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“The Naked Prince. I loved that book!”: Conferring with Children as Readers

by Dr. Nancy L. Shanklin

Teachers may aid students' development of comprehension strategies by reflecting carefully upon the verbal interactions they have with children. Like the jazz musician who knows all the jazz patterns, but in any one solo must improvise how and which to borrow from to create a unique response, a teacher must know not only which conferring probes might be used, but also borrow or create anew just the right ones in the right combination to share or extend readers' responses. Examination of these probes (Calkins, 1986; Kitagawa, 1982; Pearson, 1985; Singer, 1984) and subsequent interactions with students becomes crucial as more schools decrease use of basal readers and begin to adopt literature-based reading and writing programs (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Hansen, 1987).

What Readers Gain From Conferring

By conferring with children over texts, teachers can foster development of three vital components to reading comprehension: 1) understanding that the purpose of reading is to create meaning, 2) viewing reading as a problem solving process, and 3) learning to share and extend one's own comprehension.

Through verbal interactions with teachers and peers, students come to understand that reading is more than plowing through the words on a page, saying them right but creating little sense for the text. Through

discussions with a teacher and/or peers, students can predict, confirm/disconfirm, and elaborate upon their understandings. Rereading is a frequent result with readers revising their comprehension of a text, just as writers revise their pieces to improve clarity (Goodman & Burke, 1980).

Through interactions over texts teachers can also place emphasis on reading as a problem solving process (Duffy & Roehler, 1987). For example, when reading a student may ask, "What's this word?" Rephrased in terms of problem solving, the question might be, "What can I do to figure out this unknown word?" To deal with this problem, a teacher needs first to check that the child is making only a small number of meaning changing miscues with the text and thus can potentially use a variety of clues to figure out an unknown word. Next the teacher could model two or three strategies s/he knows for dealing with unknown words: think about what is being talked about, think about what would sound right here, say "blank" and go on, consult a conceptually related piece of reading, ask another student, concentrate on getting the meaning even if you cannot say the word, etc.

After presenting some of these alternatives as to what a reader might do, the teacher could model that in this case s/he thinks that s/he will look carefully at the picture. "There is a squirrel in a tree. The word looks like it might be nut, but it says, 'builds (blank).' Hm,

it looks like the squirrel might be building a nest. Nest, that's it!" The teacher has now modeled how s/he used information supplied by the picture in tandem with the three language cueing systems to figure out the unknown word.

Teachers find that skillful conferring with children, particularly as reader-to-reader, helps students learn to share and extend their comprehension. Several recent theories of the reading process suggest that text meaning does not lie in the text alone, but instead in the transaction between reader and text (Otto, 1982; Pearson & Spiro, 1982; Rosenblatt, 1978). If such variety of interpretation is inherent to the reading process, then correct answers occur only to the extent that readers and authors agree to the existence of similar meanings. Thus in conferring, a teacher ought to offer his/her comprehension of a text as only one of many, encouraging the children to express their own ideas as well.

All too often, however, rather than confer with children over texts, teachers ask questions that test children's understanding. This pattern is typically called an **IRE**: Teacher Initiated Question, Student Response, Teacher Evaluation (Dyson & Genishi, 1983). Frequently not only does the teacher evaluate answers, but s/he also structures the very nature of the children's responses through the questions s/he asks. S/he is more interested that children's comprehension be a perfect product, conforming to his/her sense of what the story means, than that students learn to use the predicting, confirming/disconfirming, and integrating reading strategies that can be fostered through lessons that share and extend comprehension.

For example, in a classroom of four through seven year-olds, a teacher asked, "Does anyone remember the book we read yesterday?" While the answer was **The Emperor's New Clothes**, a four year-old piped up, "The Naked Prince! I loved that book!" Rather than reprimand him for suggesting nudity, or correct him for giving a wrong title, the teacher asked the child to tell all he could remember of the story. Other children then furnished even more detail and the book's real name. The four-year old's title

is evidence of the individual understanding the child had constructed for the book, an attempt for which he should be praised.

To avoid IRE binds teachers can elect to use comprehension strategies such as previewing and predicting, already know (Hampton, 1984), directed reading thinking activities, radio reading (Vacca & Vacca, 1986), reciprocal teaching (Palincsar, 1987), say something (Harste, 1982), schema stories (Cochrane, Cochrane, Scalena, & Buchanan, 1984), sketch-to-stretch (Cochrane et al, 1984), literature circles (Calkins, 1986), sharing of literature logs (Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987), and dramatization over children's literature. All of these strategies by the very nature of the way they are devised, help to prevent teachers from getting into IRE binds.

Maintaining Ownership and Fostering Responsibility

As in the writing process, teachers ought to think of initial readings and comprehension as first drafts. Teachers do not expect children's first written drafts to be perfect: the spelling may be incorrect, words left out, crossouts and carets abound, whole ideas need to be added or elaborated upon, in some places the text needs to be revised even to make sense, etc. These problems don't make writing teachers panic: first efforts are celebrated and teachers facilitate children's elimination of them as part of revision and editing. Thus children maintain ownership of their drafts and assume responsibility for the sense they make.

Children's first readings and comprehension should be perceived in the same way. However, often through IRE sequences, teachers immediately check and correct children's misunderstandings after first readings. Teachers are monitoring children's comprehension for them rather than helping them learn strategies for self-monitoring. Unless the text is much too difficult (so that no possible comprehension is occurring), children can learn to self-correct as they read the first time (similar to adding carets and crossing out), or in subsequent repeated readings miscues may disappear (as they do in the second and third drafts in writing).

Comprehension too can be refined through group discussion and rereading. Using these techniques, teachers help to insure that students maintain ownership of their own comprehension and begin to assume responsibility for its construction.

By allowing children to maintain control in reading conferences, teachers signal that they celebrate the uniqueness of each child and his or her individual interpretation of the world (Brause & Mayher, 1985). In this way students' self-concepts as readers are fostered. Teachers point out that once students begin to internalize verbal interaction patterns, they can easily be encouraged to hold successful conferences with each other over texts that they are reading.

Insuring Constructive Verbal Interactions

In terms of sharing responses, teachers may have to remind students that each child's interpretation is valid when there are no right answers to questions.

- Teacher: Remember when I gave you the clue before you read this story that the giants had a problem. Did anyone discover the problem?
- Bradley: Cucullan and Fin McCool weren't friends.
- Teacher: Why shouldn't two giants be friends?
- Jason: They had never met each other. They never saw each other.
- Tara: One had a magic finger and the other didn't. So the other giant was scared. The magic finger could turn him into something else. That's why he was afraid of him.
- Andy: I don't agree with Jason. How would Fin know the other giant's name if they weren't friends? Because Cucullan had a magic finger and the other giant didn't is the reason they were afraid of each other.
- Teacher: It's okay to disagree with each other, isn't it?

When children begin to generate the purposes and questions for which they will read, at first many poor questions may be asked. Teachers use several techniques to deal with this problem. Having used Request (Vacca & Vacca, 1986) as a way to help children generate purposes for reading, a teacher may comment upon the fact that they have so many questions to answer. "Do you think they are all important? Are there some we could cross out because they don't tell anything important about the story? Also, are there some that the story doesn't answer and that we might have to look for elsewhere?" Children may often bring up the problem of "silly" questions themselves, as did this group of first graders:

- Kristin: Why is he wearing...(working on the word) clothes.
- Kristin: Well in kid's stories...
- Riki: (She interrupts the explanation and says playfully) Why is his underwear showing?
- Kristin: (Ignoring Riki, begins again.) Well, in kids' stories, the animals in it usually wear clothes.
- Riki: But why is his underwear showing?
- Kristin: Riki, (annoyed now) that's not a very good question.
- Edie: It ain't (his underwear). It's probably his T-shirt.
- Kristin: That's not his under(wear), it's, it's, his undershirt.
- Riki: Oh, I thought it was...
- Kristin: It's not his underwear and that's not a very good question either.
- Teacher: Why isn't it a good question?
- Kristin: 'Cause that's not a part of the story. That's just...they just drew it.
- Teacher: So it's not really important.
- Kristin: It's like making fun of the author or something or the illustrator. It's not something you really wonder, but there is another important thing about the story.
- ...

As a group participant a teacher may also demonstrate good questions by asking

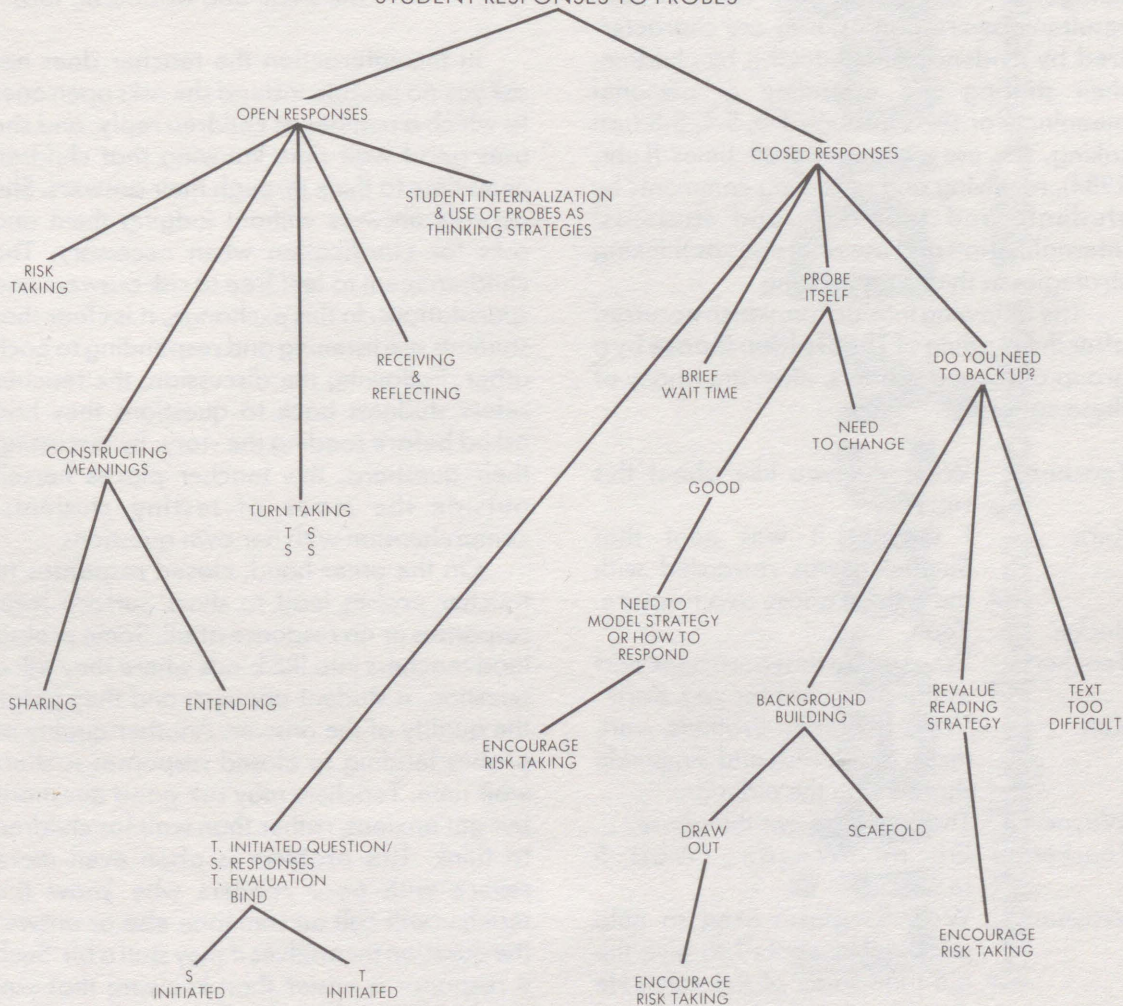
one or two that become part of those that are considered. One teacher has children preview, predict, and pose questions that are written down and placed in a jar. After reading, children draw questions from the jar and discuss possible answers. During her turn, the teacher always asks one or two questions. Over time, when the technique is used again, her questions become ones children begin to adopt themselves.

Reflecting on the Quality of Conferring

Language educators have begun to place emphasis on teachers' abilities to engage in

self-reflection and action research as ways to improve the quality of their teaching. The following diagram is offered to assist teachers in reflecting upon the effectiveness of their conferring with children over texts. Examining the quality of probes needs to be more than an exercise in deciding whether a teacher has asked appropriate ones from a potential list: such reduces teaching to a rote skill. Instead, judging the effectiveness of conferring involves examining the nature of the whole interaction between a teacher and child or group of children (Watson & Young, 1986).

FIGURE 1.
STUDENT RESPONSES TO PROBES



Teachers learn to confer with children over texts by doing it. To improve conferring abilities, many find cassette or video taping helpful. It allows them to look at interactions with children more objectively -- not rely on their memories of the moment. Taping also affords the privacy to take risks, to self-critique, and to make improvements without telling anyone. Tapes can also be used constructively with another teacher as a peer coach. Played for children, they can lead to students' own meta-level discussions of their abilities to retell, ask good questions, listen to others, etc.

Ultimately the quality of probes ought to be judged by the nature of the interactions they trigger with children. It seems that responses to probes ultimately fall into two categories -- open or closed. When probes result in open responses, they are characterized by evidence of risk-taking by children, their sharing and extending of personal meanings for texts through T-S, S-T, S-S turn taking, the use of longer wait times (Lehr, 1984), receiving and reflecting comments by students and teachers, and students' internalization and use of probes as thinking strategies in their own reading.

The following interaction, which occurred after the reading of **The Golden Goose** by a group of second graders, illustrates many of these concepts:

- Teacher: What did you like about this story?
- Keri: I thought it was neat that Simplekin was rewarded with the golden goose as a treasure.
- Becky: Yeah.
- Teacher: What made that particular part of the story neat for you, Keri?
- Keri: Well, his older brothers were mean and selfish and Simplekin shared with the old man.
- Wayne: That's why he got the goose.
- Teacher: Go on, Wayne. (Wait 5 seconds.)
- Wayne: Well, Simplekin liked to help people. He wanted to give the old man some of the cake. He shared so he got rewarded.

- Teacher: Would the old man have given the treasure to anyone who had shared with him? (Wait 7 seconds.)
- Zachary: We don't know.
- Therisha: Probably, he liked people who shared.
- Phillip: Maybe if he weren't hungry he wouldn't.
- Teacher: Why?
- Phillip: Because if he weren't hungry he wouldn't need to ask for food.
- Becky: Then he wouldn't need any cake and he could keep the golden goose to himself.
- Lisa: I thought his mother was mean to Simplekin, because she gave him a small cake.
- Paul: The small one was burnt, too.

In this interaction the teacher does not ask yes-no probes. Instead she asks open ones to which a number of children reply, and she uses good wait time knowing that children need time to think through their answers. She accepts answers without judging them and asks for clarification when necessary. The children seem to feel free to risk answers and speculations. In this exchange, it is clear that students are listening and responding to each other. Following the discussion, the teacher refers students back to questions they had asked before reading the story. By discussing their questions, this teacher places herself outside the mode of testing students' comprehension with her own questions.

On the other hand, closed responses to teacher probes lead to short, surface level responses or no response at all. Some probes lead teachers into IRE binds where they ask a question, a student answers, and they judge the quality of the answer. Another quality of probes leading to closed responses is short wait time. Teachers may ask good questions but get anxious, rather than wait for children to think. This problem is often even more severe with poor readers who know the teacher will call on someone else or answer the question themselves if they stall a bit. Such a response is easier than knowing that you need to do some thinking because the teacher

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