

# When Third-Grade Writers Do Case Studies

by

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When I responded to a cry for help last year from a bilingual first-grade teacher at my school who wanted to organize a writing workshop in her class, I could not have predicted where this would lead. I volunteered my bilingual third graders as helpers to my colleague because she was understandably nervous at the thought of being alone with 33 non-writers let loose to choose their own topics.

Before my students invaded the first-grade classroom, however, I realized that there were some issues that I needed to take up with them. I believed that if my students were to work successfully with these younger children, they would need to understand some things about writing and spelling development. I drew my students into a discussion of Richard Gentry's developmental stages of spelling, describing

but not labeling the stages. I wanted my students to understand that writing and spelling evolve naturally in much the same way as walking and talking. Many of my students had younger siblings or relatives who they had watched crawl, toddle, and then walk. I wanted my students to realize that young children go through a similar development as scribbles eventually become letters, words and pictures.

I also faced another problem. What would my students, many of them emergent writers themselves, teach these first graders? I helped my students answer this question by asking them to look back at stories they had written. How had they developed as writers? What could they do in their later stories that they were unable to do in their earlier ones? Edgar, one of my most limited writers, recognized that he had

learned how to sound out letters and write at least one vowel for each word he attempted to write. Victor, another emergent writer, noticed that he had learned to separate words, and Zaina discovered that in her writing she used to confuse "d" and "b." By examining their own learning, my students were beginning to get a sense of how others learn and what could be taught.



When my third graders finally met the first graders, they were eager to encourage their assigned students to write. The interaction in the first-grade classroom was surprisingly calm in spite of almost sixty children in one room. The third graders squeezed in between small desks and chairs to be at eye level with their young tutees. They coached the little ones by showing them how to sound out letters and do invented spellings. The third graders smiled and nodded as many first graders shared "stories" consisting of strings of random letters, numbers and squiggly lines. I watched my students imitate my own behavior as they nudged the more reluctant students to at least put marks on their papers.

At this point, a natural alliance formed between the two classes, but I wanted my students to be more than peer tutors. I wanted them to be keen observers of first-grade writers and to think about what they were learning while helping younger children. When my

students returned to our classroom after these mentoring sessions, they would record and reflect on what happened. My third graders became teacher researchers.

Looking back at my students' notes a year after this experience, I found that these novice teacher researchers had faced the same kind of problems and made the same kind of discoveries as their adult counterparts.

Like adults, the young researchers were sometimes dismayed by how little their students knew. "Yo aprendi que los ninos de primer grado no saben escribir muy bien" (I learned that first graders don't write very well), said Daniel, a very logical third grader. I responded with a plea for understanding. "Son muy juvenes!" (They're very young!). And while it may have taken these third graders awhile to adjust to these beginning writers, they also came to realize that their students made more progress when they were encouraged rather than criticized.

Irma wrote, "[I did] not say anything mean because that would have made the first grader feel bad." The mentors came to appreciate small steps: "Ya está mejorando poco a poco" (He is improving little by little).

Like adult researchers, the third graders learned to stay on the lookout for what confused them. Why was it, for instance, that a boy named Doroteo consistently wrote his name as ADAlotc? Also, like their mature counterparts, the students came to expect surprises. A story that made no sense at all when the first grader wrote it became perfectly clear later when the child "read" it.

These young mentors came to understand that each learner is different. Salvador discovered that although he enjoyed the picture and words a little boy had done about "un cuento del cuete con estrellas y la luna" (a

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story of a rocket with stars and the moon), the boy would not share his story with anyone else because "tenia verguenza" (he was embarrassed). Salvador recognized the strengths of his first grade mentee and wrote about the little boy's ability to "make good letters." He urged Salvador to share "su oracion" (his sentence) and this time the boy was willing to do so.

And finally, I noticed as I reviewed my students' field notes that the greatest pleasure these third graders took away from their experience was the same satisfaction that has made teaching a rewarding occupation for countless others: the joy in watching another person grow. Even though the third graders spent a limited time in the first grade classroom, the younger students' progress was sometimes very rapid. At one

point Irma notes, "Los ninos supieron más que el lunes porque les dimos mucha ayuda el lunes y aller..." (The children knew more than Monday and yesterday because we gave them a lot of help). Whatever sense of accomplishment and understanding these young teachers felt as a result of their work could only have been enhanced in their roles as teacher researchers.

*Editors' Note: We do not correct student spellings in English or in Spanish.*

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## Reference

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