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CONFERRING WITH SECOND GRADE WRITERS

Judy Zak

Although I had taken a summer workshop on teaching the writing process presented by Nancie Atwell, and although I had been using the writing process approach for several years with fourth, fifth, and sixth graders, this year would be different— this year I would be teaching second graders. That second graders would be able to write I had no doubt, but would they revise as Lucy Calkins had asserted in her book *The Art of Teaching Writing*? Would they be able to pre-plan, choose their own topics, and edit as my upper elementary students had done? As this was my first year with second grade writers, I was anxious to watch them and learn about their writing processes, so I decided to try an action research project with them. I would ask the question: Can my second graders successfully handle the kinds of writing activities my upper-elementary kids engaged in?

Each day as I conferred with my students I kept a conference log of the comments the students and I made during the conference. I made a chart with each child's name on it followed by a space to write a brief comment about what occurred. Although a writing process classroom with twenty-three second graders is very active, and time to write notes about conferences is limited, my students helped me by giving me those extra few seconds to fill in my log before they interrupted me.

In the fall my conference log shows that spelling was a big concern for the children and for me. The children were much too preoccupied with spelling and felt so insecure in their writing that they wanted each word to be spelled correctly. When writing first drafts, children shouldn't be overly concerned with spelling. It slows their writing and keeps them from getting their ideas down on paper. Often it limits their topic selection or choice of words because they will not write about topics they can't spell or will select simple words instead of challenging themselves to use more sophisticated

words. I hadn't expected second graders to be so worried about spelling in their first drafts.

I began a series of mini-lessons where I modeled my own writing, misspelling words as I wrote or circling words that I was unsure of to look up later. In this way I sent the message to my second graders that it was fine to spell the word as well as you could and go on trying to get your words on paper. I also did many mini-lessons on invented spelling, showing the children how to sound out words and writing down the sounds they heard. When children wanted a conference to spell a word, I would ask, "What part of the word do you need help with?", making it clear that I expected them to sound out most of the word and I would help them only with the part that they hadn't been able to figure out. I was shifting the responsibility to them and at the same time giving them power over their own writing.

At the beginning of the year, spelling conferences took at least 50% of my conference time, but four months later, during forty-six conferences in a two-week period, only two children asked me for spelling help. They are now secure in their writing and secure in the classroom. They know that I and their peers can read invented spellings, and that it's okay to use them in their drafts, and they also know that, when they prepare to publish a finished piece, it's time to look up the word and make it correct.

My conference notes also demonstrate that topic choice is often easy for my second graders. Students get their ideas from home, as when Chrissy wrote about scuba diving with her family at their cottage last summer, or from mini-lessons, such as the time I read *A House Is A House For Me* and Beth then wrote a piece based on the same idea. Often group share is a lovely place to get new ideas. At the end of our writing time we usually take about ten minutes when children get to sit in front of the class and read something they've written; the next day students will tell me they got their idea from a story or poem read the day before. For example, one day Joel read a story about a dream he had, and the next day John wrote a story about his own dream, about flying.

The times when these second-graders need help with a topic are infrequent. When students have finished one piece in the middle of writing time and seem to have trouble coming up with a new topic, we confer and talk about ideas that they have written on the "Topics I Will Write About" section in the back of their daily writing folders. I might also discuss with them the

things they have told me when they come into class each morning or simply ask them to go around and see what others are writing about. The student usually comes up with a topic.

Topic selection is less of a problem for second graders than it is for upper elementary students who are more inhibited about their writing and worried about what others would think of it and them. Younger children tend to think that everything they write is wonderful, and that is why one topic not often found in my conference log is revision.

If revision was occurring in my classroom in the early fall I did not see any indication of it, but by January my log records more and more children making choices about how they are going to write their stories. John tells me he is leaving out a sentence because it doesn't make sense, and Michael says he will add on to his story...can I help him with ideas? Michael and John have both written stories that they decided weren't good enough and needed second drafts. These conferences about revision are not the norm in my class, but they are a beginning, and I see indications that the students will start working on introductions, conclusions, and rewritings as I do more and more mini-lessons on revisions.

My conference log already records their interest in the conventions of editing and proofreading. They love to use capitals, periods, commas etc. Each morning as the students enter my classroom they find two sentences on the chalkboard that need editing corrections. For example:

ed bring me those newspapers immediately
we seen those pictures before said father

The children find the mistakes and correct them on the board and then copy the corrected sentences onto a sheet of paper. These small doses of daily editing keep the students alert to the need for copy editing and proofreading.

Often these concerns arise in their own writing. During a conference Michael shows me the sentence, "Joe went with us to a show and Mike went too." and asks if he needs a comma between "show" and "and". Gabe runs up breathlessly to tell me he got to use quotation marks. John calls quotation marks "talking things," but he uses them when he is writing dialogues even if he doesn't call them by the correct name. Corvin tells me he is using a pronoun. In his piece he says "fill it" instead of "fill the hole" and tells me

about his usage. He is consciously making a decision to use a pronoun. These and many other conferences indicate that the concepts I am teaching at other times of the day are being internalized and then used during writing time as the students need them.

Paying close attention to the things told to me in conferences also shows me that some concepts teachers are told to teach are never needed by practicing writers. In four years I've never seen a child need to use the concept of parts of speech. My second graders write in complete sentences, and they have never studied the parts of speech. They do know that they need to make a complete thought, and that the thought needs to make sense. If it doesn't make sense, another student or myself will ask about it during a conference and help the author clear it up. Jacob for example, read this sentence fragment to me: "and chased the dog up the pole." "Jacob," I asked, "who chased the dog up the pole? Was it Anne or Josh?" He replied, "Oh yeah, it was Josh. I need to put his name in." I didn't tell Jacob that he was missing the subject of the sentences, or ask him to learn the parts of speech. We just talked about making the sentence better so the reader would understand.

At the end of four months my conference log reveals that my second graders are process writers. As Corvin is reading his finished piece to me about his friend Aaron, he tells me he will next write a piece about Little Jon that will be partly fiction and partly true. He thinks the piece will be about three pages long. He is planning not only his subject matter but the type of piece it will be—fiction and true—and its approximate length. This is a great deal of planning for a second grader. Gabe tells about his plans for a story about California Raisins. He says he will write about how they come to life in his room, that the piece will be long, but the story will take place all on one day. He has decided its genre, length, and time limits. These students are writing as an adult would write, making decisions in advance that will help them with their writing. They are planning ahead, using conventions, choosing their own topics, revising, borrowing ideas from others in the class and from published authors, rehearsing what they will write, and worrying less about spelling.

After keeping a conference log for four months, I can look back and reflect on the changes that have occurred in my classroom. I know what I have worked on with each child, and I know what I have taught the whole class. The conferences I'm having now are different than the ones I had four months ago. At the beginning of the year the children wanted many words

spelled for them, they wanted constant reassurance that they were doing fine in their writing, and every piece needed to be celebrated with me. Now my records show that I'm not needed as much as I was. Certainly I go to them to see how they are doing and what they need help with, but many of them say, "Things are fine," or "I'll read this to you when I'm done," or they ask specific questions about what they need help with. They are much more in charge of the conference. I hear them sounding out words or asking a friend how to spell something instead of coming to me, or I see them sitting on the carpet reading their pieces to each other and trying to make them better or just enjoying each other's writing. One day recently I did not go to the students but let them approach me. My records show only six children needed me during the writing time. The rest were confident enough to help themselves or help each other.

My research question, "Can second grade students handle the kinds of writing activities my upper-elementary kids engaged in?" has been answered. Yes, they can. They pre-plan, choose their own topics, and edit as any upper-elementary student would do.

I have learned so much about my students from doing action research. The extra time the research took was, for me, well worth it. So often teachers work in such a concentrated manner with their students that they don't get a chance to sit back and reflect on that interaction. This action research project provided me with the time to reflect on my classroom procedures and the progress of my students.

Recently I had a conference with John. I noticed that he had used different colored pencils throughout his piece. I asked him why this sentence was green, this one blue, and so on. His answer was that when Mom spoke in the story he used a red pencil, when the son spoke he used green, etc. He had color coded their lines so he and the reader could tell who was speaking. What a marvelous idea, one I will use from now on to help my students in writing dialogue. In a writing process classroom we can learn so much from each other. By doing action research I have a record of all that learning.

Judy Zak teaches second grade at Carpenter Elementary School in Midland, Michigan.