual and the written. Sanders' (2010) research, for example, delved into the relationship between the composing processes of art and writing with fourth graders, revealing relationships and interactions that occur between the two modes, such as when children realize that the art and writing are doing opposite work or when one mode is reliant on work in the other. Substantiating Sanders' work, Hopkins and Kammer's (1992) earlier study revealed that college students became more attentive to the roles of audience, meaning-making, and perception in writing after they viewed artwork as a group and guessed which artful piece, created by someone in the group, corresponded to their writing sample. The PAP study described in this article contributes to the research on writing relationships by providing insight into children's perceptions about visual and written processes, about which little is known (Orr, et al., 2006).

Overview of the Study

This research study was implemented in a grade-three classroom in southern Ontario, Canada (the city in which I reside), and a mid-western, grade-four classroom in the United States (the city in which I work). The approximate distance between the schools is 40 miles.

The student population at both schools is predominantly Caucasian. In this study, there were two Black-Canadian children and seven European-Canadian children in Veronica's third-grade classroom and one African-American child and eight European-American children in Lillian's fourth-grade classroom. In total, there were ten girls and eight boys in the study.

Once a month for six months, nine- and ten-year-old children wrote stories of personal interest. They could choose any genre of writing (e.g., poetry, narrative, short story, song lyrics) they deemed appropriate for their topics, which ranged from pets to sports to Halloween. Similarly, art pals visually responded to writing samples using any medium—drawing, painting, collage, or found objects—they believed most effective for expressing their reactions to the stories. The teachers did not interfere with children's decision-making processes. Rather, their role involved keeping students on task and facilitating with interview scheduling. At the end of each month, writing pals were interviewed

one-on-one about their writing and their reactions to the visual response that accompanied their story. These interviews occurred down the hall whilst the teacher taught the rest of the class. During this process, I asked a variety of open-ended questions such as, "What makes composing challenging to you?" (see Figure 1 for additional questions, as well as tips for implementing PAP in your classroom) to help access their developing perceptions of art and language as communication systems. I also asked specific questions such as, "What is the main idea in your story?" and "How might we read this visual response to your story?" in an effort to understand what stood out to them. I also asked, "In what way does this response help you as a writer" and "How do you feel about how your pal captured your work?" This line of questioning helped me appreciate what they were internalizing as meaning makers. At the end of each interview, writing pals kept original artwork as a gift from their art pals while art pals received photographs of their original visual work.

- Invite students to assign words that best describe art and writing for them. For example, you might ask, "What comes to mind when you hear *art*?", or, "What word-associations come to mind when you hear *writing*?" This will help stir some student perceptions of art and language as modes of communication.
- Encourage students to delve deeply into their perceptions of art and writing by asking questions such as, "Which mode helps you to generate ideas?", and, "What makes composing challenging to you?".
- Nudge students to articulate similarities, differences, and possibilities that they see in using art and writing to develop the expression of ideas.
- Give students opportunities to assume the roles of both pen pal and art pal.
- Invite pen pals to explore genre (e.g., poetry, personal narrative, memoir) as a process for discovering voice in writing.
- Invite art pals to explore media (e.g., clip art, collage, drawing, stenciling, modelling clay) as a process for discovering voice in artistic response.
- Let students know that, when they write, they should strive for specificity in their writing, which will strengthen the writing, but also give their art pal rich material to consider.
- Remind students how important it is to carefully read someone else's writing before responding to it artistically, so as not to miss supporting or critical details and possibly literary devices, such as foreshadowing, that could affect a visual direction.
- Pair students with another class of the same grade level or across grade levels within the same school. This kind of pairing could increase the likelihood that children from various ethnic and social backgrounds have opportunities to interact with one another, giving potential rise to the exchange of differing ideas and viewpoints, including the exploration of how one's lived experiences affect personal narratives (Ahmed, 2018).

Figure 1. Envisioning a PAP for your classroom.

Whether writing or art making, children had three weeks to work in each assigned pal relationship. Children were encouraged to use their basic understanding of craft in writing to make their stories descriptive. Similarly, they used their basic knowledge of color, line, and shape to create an effective visual response to the writing. Skill in art was not a criterion for participating as an art pal. Rather, children were asked to respond to one or several ideas and/or emotions in the writing that stood out to them. There was no right way of responding. Visual responses included 2D and 3D art, ranging from crayon, marker, and pencil drawings to pop-up art. Students worked on their visual responses before class, during recess, or whenever time permitted. The classroom teachers encouraged their students to be honest in both their writing and in how they visually responded to a pal's work. While the pals never met, students often asked to know their art pal's gender, which revealed some stereotypes. Some children also noticed differences between American and British spellings (e.g., color and colour), but these differences did not hinder children's understanding of what was written. Rather, unique spellings contributed to their curiosity about one another. The PAP study worked, in part, because the classroom teachers Veronica (Grade 3) and Lillian (Grade 4) support aesthetic approaches to writing and care about their children's learning.

Mode of Inquiry

Students were blindly paired with six different pals which contributed to six unique pen pal/pen artist experiences. As pen pals, each child wrote three writing samples for three different art pals and visually responded three times to three different writing samples. Each pal-relationship lasted one month. Given their greater experience with writing, fourth-grade children wrote for the first three pairings (October, November, December), whilst children in third grade visually responded to the writings they received. For the last three months of the study (January, February, March), these pairings reversed whereby the third graders then wrote and the fourth graders now had an opportunity to visually respond to the writings that they received.

At the end of 24 weeks, each child had been interviewed three times for their reactions to three different visual responses that accompanied three of their writing samples. Interviews took place in a storage room and the school library. To capture children's immediate reactions to artwork in response to their writing, they first saw the art at the time of their interview and not before. While the parent permission form identified the two participating grade levels, children assumed, based on their responses and questions during interviews, that they were all in the same grade. They were not corrected in their assumptions which allowed them to focus on their work rather than the age and/or ability of their pals.

Writing samples were photocopied and visual responses were photographed. Interviews were videotaped, transcribed, coded, and analyzed using Kvale's (1996) meaning interpretation method where central themes are analyzed against children's writing samples and visual responses. Findings suggest that children experienced visual and verbal connections through their PAP exchanges. Specifically, they experienced intention, invention, and interpretation. In the following paragraphs, I explore these literacy connections in detail and offer suggestions for how teachers might incorporate a PAP experience in their own classrooms.

Intention

Children experience *intention* in a PAP pairing when they discover that an art pal's lived experiences influence how they perceive a story. Thus, they may visualize something other than what the writer intends. The art pal, not the writer, controls meaning-making.

Intention can be seen in a fifth PAP pairing between Allysa, Grade 3, and Austin, Grade 4, in which he draws a goldfish in response to her story titled, *My Pet Fish*. In this story, Allysa writes an expository paragraph about how her first pet, Bubbles, swims, sleeps, and performs tricks like sinking to the bottom of the bowl. Austin's visual response to this writing focuses exclusively on the fish (Figure 2). Using pencil, crayon, and cut paper, he pastes a profile cutout of a large orange

fish surrounded by vibrant blue crayon in an oversized fish bowl. Proportionately, the fish is too big for the bowl and the bowl is too big for the table on which it stands. The close-up, centered drawing of the fish is also an example of a zoom hook (Leigh, 2012), a common content decision that illustrators make to magnify an idea, emotion, or detail.

not part of his lived experience. Therefore, it makes sense that he does not focus on the detail about puffing up, a trademark of Betta. Instead, he focuses his attention away from surface details in the writing and visually responds to the theme of love and friendship by using what he knows about shape and space to capture his perception of the significance of Bubbles to his

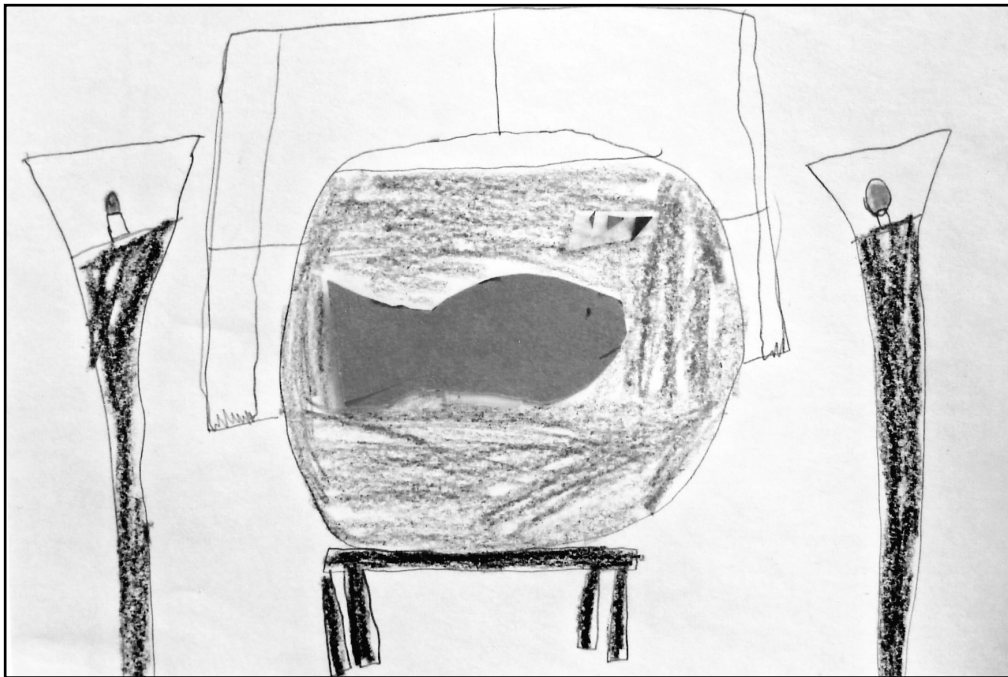


Figure 2. Austin's visual response.

When Allysa first sees her art pal's work, she is noticeably disappointed as evidenced by her tone of voice. "A goldfish," she quickly corrects, "is not the same as a Betta fish." Having had a Betta myself, I have to nod in agreement. "First of all," she continues, "they don't puff up" which leads to a brief discussion about how her art pal could have missed this detail in her writing. Though she does not identify in her writing what kind of fish Bubbles is, the line "she puffs up when she gets mad," according to Allysa lets the art pal know. Nevertheless, she concedes that "if you never saw a Betta fish before you'd draw that," pointing with her finger to the goldfish picture.

It is true, as I come to learn from our interview, that Austin has never seen a Betta fish. This type of fish is

writing pal. In a separate interview, I invite Austin to talk about this content decision, and he explains that he "made the fish big on purpose because I thought they were friends, like really good friends." In short, Austin experiences flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996); it is clear from our discussion that the issue of proportion is, in fact, meaningful as reflected in his statement, "He's big because I wanted to show that friendship." He controls meaning making by using what he knows about basic art elements and principles of design to visually communicate importance. As such, the close-up cutout of Bubbles, while at first a disappointment to Allysa, signifies a demonstration of transmediation (Siegel, 2006) in which Austin moves beyond a fixed meaning (i.e., the orange cutout represents Bubbles) and creates, instead, meaning that is open and abstract (i.e., the

size of the orange cutout communicates a degree of friendship). In so doing, Austin experiences what Eisner (2002) has long maintained about the potential of the arts, that visual ideas can be sophisticated and complex. Art making is very much a “language system that communicates important messages and demonstrates learning” (Albers, Dooley, Flint, Holbrook, & May, 2012, p. 163).

Through this PAP pairing, Allysa also comes away with a better understanding of audience (Calkins, 1994; Hopkins & Kammer, 1992), and what Katherine Paterson (1981) meant by letting go of the work after it is done:

Once a book is published, it no longer belongs to me. My creative task is done. The work now belongs to the creative mind of my readers. I had my turn to make of it what I would, now it is their turn. I have no more right to tell my readers how they should respond to what I have written than they had to tell me how to write it. (p. 34)

Intention shows students how personal lived experiences affect the lens through which one reads and responds to a story. What the writer intends may not always be transparent to the artist. Therefore, visual responses are neither correct nor incorrect; they are simply personal. Intention, thus, challenges the pen pal to let go of his story as much as the art pal must let go of the desire to please the writer and focus, instead, on the authenticity of his reaction and visual response to a story.

Invention

Children experience invention in a PAP pairing when they discover how the art pal creates or invents ideas/images where the writing lacks detail or the detail appears insignificant to them. Unlike intention, where the art pal does not have the background knowledge to pick up on a particular idea from the writing and therefore may visually intend something other than what the pen pal has written, the art pal who invents has background knowledge about what he is reading, but invents his own visual ideas because

the descriptive quality of the writing is thin and therefore allows him to create something anew.

Invention can be seen in a fourth PAP pairing between Caleb, Grade 3, and Gabbi, Grade 4, in which Gabbi draws people sitting around a table in response to a personal narrative titled, *Thanksgiving* (Figure 3). In this story, Caleb writes about fall, jumping in a leaf pile, and his grandmother’s cooking. The writing is not descriptive (i.e., “I make a leaf pile. I jump in the leaf pile”); sentences tell rather than show the importance of his grandmother’s cooking to him or the joy that comes from jumping in leaves in autumn. His art pal, Gabbi, draws two scenes in response to this story: three stick figures sitting around a pink, oval table with plates of food; and a stick figure girl in a triangle shaped skirt standing beside a leaf pile.



Figure 3. Gabbi's visual response.

When Caleb first sees his art pal's work, he shares what he likes (e.g., "I like the leaf pile. I like the colours. I like the leaves scattered.") and what he is unsure of ("Why is there a girl? Um, why is the table pink? I never said that."). Rather than reread his narrative to see what his art pal had to work with, he concludes from the decision to color the table pink that his art pal "must be a girl." I direct his attention, instead, to his writing, and we talk about which part(s) of the story stand out to him and how he could have developed these ideas. In response to the question, "What is good writing to you?" Caleb explains that details in writing matter and, taking a reflective pause, admits that the pink detail is not really "that [emphasis his] important." What is important, Caleb continues to explain, is how the pink table nudges him to think about the details about his grandmother that he forgot to mention. "This picture makes me think of what I could have said, like maybe describe my grandma's stuffing, and, like, how I feel when I go outside with her food in my stomach. Her food makes me happy."

As Caleb describes specific aspects about his grandmother's cooking, I am reminded of the art of specificity in writing (Fletcher, 2013), and how small details, like, "the taste of her Thanksgiving gravy," can evoke big ideas or emotion. I share this example of craft in writing with Caleb, and quickly the conversation becomes more focused on the kinds of food she makes (e.g., buttery rolls, scalloped potatoes) and which words to use (e.g., fluffy, creamy) to best describe them. From this discussion, Caleb begins to nod more in agreement at how the art pal is left to invent visual details, out of necessity, where written details are few or missing. Attending to details helps shape the kind of writer we want to become (Kabuto, 2014). In addition, invented visual details are not necessarily signs that something is wrong with the writing, but they do invite reflection and discussion about written expression. Put another way, "Pictures are like windows. They affect (my) writing," says classmate Emilie.

Invention shows children the importance of developing ideas in writing and rereading for clarity. Details that do not enhance meaning or improve the descriptive

quality of the writing may appear insignificant to the art pal. Invention, therefore, challenges the pen pal to think about how to use detail to develop ideas and/or emotions effectively. Sometimes, it is difficult to read one's work with objectivity. The art pal makes this process more transparent for the writer.

Interpretation

Children experience *interpretation* in a PAP pairing when they discover that their perceptions of writing broaden when art is experienced as a meaningful and respected mode of expression in the writing process.

In PAP, children experience art as a social practice. Art pals share their ideas about how to construct visual messages through their use of line and space, color and shape, etcetera. From teacher observations in this study, we know that students exchange "What if..." reflections with each other about how to construct a visual idea (e.g., "What if I crease the page like this?") and offer suggestions on how to make particular ideas realistic, eye-catching, or unique. Art pals also talk about how written ideas inform visual ones and help each other resolve issues such as figuring out how to visually respond to a story in which multiple ideas are present.

In the first of three interviews, many children describe writing as "hard" because they struggle with "how to start" or where to get "good ideas." There is a general sense that good writers are "born that way" rather than taught and shown how to write effectively. Writing is viewed, therefore, as a closed sign system. By contrast, children describe art as "fun" or "cool" because "you can do what you want." By the third interview, when students have experienced at least two PAP pairings, it is clear that the open potential of visually responding to someone's writing has some positive effect on their identity as writer and what it means to write. Children are clearer in how they respond to specific questions about art and language. The questions, "What are you noticing about yourself as a writer and/or artist from this partnership study?" or "What is good writing to you? What is good art to you?" raise the expectation that noticing something, whether in oneself (e.g., the

decision to use particular words; the practice of using pop-up art to create dimension) or in someone else's work (e.g., how a writer uses words; how an artist uses space) matters. In particular, children are clear about how being an art pal contributes to their thinking about themselves as writers.

Third-grader Matthew says, "I'm noticing that when I make art, writing doesn't seem so boring. It's actually fun because my mind fills up with ideas that I can use later." Put another way, Matthew discovers the expressive possibilities in making art and sees their potential in motivating his thinking about what to write. Abigail in his class also discovers the generative potential of art. "I'm learning that I can use details from pictures to write a better story, like with vivid words." Vivid or "silver dollar" words (Olshansky, 2008, p. 224) are important in writing because well-chosen ones draw in readers and when we attend to language at the sentence level, we are developing our identities as writers (Fletcher, 2013). "Finding words wasn't as hard this year," explains fourth-grader Jacob, "I liked drawing because it helped me to pick words I liked."

When art is a respected mode of communication, young writers notice. Third-grader Gwynn explains, "We didn't just make pretty pictures. I like that we talked about how to make a good picture." Gwynn also notices, "When I write a story now, I think about the picture I'm making in my mind. I mean, I use it to help me with my story." For Gwynn and her classmates, paying thoughtful attention to how something is visually represented on the page impacts the mental images one creates as one writes. Viewed this way, access to art broadens perceptions of writing as something that can be more fluid, open, and creative. Access to art also broadens the relationship of multimodal experiences which informs children's identities as young writers (Leander & Boldt, 2013).

Interpretation shows children how access to art positively impacts their perception about writing and what it means to be a writer. The synergistic relationship between art and language allows children to experience the open potential of language through art.

Closing Thoughts

It is commonly accepted that society is becoming more and more visually aware. Still, traditional K-12 classrooms, with their heavy emphasis on language and treatment of language as a closed sign system, have been slow to accept other modes of knowing, like art, as effective pathways to literacy learning (Kuby & Gutshall, 2015). A resistance to accept broader definitions and practices of literacy is problematic for all children, particularly for young writers who do not fit inside the verbocentric box.

The core underpinnings of literacy pairings embrace a multimodal approach to learning (Berghoff, Egawa, & Harste, 2000), an integrated approach that Dewey (1938) and Gardner (1993) long argued provides children multiple access points in their learning. As such, a PAP pairing recognizes that visual and linguistic literacy each have their own potential to communicate particular ideas (Harste, Short, & Burke, 1988). Additionally, PAP pairings invite children to take ownership of their meaning-making. Rather than be told what to write and how to write it, pals must decide which ideas are worth pursuing and select a genre best suited to share them. This, too, is an act of writer-identity (Fletcher, 2013). In making meaning visually, pals must draw on what they know about basic art elements, such as dot and line, to effectively communicate their response to any given story. PAPs, then, provide a structure for learning to think. If children are not given such opportunities to choose which topics to explore or colors to invent, others will make these decisions for them, threatening the development of their voices as a writers and artists. Finally, PAPs position children as both meaning-makers and audience members. As such, children experience two different points of view: how to express meaning as well as how to read someone else's meaning and/or what meaning they might bring to a text. Having more than one role helps expand children's perspectives on the world. Further, having a peer-audience, rather than solely a teacher audience, provides a context for mutual inspiration as meaning makers (Calkins, 1994).

Overall, the children in this study enjoyed writing for an invisible, but real, audience. Specifically, they

enjoyed the experience of sending their work into the unknown and receiving visual feedback from their peers about their stories. The PAP experience helped children to think about how individual lived experiences affect meaning-making. As such, the art pal may not connect with aspects of a story that the pen pal feels are relevant, and therefore may visualize something other than what the pen pal had intended or anticipated. In addition, pairing the children encouraged them to think about the importance of detail in writing. For some, the disappointment of receiving a piece of art that did not quite capture the heart of their story spurred thinking about being more specific in their next writing piece and using language to develop particular ideas and/or emotions. The PAP experience promoted reflection as children self-assessed their work. Each visual response, therefore, positioned children to think about what they wrote as well as how they may approach future stories. Finally, and perhaps more notably, the PAP experience provided children with an enjoyable structure in which they could experience language outside of the verbo-centric box as an open and flexible sign system through which they could make meaning in ways that made sense to them.

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