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CONFERENCING LEADS TO SELF-RELIANT LEARNERS AND TEACHERS

Kay Harley

It's writing time in a split 5th/6th grade classroom. Students are writing at their desks, using dictionaries at the editing table to check spelling, reading drafts to each other in pairs, speaking a completed piece into a tape recorder to see how it sounds, and illustrating a story for publication. On the floor in one corner of the room Jane confers with her teacher. Oblivious to the other sounds in the classroom, Jane reads her four pages aloud.

Jane: The part I really like is..."After Sara fell asleep and we roasted hot dogs."

Mrs. Z: Did you ever think of just starting your story right there? With that part? (A puzzled look crosses Jane's face. She looks up, silent and quizzical.) Remember the other day I had the mini-lesson about the tornado? And I made a choice of where to start the story. You know, you're starting right at the very beginning and going to the end.

Jane: Yeh. But the reason why I wanted to start in the beginning was I thought it would be neat if I start, "It was turning out to be another **boring** day." I like that part at the beginning.

Mrs. Z: O.K. And then these events changed that. So you made a conscious choice to begin that way. That's what I wanted to check on. To have you realize as a writer you can make choices in your stories where you want to start. And I wanted to make sure you knew that you had that option.

Jane: Yeh. But I wanted to start it here because I thought it would be really neat. I don't know. I just thought it was neat. "It was turning out to be another **boring** day. And my grandpa..."

Mrs. Z: That's what I wanted to find out. You made a choice. That's what I wanted to find out.

Writing conferences such as this one are a model of student-centered language arts. They provide a powerful teaching/learning method which elevates the student's ideas and insights to a primary position while allowing plenty of scope for a teacher's response and instruction. Jane holds fast to the opening of her story, unwilling to change it simply to please the teacher. Through reading her text aloud, she can emphasize "boring" and give her opening sentence the intonation she wants. Jane has the confidence to "own" her story, to defend her words and her topic, and Mrs. Z respects and even cultivates that ownership. Nonetheless, Jane learns from the conference. Mrs. Z uses this opportunity to remind Jane of a mini-lesson presented a few weeks earlier on finding focus for a story, selecting what to include, and deciding where to begin. That mini-lesson now takes on a personal meaning for Jane as she relates it to the choices she has made in the piece of writing about her grandpa. Jane's choice of opening when she wrote her first draft was probably unconscious and she likely followed the common "bed-to-bed" narrative pattern of young writers in which all the events of the day are told with little selection and emphasis on the significant. Jane's conference has now made this choice of opening a conscious one. The puzzled look at the start of the conference gives way to a willingness to defend her choice even if she doesn't yet have the language to articulate reasons for that choice. ("I don't know. I just thought it was neat.") Mrs. Z has used the conference to teach Jane to become more

reflective about her writing and to see that choice is central to a writer's craft.

Conferences used in this way create self-reliant learners. As students initiate the conferences and establish their direction, they actively accept responsibility for their writing and learning. Equally, the conferences provide powerful teaching opportunities as the teacher can gear remarks to the specific context of the writing and needs of the student. Conference teaching, moreover, possesses a built-in flexibility. It is a potent antidote to rigid and uniform methodologies that have done little to foster active learners and autonomous teachers. The fact that conferences must be adjusted to each child, each teacher, each classroom environment, and each topic makes them ideal teaching/learning situations.

Ten of Sam's stories are spread out in front of Sam and Miss F as they hold a publishing conference to select which story to publish. After five weeks, all of the children have published once. While Sam and Miss F talk, the other children are busy "writing" their stories at their tables by drawing and using their "best kindergarten spelling."

Sam: That's not my best.

Miss F: How do you know that?

Sam: The picture could be better.

Miss F: (Looking at another piece) Oh, I see lots of kindergarten spelling in this one. Can I put it over here?

Sam: (Nods without interest) That's my goodest. (He points to a picture of ice cream cones.)

Miss F: Oh, the ice creams make it good. Why?

Sam: Because they're yummy. There's a red one and a green one.

Miss F: So you like that story because it's about something you like.

Sam at the moment has little interest in the kindergarten spelling he did a few days ago. Yet Miss F's comment reinforces her goal of having students use invented spelling in their stories. However, rather than rigidly insisting on kindergarten spelling at this point, Miss F uses the conference to help Sam begin to exercise critical judgment as he selects his "goodest" story and states why he likes it. The story is good, to Sam, because it helps him to relive an experience, to capture on paper the yummy ice cream cones. And Miss F needs to know this so she can show kindergarteners how other authors also recapture experiences and put their ideas on what's yummy into words and books.

Conferences have become familiar features of many writing process classrooms. However, their effectiveness as a teaching/learning method is not limited to a particular approach to teaching writing. Conferences can be powerful learning tools in any area precisely because they are so student-centered. They foster a friendly, direct verbal exchange between student and teacher and allow the teacher to see through the student's eyes. As the student leads, providing impetus for the conference, the teacher can understand the unique perspective of this individual student, at this moment, in terms of this material. Such an understanding enables the teacher to shape specific responses that lead to learning: to clarify misunderstandings, to reinforce concepts presented generally to the class, to challenge to greater effort. And the benefits of seeing from the child's

eyes are not limited to the moment of that conference but extend to give teachers greater insight into all of the teaching/learning of their classrooms. As they learn to listen more carefully to their students, teachers can anticipate problems and plan and present material more effectively. In addition, regular conferences aid evaluation. They provide teachers with knowledge of every child's strengths and weaknesses and growth over time in a way that no tests can equal.

Conferences not only create self-reliant learners; they also create self-reliant teachers. The teacher who listens and seeks to value the child's perspective even when it has led to errors cannot follow a prescribed formula. Her own best thinking and responsiveness to students must be drawn upon to decide what is best taught in this context. Teachers using conferences become inquirers and problem solvers, guided by their experience, knowledge, and intuitions to respond to the questions and difficulties posed by the student. Conferences thus restore autonomy to teachers, placing their informed judgments at the center of the teaching and learning in their classrooms.

NOTE

Two excellent books that describe the use of conferences in the teaching of writing are Donald Graves, *Writing: Teachers and Children at Work* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann Educational Books, Inc., 1982), and R.D. Walshe, *Every Child Can Write: Learning and Teaching Written Expression in the 1980's* (Rozelle, New South Wales: Primary English Teaching Association, 1981).

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