

Pen and paper: A simple formula for enhancing wellbeing

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with

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Sitting in her classroom, Lynn wonders whether her pen pal, Jean, has received and read her letter. Several kilometres away, sitting in her armchair, Jean's eyes light up as she reads the questions that Lynn has carefully written. She takes up a pen and begins to write. Theirs is a mutually beneficial relationship established through pen and paper, with the help of an envelope and an enthusiastic teacher who acted as a courier.

Students from Toronto Adventist School set the goal of writing one letter a week to residents at Avondale Residential Aged Care, Cooranbong. Students were excited to receive their response letters each week and readily wrote replies, asking a host of questions of their writing 'buddies'. The letters were a candid representation of stories from the past and present, and it became apparent that the weekly replies touched the students' lives.

This English project evolved to also be a wellbeing project for both the students and elderly residents. Dr Darren Morton, a world-leading educator in lifestyle medicine, offers insights as to why this project enhances the wellbeing of those involved. Social connectedness, Morton (2018) asserts, is vital to a sense of wellbeing. In this project, the connection was through letter-writing, instilling a sense of self-worth in the receivers as they perceived themselves as reciprocal recipients of care.

Morton also claims, service is a crucial

strategy in the wellbeing stakes. "Something deep within us seems to embrace the paradox that, through giving, we receive" (p.151). Giving to others through their letter writing, also lifted the spirits of the residents and students involved. Teacher, Andrea Thompson, who organised the project, believes in the value of connection. Through helping her students read some of the beautifully penned cursive letters written to her students, Thompson also developed her own unique relationship with the pen pals. "It was a wonderful moment to finally meet them. I felt like I already knew them from the delightful responses they had shared with my students through their written word."

At the end of the school term, the students visited the aged care facility to meet their pen pals. Music teacher, Janel Tasker, and children from the younger grades supported the senior students in a musical concert and sing-a-long. The items chosen were a direct outcome of the letter-writing project. The students had asked the residents via their letters what their favourite Christmas carols were. They then collated the results, practised these songs during music classes, and researched interesting information about them to present at the afternoon tea and concert. This integration of subject areas gave additional purpose to their learning as children looked forward to sharing this information with their pen pals and others who came to enjoy the program. Having a purpose for learning is another wellbeing strategy (Morton, 2018) that was built into this project.

Although the musical part of the program was very well received, it was the interaction between the pen pals, both elderly and young, that highlighted the success of the program. It was a special moment when the pen pals met face to face for the first time.

Jean, the pen pal of Year 4 student Lynn, shared her perspective of the meeting. "It was just a happy experience. It brought a tear to my eye. The children were so delightful. I was very impressed with how they spoke. The whole thing was most successful." Resident Yvonne added similar sentiments. Pen pal to Grady, Year 3, Yvonne thought the pen pal program between

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the school and nursing home was “thrilling.” She comments, “I said to Grady, I look forward to my envelope and he said he looks forward to his envelope. What an absolute thrill it has been to see these young people relating to us so well.” Year 5 student Riley, pen pal with Joan, shared that his highlight from the visit was seeing Joan’s face after “all that writing” he had sent her. Jack, also in Year 5, could not wait to meet his pen pal and had repeatedly asked his teacher if he could meet her earlier.

Lindl Webster, Lifestyle Manager at Avondale Care commented on the program. “The benefits are quite clear. Some of the residents have been so enthralled that they have written multiple letters in one week. They have shown them to their families, and the letters have become a talking point. It’s anticipation, something to look forward to. The children bring a different vibe to the place.” Morton also ranks anticipation as critical to wellbeing and believes that “the excitement of looking forward to something can be all it takes to pick us up when we are feeling down (2018, p. 93). In this case, both the elderly and the youthful pen pals had something to eagerly anticipate.

Teacher, Andrea Thompson remarked, “The whole experience was a win-win, and one I will definitely be replicating in the new school year. The majority of the elderly residents are keen to keep writing, so I want to foster this connection. Apart from the obvious curriculum benefits, students gain so much more from this kind of relationship. The letters have been a very popular part of the school week. I cannot say enough good things about the advantages for both my students and their pen pals.”

This pen pal project not only supported the curriculum but enhanced wellbeing through reciprocal relationships, characterised by social connection, service and learning with purpose. It allowed the students to enact their values by showing a genuine interest in others with everyone emerging as winners! [TEACH](#)

References

Morton, D. (2018). *Live more happy: Scientifically proven ways to lift your mood and your life*. Signs Publishing Company.

Author information

Andrea Thompson is a teacher of pre-kindy, and years 3-6, with a particular interest in ensuring students are engaged in their learning, notably using digital

technologies to establish 21st century literacies. Thinking creatively, she strives to make learning fun, relevant and meaningful, and recently she has enjoyed sharing her expertise with teacher education students.

Beverly Christian is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Education at Avondale University College in New South Wales Australia. Her specialty area is classroom pedagogy and professional development. Her research interests include school culture and ethos, pedagogical approaches to learning and the role of nature in well-being.

Editor’s Note

‘Live More Happy’ is available through Amazon Australia.

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Leslie Reedman chats with pen pal Rain Darby (Yr 4).



Stephen Tasker (Yr 5) waiting to meet his pen pal Elva