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# Essential Components and Expected Benefits from Quality Individual Reading Conferences

BY BEN ZULAUF

**A**s I sat in the library, listening to my principal give the long list of changes that were going to occur in my district over the next year, my eyes couldn't help but glaze over. I was just finishing my second year of teaching and was finally beginning to have a good grasp of all the curriculum that I was supposed to be teaching, and now everything was changing. One "non-negotiable" for the upcoming school year was going to be reading conferences. I remember thinking to myself, "Reading conferences? We never learned anything about reading conferences in college! I haven't been prepared for this, and I don't know what I'm doing." As most people are when unwanted change is about to occur, I was upset. I was flustered. I didn't see where I was going to find the time in my day to fit meaningful, individual reading conferences into my schedule, not to mention what benefits this would generate in my classroom.

In the interest of keeping my job, much research needed to be done. I needed to learn, and learn quickly, the answers to all the questions I had. Through my review of the literature, I learned that conferring with readers is not a new topic; in fact, it has existed for years under different names such as discrete conferences or individual structured conferences. I learned that the classroom teacher is the one who decides what a conference looks like and with whom to meet and when. Most important, I learned that the outcomes of quality reading conferences merit making them an essential part of any classroom.

## What Is a Reading Conference?

A reading conference is a one-on-one meeting between a teacher and a student that gives the student an opportunity to talk about a book of his choice. Oliver Keene and Zimmerman claim:

Conferences are lifeblood to comprehension teaching. It is through conferences that we come to understand each child's strengths and needs. In conferences, we tailor instruction to promote new learning and new levels of comprehension at the moment a child demonstrates a need. (2007, pp. 155-156)

The meetings between teacher and student are much more than nice chats about the books each student is reading. By identifying the specific needs of each student, teachers are able to make students increasingly independent in their reading (Oliver Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). Teachers should support

the reader by demonstrating or suggesting reading strategies during or immediately following the conference (Gill, 2000). Through conferencing with readers, teachers are able to get to know each reader at a personal level – his or her interests, strengths, and weaknesses. This personal relationship will help each reader grow to meet his or her full potential.

## What Do Reading Conferences Look Like?

There is no set "right" way to hold reading conferences; there are only guidelines to help teachers form what will work best in their classrooms. Conferences should follow a set structure that is made known to the students. By having a preset structure, both the reader and the teacher can focus on the content of the conference, not determining what will take place next (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Conferences should start with assessing if the student is reading with understanding (Routman, 2003). From there, students should read a few pages; here, the teacher has the option to listen to the student read aloud (Allen, 2009) or read along silently as the student reads to himself or herself (Routman, 2003). While the student is reading, teachers should write notes based on things that they have noticed (Allen, 2009). These notes can be difficult words or concepts in order to assess the students' understanding (Routman, 2003) or evidence of how students are doing with strategies they have learned in class (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Finally, reading conferences should end with a brief discussion on precisely what the reader should work on during his or her independent reading. This new

or continued goal will be assessed during the next conference (Oliver Keene & Zimmerman, 2007). The notable thing about conferencing is also a downfall; there is no clear-cut way to conduct conferences. While there are general guidelines to follow, teachers can adapt conferences how they see fit in order to best accommodate the needs of their students.

Reading conferences should be incorporated into the daily lesson plans and fit perfectly as part of a Reading Workshop. A Reading Workshop should last between 45 and 60 minutes. Just as during reading conferences, Reading Workshop should have a predictable structure. Reading Workshops should start with a mini-lesson where the teacher will demonstrate a particular strategy such as inferencing or predicting. After the mini-lesson, students should go off to their independent reading spot to practice the strategy of the mini-lesson along with other strategies learned throughout the year (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). It is during this independent reading time that the teacher can make his or her rounds to confer with readers. The amount of time spent conferring depends on the grade level. Teachers should try to set aside 20 to 30 minutes for first and second grade and 30 to 45 minutes for third grade and above (Routman, 2003). The Reading Workshop should conclude with a whole-class discussion for students to share their experiences from the day (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Reading conferences don't have to be something intimidating to incorporate into the classroom; in fact, they fit beautifully into the lessons that are more than likely being already taught.

The number of students a teacher confers with will vary from day to day. Teachers may not have a set number of students to meet with daily, but they will have a general idea of the expected number of students after seeing how conferring works within their classroom. Conferences typically last anywhere from 5 to 20 minutes; therefore, with practice, teachers can come to expect to meet with 2 or 3 students daily, with the possibility of meeting with more (Routman, 2003). The number of students a teacher confers with on a daily basis will depend on how the teacher conducts his or her conferences.

One of the main purposes of conferring is to target developing readers to make sure their reading progress is being carefully monitored. "While you will want and need to meet with your struggling readers weekly (and sometimes for a few days in a row), for

most of your students once a month is sufficient" (Routman, 2003, p. 102). Because teachers will be meeting with developing readers more frequently, it might be a good idea to circulate around the room and offer words of encouragement to the higher-level readers. This will ensure that their progress is also being monitored and celebrated, even though their conferences will be less frequent.

## Components of Reading Conferences

As previously stated, while there aren't set guidelines reading conferences have to follow, there is a set structure that teachers should stick to in order to produce the most efficient conferences. This structure is composed of three essential components: goal setting, reinforcing effort, and providing immediate feedback to the student.

Setting a goal for the student should be the first thing done at the start of every conference. "From the moment I sit down with a student, she should be aware of what her role is in a conference" (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007, p. 28). This goal will provide readers with a specific task on which to concentrate. Goals should neither be too specific nor too broad but should be individualized to fit the needs of each student (Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2005). The benefit of setting goals during conferences goes beyond helping the individual student focus on a task during independent reading though. When teachers know exactly where the readers in their classroom are, they can use this information to make instructional changes, such as reteaching or small group mini-lessons (Boston, 2002). As the conference comes to an end, the teacher should assess if the goal set at the start of the conference has been achieved and either assign a new goal for independent reading time or have the student continue to work on the aforementioned goal.

While conferences are a time to help students realize what struggles they have as readers, it is extremely important to reinforce the effort students are putting into their reading. Reinforcing effort helps to teach students an extremely valuable lesson: "the harder you try, the more successful you are" (Marzano et al., 2005, p. 59). The most encouraging aspect of reinforcing effort is that a student can learn the idea that putting forth effort will be beneficial in the end, even if the student did not originally possess

this idea. This recognition should be something that students are given by the teacher on a regular basis, but it should also be something that a student has earned. When recognition is given far too frequently, students' ideas of their own competence could actually be lowered (Marzano et al., 2005). By reinforcing the labor of students in the classroom, teachers not only convey an extremely important message onto the reader but can also create a community of learners who are confident to take new steps in their reading.

One of the most beneficial things teachers can provide for students to experience success is feedback. In reading conferences, teachers can provide specific feedback that is individualized for each student. "Feedback has been shown to improve learning when it gives each pupil specific guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without any overall marks" (Black & Wiliam, 2010, p. 144). The most effective feedback is timely and corrective in nature. Students should be given distinct information on what specifically was done correctly, what was done incorrectly, and what can be done in the future to experience more success. Generally, the longer it is between the assessment and feedback, the less beneficial the information will be (Marzano et al., 2005). When students consistently encounter difficulties, they draw the conclusion that they don't possess the ability. Once this idea is engrained in their heads, students refrain from investing effort in school (Black & Wiliam, 2010). By providing corrective, timely feedback, teachers can help students realize their own reading potential.

## Overcoming Challenges of Incorporating Reading Conferences

As with every teaching strategy, there are some drawbacks of reading conferences that should be acknowledged. Meeting with every student in a one-on-one setting regularly seems very time consuming, sounds intimidating, and is somewhat frightening; however, most teachers already have a time in the day when the students read silently that can be used to confer with students. There is no need to read every book that each student will bring to the conference because it will be obvious if the student has read the book. "When a student knows what's going on, his retelling is full of detail, his language makes sense and has a flow, he has an obvious sense of what the book is about, and usually, his pleasure

is evident" (Routman, 2003, p. 103). Because there is no single way to conduct conferences "correctly," teachers should not feel intimidated by incorporating conferences. If a teacher doesn't know where to begin, there are five basic processes to consider while conducting reading conferences – "answering literal questions, retelling, merging thinking with content, acquiring knowledge, and actively using knowledge" (Harvey, 2011, p. 117). Answering literal questions would be having students reply to questions where the answer is right there in the text. Retelling is simply having students summarize what they read; this retelling can be an overview of the whole book or a summary of what the student read during the conference. In order to merge thinking with content, students explain their thoughts of what just happened in the text and what might happen as the plot unfolds. When students acquire knowledge, they are learning new information and finding out if their predictions are correct. Finally, actively using knowledge is having students use critical thinking skills to draw conclusions about what is not stated explicitly in the text. Conferences are a learning experience for both the teacher and the student and can be adapted to meet the needs of the students in any given classroom.

## Benefits of Quality Reading Conferences

Although many teachers feel there isn't enough time to incorporate reading conferences in a daily schedule, the benefits of these conferences will prove to be worthwhile. Research shows that by integrating reading conferences into the classroom, students will show growth in reading comprehension and will develop a love of reading.

### *Increased Comprehension*

The talking done between teacher and student during reading conferences will have a significant impact on the comprehension of each student. Oliver Keen and Zimmerman state:

The research is now clear that instruction that actively engages students in asking questions, summarizing and synthesizing text, and identifying important ideas improves comprehension, and that proficient reading involves using more than one strategy at a time: 'it involves a constant ongoing adaptation of many cognitive processes.' (2007, p. 27)

Besides engaging students in these processes, incorporating reading conferences in the schedule will hold students accountable to talk about just-right books.

Before a teacher can use just-right books in his or her classroom, there needs to be a set definition for just-right books. "A 'just-right' book seems custom-made for the child" (Routman, 2003, p. 93). One characteristic of just-right books is that students can read the book with at least 97% accuracy (Allington, 2001). While many students and parents believe that if a student can read the words on a page the book is at the appropriate reading level, many students can read the words fine but are unable to summarize the book. Just-right books should push readers to the edge of their comfort zone, allowing them to become accustomed to new vocabulary, genres, and styles of writing (Routman, 2003). In order to gain the best use of class time possible, students need to be able to find just-right books.

There are several strategies teachers can employ to find just right-books. Because teachers can't very well test every text readers pick up while at the library, one way to get students to independently monitor their choice of books is the "three-finger rule." To do this, students should read a page or two (depending on the density of the text on the page), and put up a finger for each word they don't know (Allington, 2001). If students hold up three fingers before the end of the page, the text may be too difficult (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Students can't read for understanding if they are constantly stumbling over words or concepts (Routman, 2003). This quick and easy method will give young readers an easy way to figure out if a book is right for them without having to take too much time reading the start of the book.

Another technique that can be used to find just right books is "BOOKMATCH" (See Appendix A). BOOKMATCH is a poster with a checklist that should be made available to students as they are selecting books. Each letter of BOOKMATCH stands for something different, and there are questions that help the reader evaluate each criterion. For example, "B" stands for "Book Length." When students consider book length, questions they can ask themselves are, "Is this a good length for me? Is it too little, just right, or too much? Do I feel like committing to this book?" (Wutz & Wedwick, 2005, p. 17). This chart gives students a simple way to evaluate if a book is right for them.

Too often, students are forced to read books that the teacher assigns to them. These books frequently are not at the students' reading levels, do not engage readers with the text, and do not require them to use multiple reading strategies. Students' interest and background knowledge strongly feed into their capability to read a text. Therefore, students need to be taught to pick just-right books not only based on their current levels of reading but also on personal interests (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). When students are engaged with a text that is within their comfort zone and that interests them, they will automatically apply reading strategies to comprehend the text. Generally these strategies have been internalized, and the reader is incognizant of the application of these strategies (Tovani, 2011). When readers apply a wide variety of strategies while engaging with a text they enjoy, reading comprehension will increase.

Conferring with students also holds readers accountable to consistently read on their own. In conferences, students will always have a goal to achieve for the next conference—one that can only be achieved through practice. In order to reach the goals set for each conference, students will need more than quality instruction; students will need to complete extensive amounts of independent reading (Routman, 2003). Through conferences, teachers can also assess previously taught skills to make sure each student is practicing the things he or she has learned in class. There are several reasons to follow up on previously taught reading skills:

It can be tempting for young readers to only practice what I teach them on the day I teach it, never to think about it again. By following up with skills and strategies I previously taught, I am sending the message to students that once they are taught a new skill and strategy the expectation is that they incorporate it into their reading lives from now on. (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007, p. 102)

Not only will following up on previously taught skills hold students accountable for past teaching, it also offers teachers a way to prepare for upcoming conferences and reflect on their teaching choices and practices (Serravallo & Goldberg, 2007). Holding students accountable and checking in on how well they are integrating previously learned strategies will benefit both the teacher and the student.

It is very easy for a teacher to assign a section of a book for students to read only to have them answer questions about the section. While this is an easy way for the teacher to informally assess the students through observation and formally assess the students by grading the answers, this technique may not do anything for the students in terms of comprehension. For a student to develop a complete picture of a text, he or she must talk about it. "Nothing enhances our understanding more than talking about what we are reading and learning" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 34). Reading conferences provide the perfect opportunity for students to talk about the books they read.

Reading conferences typically start with the student giving a brief summary of the text followed by a bit of reading and talking about what was read. In their book, *Conferring with Readers*, Serravallo and Goldberg (2007) state, "Talking about books not only gives the readers a nudge into deepening and clarifying their thinking about the text, but it also gives me insights into the ways they construct meaning from the texts" (118). When teachers confer with readers, they are able to assess more personally the student as a reader. Taking the time for students to reflect and share what they are reading provides students with meaningful ways to learn about themselves as readers (Miller, 2011). When students read in isolation, they rarely have the opportunity to grow through their own self-talk. Through conferring, students might grow this self-talk by explaining how they personally connected with a text or how they interpreted a section (Hutchins, 2011). Reading is more than just word calling; it is putting the words together to fully form a movie in one's mind of what is happening in a book. The best way to help students make this movie is to allow the opportunity to talk about the text.

## Reading Conferences Impact on Developing Joy in Reading

In addition to increasing reading comprehension, conferring with readers can increase a student's joy of reading. The current practice of teaching reading is causing a disturbing trend. According to Bradshaw and Nichols (2004) in *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, "Literary reading in America is not only declining rapidly among all groups, but the rate of decline has accelerated, especially among the young" (p. vii). If today's current reading education practice isn't changed, the decline of literary reading in America will only continue.

One reason literary reading is declining today is that teachers are forced to create test readers. These are the readers who can scan a text with the sole purpose of finding the information needed to answer questions. There is plenty of assessment taking place in today's school that is used ineffectively, if it's even used at all. The school might not know how to use the assessment or the school might not have met Adequate Yearly Progress and is now scrambling trying to find something to help students in the next rounds of testing; either way, this time used for inefficient testing is a lost opportunity to help students grow as readers (Routman, 2003). "Comprehension is not about answering those literal questions at the end of a story, chapter, or textbook section. Comprehension is not about spitting out facts and filling in blanks. Comprehension is about understanding" (Harvey & Daniels, 2009, p. 27). The worst part about this lost time is that if students read for the joy of reading, comprehension would automatically increase.

In one-on-one reading conferences, students are given access to books that are in their area of interest and at their reading levels. "When students are assessed in connection with a book they are interested in—rather than a decontextualized test passage—optimal and accurate assessment is more likely" (Routman, 2003, p. 100). Books that students are interested in will spark readers to use more reading strategies unknowingly. This independent reader will figure out what is confusing, will set new goals, and will be able to talk about the processes being used to get through the book (Beers, 2003). Allowing students the opportunity to read the books they want to read will increase reading abilities.

Reading conferences also create a risk-free zone where students aren't afraid to make mistakes while receiving excellent instruction. The readers who may not be willing to participate within a whole or small-group setting can enter into a relationship with the classroom teacher where they won't shy away from reading. By complimenting and reinforcing the effort being put into new or developing strategies, the reader will feel more confident in using these strategies more regularly (Allen, 2009). Conferences allow the teacher and student to come together to co-create how, when, and why reading strategies are used and will help the student make these strategies his own (Miller, 2011). When students develop an understanding of how to use strategies and feel

comfortable employing these strategies on a regular basis, they will find themselves picking up more books for the joy of it.

In the process of creating readers who have a passion for reading, teachers will be able to guide readers from one level to another. Frequently when students remain at the same reading level month after month, it is because they have not been shown any strategies they can use to progress to the next level, so when students try to shift to the next level, they do not possess the skill set needed to advance (Allen, 2009). However, when teachers confer with students, they learn exactly where their students are in the process of applying multiple strategies to create meaning (Miller, 2011). When teachers know exactly where each student is, they can help readers move from level to level with more ease and success.

### Classroom Implications

When I first learned of conferences, I was very skeptical about implementing them in my classroom. I obviously didn't have a choice of whether or not I could use it, but I did have the choice of how much time to devote to reading conferences. After looking into the benefits conferencing could provide for my students, however, I couldn't think of a better use of time in the classroom. By conducting these reading conferences, I will be able to work one-on-one with all of my students to individualize support in order to push them to the edge of their capabilities (Allen, 2009).

In spending just 20 to 45 minutes a day, depending on the grade level, meeting with students in a one-on-one setting either during a Reader's Workshop or just while the students are reading independently, there will be invaluable outcomes. Students should not only show growth in their reading but will also develop a love for reading that is needed in order to be avid readers.

I once heard a professor talk about how many people say that we are raising a very lazy and apathetic generation. His response was that times are changing, but our methods of teaching are not. We can't say a student isn't responsive or doesn't have an attention span to learn if that same student sits down in front of a TV and plays video games for six hours straight. This student can do this because video games provide exactly what he or she needs to continue to put forth effort. The game presents the goal of beating the

game; throughout the game, effort is rewarded in the forms of new, more challenging levels; the game provides immediate, specific feedback. For example, if there is a cliff he needs to jump over, the game immediately notifies the player if he made it to the next ledge. If the video game was never ending, never changing, and it took 2 to 3 weeks to figure out if the player made it to the next ledge, no child would ever play video games. So why would we expect that same student to want to put forth his best effort in school? We need to adapt the way we teach in order to fit the changing needs of each student. The only way to efficiently accomplish this is through reading conferences.

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## Appendix A

### BOOKMATCH

FIGURE 1  
BOOKMATCH classroom poster

- B** **Book length**
- ✓ Is this a good length for me?
  - ✓ Is it too little, just right, or too much?
  - ✓ Do I feel like committing to this book?
- O** **Ordinary language**
- ✓ Turn to any page and read aloud.
  - ✓ Does it sound natural?
  - ✓ Does it flow? Does it make sense?
- O** **Organization**
- ✓ How is the book structured?
  - ✓ Am I comfortable with the print size and number of words on a page?
  - ✓ Are chapters short or long?
- K** **Knowledge prior to book**
- ✓ Read the title, view the cover page, or read the summary on the back of the book.
  - ✓ What do I already know about this topic, author, or illustrator?
- M** **Manageable text**
- ✓ Begin reading the book.
  - ✓ Are the words in the book easy, just right, or hard?
  - ✓ Do I understand what I read?
- A** **Appeal to genre**
- ✓ What is the genre?
  - ✓ Have I read this genre before?
  - ✓ Do I like or expect to like this genre?
- T** **Topic appropriateness**
- ✓ Am I comfortable with the topic of this book?
  - ✓ Do I feel like I am ready to read about this topic?
- C** **Connection**
- ✓ Can I relate to this book?
  - ✓ Does this book remind me of anything or anyone?
- H** **High interest**
- ✓ Am I interested in the topic of this book?
  - ✓ Am I interested in the author/illustrator?
  - ✓ Do others recommend this book?

Taken from Wutz & Wedwick (2005)





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\*If yes, please provide name of council.