Student-teacher conferences

Karen K. Johnson

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Abstract
The purpose of this study is to investigate the rationale for implementing student-teacher conferencing in a language arts program as one means of promoting the teacher as a child-advocate. It will review the many functions of conferences including assessing literacy, nurturing self-esteem, promoting positive attitudes toward language arts, and individualizing instruction and will consider ways to implement student-teacher conferences as part of the instructional program.
Student-Teacher Conferences

A Graduate Project
Submitted to the
Department of Curriculum and Instruction
In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in Education
UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by
Karen K. Johnson
May 1992
This Research Paper by: Karen K. Johnson
Entitled: Student-Teacher Conferences

has been approved as meeting the research paper requirement for the Degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Jeanne McLain Harms
Date Approved: 5/8/92
Director of Research Paper

Jeanne McLain Harms
Date Approved: 5/8/92
Graduate Faculty Adviser

Ned Ratekin
Date Approved: 5/10/92
Graduate Faculty Reader

Peggy Ishler
Date Approved: 6/10/92
Head, Department of Curriculum and Instruction
Traditionally language arts instruction in the elementary school has been teacher-centered, with teachers cast as the children's adversaries. With the trend toward extending the whole language concept throughout the instructional program, classrooms increasingly are child-centered, with teachers interacting continuously with students to learn their needs. In this type of learning environment, teachers become children's advocates.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to investigate the rationale for implementing student-teacher conferencing in a language arts program as one means of promoting the teacher as a child-advocate. It will review the many functions of conferences including assessing literacy, nurturing self-esteem, promoting positive attitudes toward language arts, and individualizing instruction and will consider ways to implement student-teacher conferences as part of the instructional program.

Rationale for Student-Teacher Conferences

Assessment of Literacy

Student-teacher conferences can serve several functions in facilitating children's emerging literacy. Yetta Goodman (1989) relates that evaluation is a continuous process, for teachers are constantly making judgments as their students engage in the
language process. During a school day, a teacher is constantly assessing: Which students are getting the point of the lesson? Who is having trouble with a concept? Who already knows the material and needs something more challenging?

Teachers are frequently led to believe that these observations are subjective and of little value when it comes to student assessment, for they are not formal measures. In contrast, informal assessment gives valuable information to teachers concerning the progress of their students. It can be used to develop instruction and to report to parents and administrators. Teachers need to know if a child is progressing, the parents need to know of their child's progress, and the administrators need to know that their school is providing an adequate education for its students (Valencia & Pearson, 1987).

Johnston (1987) points out that all too commonly the process through which children's literacy development is examined and recorded is dominated by tests, characterized by multiple choice, product-oriented, group-administered, and norm-referenced. These objective measures of assessment do not measure the important aspects of language. Processes cannot be assessed with group tests. For example, the critical concepts about print, phonemic segmentation, prediction, monitoring, and self-correction cannot be assessed with a group test. The
logical way to test these concepts is to confer with each child individually to find out how they are involved in the language process.

To assess students' growth, Ridley (1990) relates that teachers can use evaluation instruments such as conferences, anecdotal records and samples of students' work from an ongoing portfolio. The portfolio can also contain records from previous conferences with the student, checklists, and simplified reading miscue inventories. It offers many meaningful insights into the child's emerging literacy. The records from these informal assessment techniques help the teacher to plan more effectively the ongoing instructional program. The information concerning the child's approach to learning and the growth that is taking place can be shared with parents and administrators.

Current assessment practices involve rather awkward relationships between teacher and student that produce restricted language activity (Johnston, 1987). This restrictive setting is in contrast to what both Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) see as a need for a sense of community in a classroom, where students work with other students and teachers work with students individually or in small groups for the benefit of all. Graves (1983) stresses the need for a teacher to be a child's advocate, not their adversary.
Standardized testing places the teacher in a position that is adversarial. During standardized testing, the students know they are being judged, and some students' learning will be found to be inadequate. During an individual student-teacher conference that is child-centered, the child is not expected to do anything special. The teacher simply asks the student to explain what they are doing. The teacher assumes a non-threatening posture, by sitting down beside the student to visit with him/her. By projecting a caring and curious attitude, the teacher helps the student feel comfortable discussing his/her learning. The teacher is then able to assess the child's progress in a non-threatening atmosphere (Graves, 1983).

Valencia (1990) observes that as teachers interact with students, they can evaluate the way in which the students construct meaning. There are no students who do not "pass the test," there are only students who are in different stages of constructing meaning to learn.

Ridley (1990) believes that teachers should spend their assessment time holding conferences rather than grading papers. Teachers are able to learn much more about children and how they think by sitting down beside them and talking and listening to them, rather than giving them a worksheet to complete.
Cambourne (1988) sees a need for learning about each individual student's needs, attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses. This information can be gained through individual student-teacher conferences. No standardized group test is able to evaluate all the areas involved in emerging literacy.

Johnston (1987) states that by individualized, process-oriented evaluation, the teacher can boost efficiency, because then the role of teacher as an evaluator allows teaching and evaluation to occur at the same time. When students and teachers are collaboratively involved in conferencing to assess students' goals and growth, the greatest benefit from this type of assessment is achieved. Valencia (1990) stresses that collaborative assessment strengthens the bond between student and teacher and establishes them as partners in learning.

By observing, the expert evaluator strives to ascertain a child's understanding of the reading and writing processes and to help the child to comprehend what he/she is doing and how to extend it. The ultimate goal of assessment is for students to learn to evaluate their own progress in the process of learning and to have optimal learning. Students need to learn to recognize their needs and strengths and how to build on what they know. When students and teachers are able to work together through conferencing in the evaluative aspect of learning processes, they both gain (Johnston, 1987).
**Development of Self-Esteem**

Individual student-teacher conferences can also be used as a means to positively influence students' attitudes toward themselves and their learning. A teacher has a powerful influence on the attitudes of students, generating enthusiasm and promoting self-esteem. Students need to feel they have worthwhile ideas to share. There is no greater gift a teacher can give students than to help them know that they have a story to tell. Self-esteem is fostered when students feel that something they have said, read, or written is important and that their audience wants to know more about their ideas. To promote self-esteem, it is more sensible to work with each student individually to get the maximum influence, rather than in a group situation. When a teacher has an individual conference with a student and reacts in a positive and inquisitive manner toward the student and his/her ideas, a positive self-image is promoted (Calkins, 1986). Johnston (1987) thinks that even the terms "interview" or "conference" are significant, since both imply trust, client status, and a valuing of the student's perspective.

Hansen (1987) believes that when students have opportunities to tell what they know, teachers honor the students' knowledge. As a result, students develop confidence. When students have a clearer idea of their potential and feel that the teacher is
truly interested in what they think is important, then students start to share with the teacher. Then the teacher becomes, not only the instructor, but also the learner.

**Promotion of Positive Attitudes Toward Language**

Teachers exert a strong influence on the attitudes of children in their classrooms. If a teacher is able to work individually with each student, this interaction becomes even more powerful if the teacher and student share a good rapport (Stayter & Johnston, unpublished). Johnston (1987) says that unless teachers take the role of advocates, children will not relate to them.

A study of factors that influence attitudes about reading was conducted by Manning and Manning (1984). At the beginning of the study, the attitudes of students, representing all achievement levels, toward reading were surveyed. Working from the premise that Silent Sustained Reading experiences in the classroom nurture positive attitudes toward reading, the researchers wanted to find what other factors in this experience affected students' attitudes. The study looked at four groups of randomly assigned students. One group was assigned only Silent Sustained Reading. The second group was given Silent Sustained Reading, plus weekly individual conferences with the teacher about the books they were reading. The third group was presented Silent Sustained Reading and also peer conferences.
about the books they were reading. The fourth group was the control group, which did not participate in Silent Sustained Reading. After pre- and post-attitude surveys, the students who had participated in Silent Sustained Reading with peer conferencing and the students who participated in Silent Sustained Reading with individual student-teacher conferencing were found to have significantly more positive attitudes toward recreational reading than the students who were participating in Silent Sustained Reading or were in the control group. They concluded that teachers using one to one conferencing with students and peers interacting with their classmates about the books being read during Silent Sustained Reading were positive influences on children's attitudes toward recreational reading. Stayter and Johnston (unpublished) also concur that teacher influence is important in shaping attitudes, and if the evaluative responses students receive from their teachers are generally positive, that is how students will tend to view their efforts.

Hill (1985) in writing about the positive effects of reading conferences on students' attitudes toward language stresses the importance of the classroom teachers as literature enthusiasts. In sharing their knowledge and appreciation of literature, teachers can positively influence children's attitudes toward literature. Careful questioning of students
can encourage their personal responses to literature and can guide them to reflect on their reading experience, thus extending their understanding of literary qualities and their appreciation of literature.

When a teacher conferences with a student, the student is the authority on the printed material before them (Hansen, 1987). The teacher shows this by, listening with interest, allowing the student to talk, and responding with positive comments during the conference. The teacher also develops the art of questioning and positive commenting to promote the child's confidence in his/her ability as a learner (Turbill, 1983).

**Individualization of Instruction**

Conferencing is a valuable use of teaching time, for it allows the teacher to provide individualized support at the child's point of need (Butler & Turbill, 1987). All children are at different levels in acquiring literacy, and their needs are different. A teacher, working with an individual child, is able to ascertain these needs, when these needs might not become apparent during a group test or discussion (Johnston, 1987). Unless teachers know their children, they will be unable to tailor effective language arts instruction (Johnston, 1987).

Teachers in conferencing with students need to find out what students have on their agenda for learning instead of
bringing their agenda for the students' learning to the conference. In the past, teachers have felt bound to a scope and sequence that dictates when skills can be taught (Hansen, 1987).

Y. Goodman (1989) believes that reading and writing conferences provide opportunities for interaction between students and teachers that result in students reflecting on their own learning while at the same time teachers focus on their teaching. When students reflect on their own learning, they often come to realize what else they need to learn.

Implications for Instruction

The review of literature confirms the importance of teachers having conferences with individual students. Student-teacher conferences serve at least three purposes: the teacher is able to assess a student's progress, the teacher is able to positively influence attitudes towards learning, and finally conferences provide a time for the teacher to initiate individual instruction.

In extending the whole language concept in the instructional program, the writer started with a writing program in second grade, known as Writer's Workshop. Students enjoyed writing and extending their language abilities in Writer's Workshop, which focuses on the writing process and encourages interaction among peers and the teacher within small designated groups.
Students thrived and were excited about the freedom of choice they experienced in writing and were amazed at how much their abilities improved. Then this approach to instruction was extended to reading. The school evaluation program which was based on the administration of standardized tests once a year and report cards with grades was inadequate in assessing children's involvement in the language processes.

The writer researched different methods of conferencing with students and observed teachers using different types of conferences. Checklists and conference forms with possible questions to use during conferencing were collected and evaluated. The writer believed that the method of conferencing should be compatible with the whole language concept.

Reporting pupil progress through report cards could not be changed, but the format could be modified from letter grades to teacher comments and a checklist. To obtain information for this qualitative assessment, the teacher needed to confer with each student from time to time. To carry out this ongoing assessment, the teacher used the information on anecdotal records, checklists, conference forms, and examples of student work to summarize and make the comments that are written on the report cards.

Because the teacher's time was needed for a whole array of activities, a systematic approach to conferencing was developed.
In the process of setting up a conference schedule, student ownership of his/her work and time was emphasized. The students are allowed to select the day they wish to conference with the teacher. A simple card pocket system was set up for both reading and writing conferencing. There are three pockets for each day of the two-week conferencing cycle. Each child has two index cards with his/her name printed on it, one card for reading and one for writing. They select the day they wish to conference with the teacher by placing their card in the appropriate pockets of the reading and writing conferencing charts. When the two-week conferencing period is over, the child then again selects a conferencing date during the next conferencing period.

The writing conference schedule was set up so that each student met with the teacher at least once every two weeks for approximately ten minutes during Writing Workshop period. The conferences were modeled after the writer's conferences that Graves (1983) and Calkins (1986) advocate in their books. During the writing conference, the teacher sits beside the student on his/her level as the student reads their piece. The teacher can make several kinds of collaborative responses to the student's work: offers positive and constructive comments, shares similar experiences or information about the topic, asks questions about the piece, and inquires if the student has had
any difficulties writing the piece and if so, what was done to solve those problems or needs to be done. If the student needs assistance in working on a composition, the teacher can discuss different options for solving the problem. The teacher helps the student feel that he/she is the expert on the piece. The teacher allows the student ownership of the composition and does not press ideas upon the student.

During the conference, the teacher records comments about the conference on a form concerning topics discussed and completes a skills checklist that assesses the piece. This checklist of mechanics offers a three-point evaluation scale: the skill is used regularly, used some, or not used at all.

During the conference, the teacher notes any areas the student finds difficult in either the content or mechanics of the paper. The teacher then is able to teach those skills during the conference, as they are at the student's point of need. Only one or two skills are targeted to teach at each conference, so the student will not be overwhelmed. The teacher also records on the conference form the skills that need to be taught at a future date.

Reading conferences are set up similarly with sessions held with each student at least once every two weeks. The conferences generally last about five minutes. The student uses self-selected reading material for the conference. Most
students opt to use library books. The teacher sits beside the student on his/her level for the conference as the child gives a retelling of the selected book. After the retelling, the teacher asks questions that will clarify ideas that are unclear from the retelling. The teacher can inquire about the student's reasons for selecting the book. Also at this time, the student can connect personal experiences with the work.

The conference provides a time for a student to express his/her thoughts about the author's purpose for writing the book. This allows the teacher a chance to discuss the author's literary style and the illustrations and a chance to scaffold with a child about concepts presented in the book. The child can also choose to read orally an excerpt from the book. Periodically the teacher completes a miscue analysis of the oral reading.

As in the writing conference, the teacher can offer instruction to extend the student's abilities. The teacher records on conference forms what transpires during the conference: difficulties the student has, skills taught, miscue analysis, and strengths noted.

The conference forms for both reading and writing are filed in a portfolio. Each child has a portfolio which houses these forms, examples of work, and other assessment tools. When it is time to do report cards, the information is together and ready
to be interpreted, summarized, and recorded on the report card. The parents are then made aware of the student's progress in the process of developing literacy. The portfolio information is also employed during parent-teacher conferences.

Conclusions

This writer has witnessed the importance of conferencing in her classroom. Positive attitudes toward conferencing are observable. The writer has witnessed the disappointment exhibited by children if the conference had to be postponed. She has heard students beg to be squeezed into the conferencing schedule because they cannot wait to share with the teacher. Conferencing has helped make what is happening in the workshops important to the participants. Students have found meaning in reading and writing.

In the writer's experience, conferencing with students has helped the teacher make assessment decisions. The teacher has been able to influence students' attitudes toward reading and writing. Individual student-teacher conferences have provided a time for individual instruction.
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