

Exchanging handwritten letters strengthens children's literacy skills and family ties, new UTA study finds

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One child's letter to her grandmother who lived several hundred miles away and who had apparently taken too long to send mail, asking "Why Downt You Riyt Back to Me?"

Young children who write letters back and forth to extended family members improve their literacy skills. They also develop a stronger connection with distant relatives, a University of Texas at Arlington study finds.

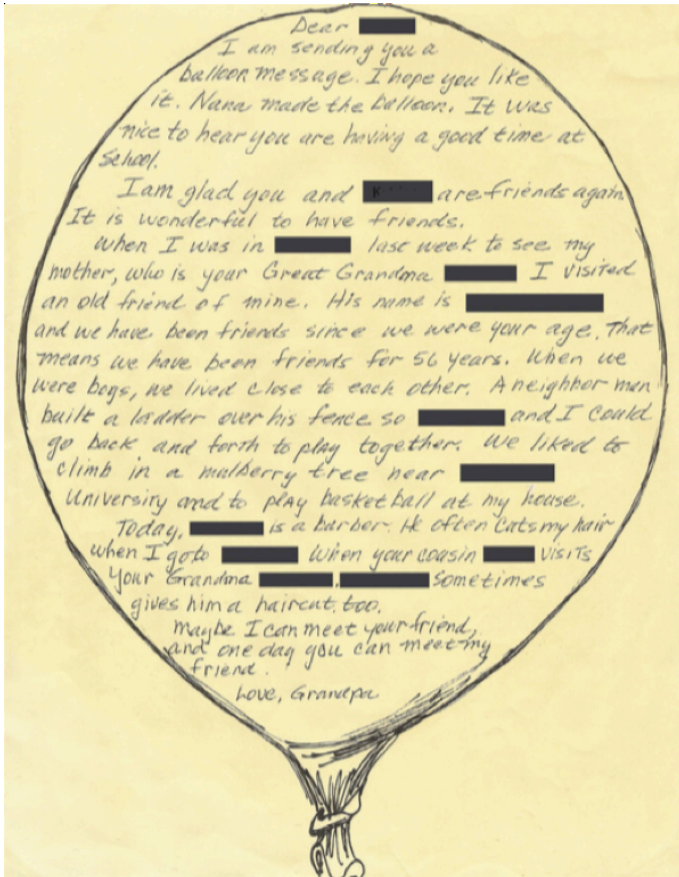
Kathryn Pole, an assistant professor in the UTA College of Education's Department of Curriculum and Instruction, followed 22 kindergarten students at a public school for one school year. She wanted to track their progress when they wrote and exchanged letters with relatives such as a grandparent, aunt or other extended [family](#) member.

The study, called "Why Downt You Riyt Back to Me?" appears in *The Reading Teacher*, a journal of the International Literacy Association.

When Pole's group first started the year, the 5- and 6-year-olds rarely moved past predictable statements, such as "I like..." or "I saw..." followed by a word or two.

By the third round of letters, the 13 girls and 9 boys were planning what they were going to write in their next letters. The kindergarteners also had plans for other writing, because now, they considered themselves to be writers. By the end of the year, the students' letters were longer, contained more than one idea and provided a context for family history.

When new correspondence arrived, and with the adults' permission, the children had the choice of letting Pole read the letter aloud to the class; having it read to the child; or not having it read aloud at all. On every occasion, children chose to have the letters read aloud to the entire class.



One child's grandfather wrote a response about his best childhood friend. Credit: K. Pole

"Both my students and their family members learned exciting things about one another that are not part of school curriculum, but are worthwhile and supportive of learning," said Pole, who began her research as a teacher and parent because she believed that she could better support emergent writers through a correspondence project.

The idea also sprang from Pole's desire to preserve family history that may otherwise be lost.

"My mom's lasagna was part of every family gathering, whether to welcome a newborn baby or returning soldier," Pole said. "I noticed its absence during my mom's funeral. No one knew how to make it and I never asked her to write it down. I began to think of how such practices might be used to teach better writing, reading and communication skills and to maintain [family history](#)."

State Rep. Helen Giddings, D-DeSoto, a UTA alumna, has called education her highest priority in the Legislature. She said Pole's study is important because of its emphasis on early childhood education.

"Research like this is invaluable as it takes into consideration the very people who help to shape a 5 or 6-year-old child's early academic and life lessons – school educators and family members," said Rep. Giddings. "Learning to read and write at such a young level is vital to the long-term education outcomes for our state and nation. These lessons also provide unique experiences for the teachers themselves."

Jeanne Gerlach, dean of the UTA College of Education, called Pole's work a tremendous resource aligned with the University's Strategic Plan 2020: Bold Solutions | Global Impact. The plan sets a path to unprecedented University excellence in research, teaching and community engagement.

Dr. Pole has examined the ways in which family letter writing can be used to support early literacy, and demonstrates the impact of teacher action research," Gerlach said. "This type of advocacy is inspiring students to become better readers, writers and communicators. It's also motivating current and future teachers to connect with students utilizing meaningful and creative pedagogies."

The unidentified school in Pole's study is located in a small, southwestern U.S. city. The school served about 600 students from pre-K through fifth grade and received Title 1 funding. About 45 percent of the students are classified as economically disadvantaged and the school was recognized by the state as having exemplary student achievement ratings.

For the study, the kindergarten students and their extended [family members](#) lived far enough away that they didn't visit often and were able to correspond for a school year.

Adult participants committed 3 to 10 hours writing their letters, but they had the option to commit as much or as little time as they wished. They were asked to use natural language to tell family stories

in their letters. The kindergarten students did most of their writing in class as it was woven into assignments and class activities

"I chose to use a paper-based form of writing rather than e-mail because at the start, some of the children were still drawing images as placeholders for words, and because their pictures sometimes carried more meaning than the words they could write," Pole said. "We looked for opportunities to write. On a day when the cafeteria served especially delicious cookies, we wrote a class letter thanking the cooks. We were always writing."

Pole said her study demonstrates that when children have an audience and purpose for writing their writing improves, their ability and motivation to spell and write legibly improves and that family letter writing helps develop stronger family bonds. Pole is planning follow-up studies to see if the correspondence project is replicable in different sites and contexts.

Provided by University of Texas at Arlington

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