

Writing their way to understanding

3rd-graders show progress in essays but still fall short of goals

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Two years ago, *The Arizona Republic* began chronicling the efforts of a group of children as they began to learn to read.

Many of the children at Creighton Elementary School started first grade without even knowing the alphabet.

Now, midway through third grade, essays written by the 8- and 9-year-olds reflect not only how far they have progressed but also convey insight about their lives and hopes for the future.

Still, most of the third-graders are about a year behind where they should be in both reading and writing. Their struggles mirror those of children across Arizona, where 24 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in reading, compared with 31 percent nationally.

For all children, reading and writing are natural partners for literacy, says Maryann DiRobbio, a literacy specialist at Creighton. That is why so many teachers teach the two subjects together, having children write about what they read and read aloud what they have written.

What children learn from writing - how to write topic sentences, think logically, convey meaning or a main idea, and create images - helps them become better readers, DiRobbio says. The best readers typically are the best writers.

Good writers will write something, reread what they have written, question it as to clarity and purpose, and edit accordingly, DiRobbio says. As children learn to do that in their writing, they tackle text differently, reading more closely for the main ideas and noting descriptive details.

What children write is revealing in itself. Their word choice, sentence structure and ideas not only indicate how well they are learning to read but also how they comprehend the world around them and the kind of people they are growing up to be.

All children take great risks when they write, DiRobbio says. They are experimenting with words and how they fit together. Even if they aren't spelling all the words correctly, they have the proper sounds represented, with a "c" instead of a "k" or missing vowels.

It's brave, especially when they are struggling to learn to read and at an age when what people think of them really matters. Their strengths and weaknesses are evident when they put pencil to paper where anyone can see it.

In their writing, you will see that their hopes for the future do not stretch much farther than the boundaries of their neighborhoods or of what they already know, though one girl plans to live in Paris.

Nine-year-old Irvin Moreno, the boy the other kids call "the smart one," wants to work at a carwash, just like his dad. But his father, Fermin Moreno, has other plans for his son. He wants him to go to college and become a lawyer.

Irvin's teacher, Jessica Barrios, wants to take him and his classmates on a tour of Arizona State University, where she went to college. Her students have seen the campus only from the bus window during a field trip to a theater in Tempe.

"We have to give them bigger dreams," says their principal, Rosemary Agneessens.

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