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Write on

By Hudson Sangree -- Bee Staff Writer

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A day after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, the second-graders in Dawn Imamoto's classroom at Bryte Elementary School began asking her troubling questions.

Would the terrorists attack here? Why were planes crashing into buildings over and over?

Imamoto realized her students didn't understand they were watching replays of the jet crashes on television, or that the attacks had occurred thousands of miles away.

"I thought, what am I going to do?" she said. "These kids are scared."

To help ease her students' fears, Imamoto asked them to write about and illustrate examples of bravery. The results - vivid drawings and penciled captions signed with just the youngsters' first names - were published last year by McGraw-Hill as a book titled "Some People Are Brave."

"The children who lost their mommies and daddies are brave," wrote Mark, who drew a picture of a jet impaling a tower.

"The firemen who told the people to get out of the building are brave," wrote Sarah, showing a fireman standing in a burning building.

Imamoto, 34, received her teaching credential from the University of California, Davis, and has spent her entire 11 years as a teacher at Bryte. Four out of five children at the West Sacramento school are from low-income families, and many speak Russian or Spanish at home.

She thrives on the challenge and has no plans to leave. "I think it's because I know the kids need me," she said.

Along the way, she has become one of the state's most highly acclaimed writing teachers, winning California Teacher of the Year honors in 2004 and training other teachers how to teach writing.

In a typical class of 20 second-graders, three out of four students come to Imamoto reading below grade level, some on par with kindergartners.

Imamoto cited a study showing that children who aren't reading at their grade level by third grade have less chance of finishing high school.

"It's a real passion with me to get the kids reading at their grade level," she said. "I want all of my kids to succeed. There's no failing in this class."

Imamoto said she was a poor student in college and that helps her understand her students.

"I'm a very selective learner," she said. "If I don't like it, I won't do it."

Imamoto said she disliked being talked at by teachers for hours and refuses to do the same thing to her students. Instead, she finds activities that are engaging and instructive.

In the blue-and-white school, older but spotless, Imamoto's classroom is brightly decorated with posters encouraging good writing. The teacher, a petite woman with a lilting Hawaiian accent, is energetic and upbeat but insists that her students pay attention and obey her.

In a letter-writing class Thursday, Imamoto used a colorful drawing of a man with a green head, blue body and red feet to represent the opening, body and closing sections of a letter.

The visual cues helped the children understand. Such a simple device - Imamoto's creation - not only works with students but has inspired other teachers.

Imamoto next had the children write their own letters to characters from stories they had read.

She suggested a variety of closings, including standards such as "Yours Truly" and "Sincerely" but also "Aloha," reflecting her native Hawaii.

"Dear Pig 1, Pig 2, Pig 3," wrote Philip Savenko, 7, whose parents are Russian immigrants. "I hope you had a great party. I think the wolf doesn't chase you anymore."

The students are constantly writing and seeing their work in print.

Each month, Imamoto publishes a newsletter that features student work. Letters, poems and stories are collected in "News From Room 10."

On field trips she takes photographs, and the children write captions. Then she puts them all together in a laminated book.

As a way of keeping everyone informed of their progress, the students correspond with their parents and Imamoto in colorful letter journals - another of the teacher's innovations.

"By the time they exit second grade they feel like writers," she said.

In addition to her full-time job, Imamoto works with the California Writing Project, a nonprofit group that trains teachers how to teach writing.

In California, teacher training is woefully lacking in writing-instruction courses, said Jayne Marlink, director of the Berkeley-based organization.

"There's a huge gap to fill," she said. "Even for English majors, there's still not a required course in the teaching of writing."

Expert teachers such as Imamoto help fill the gap by passing on their skills in workshops.

"Dawn is brilliant," said Marlink. "She's one of the most intuitive teachers I've ever seen work with students, and she's really skilled in showing teachers what works with elementary school children."

In a workshop last week in Roseville, Imamoto put nine kindergarten and first-grade teachers through the paces of a writing class, as if they were students.

In one exercise, the teachers learned to use punctuation and capital letters by bending their bodies like question marks, clapping their hands for periods, and holding their arms up for capitals. The exercise makes the lesson fun and brings to life a subject young children find difficult.

"She gives you stuff you can really use in the classroom," said Karli Lewis, a Roseville kindergarten teacher. "She gets you to get up and do it like the kids."

Imamoto also read a book to the teachers about two young girls who live with their mother during the week and their father on weekends. The book, "Charlie Anderson" by Barbara Abercrombie, always strikes a cord in her classroom, Imamoto told the teachers.

"Every year I have kids who sleep at mom's house part of the week and dad's house the other part," she said.

When Imamoto teaches, she always tries to consider her students' backgrounds. Some have chaotic home lives that make the orderly and positive environment of her classroom all the more important.

For some students, it is the first time they learn what it feels like to set goals and succeed.

"If they come into my classroom, I intend to change their lives," Imamoto said. "Some of them come from families where everything is negative. This school is their positive."

About the writer:

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