

Conferring: The Heart of the Work

By Isabel Sawyer | Categories: Reading, Writing, Independent Reading

Carl Anderson writes: "Conferring is not the icing on the cake; it is the cake." Conferring truly is the sweet spot of all that we do.

It is through conferring that we build community with our students; conferring affords us the opportunity to reach into every single reader and writer in our classrooms. Conferring is not just an add-on. It is a critical component of our work in classrooms. But, this is the part of the workshop that is hard for teachers. We often don't know the questions to ask our students.

Conferring: A Conversation

Instead of thinking about the right or wrong questions to ask learners, perhaps we should think about conferring as a conversation. Lucy Calkins tells about working with a group of teachers one day. She read aloud a story written by a child: "My grandfather was sick. He went to the hospital. He died. He went to God." Then, she asked the participants how they would confer with that student. Some of the questions they suggested asking were: What would you add to your story? What did the hospital look like? Finally one teacher raised hand from the back of room and said, "I am probably wrong, but I think I would just hug the child and say I am sorry about your grandfather."

A Framework for Conversation

In order to help us think about conferring as a conversation rather than a question and answer session, the consultants shared with us a framework for every conference we might engage in with students. The architecture they suggest is:

- Listen
- Think
- Teach
- Try

Someone in the audience suggested that this structure would work for every single conversation we have with children. Listen to what the child has to say; think about what is most important to praise them for and help them with; teach them one thing that is new and give them a way to try it out. We were reminded that the focus should be on the bigger, more global instructional issues-not event-specific tasks. Teach a child a strategy for spelling unknown words; don't teach her how to spell a specific word.

We should keep in mind Donald Murray's wise words when we enter into a conference with a student:

How should we respond to a look, a piece of blackberry pie, a kiss, a death in the family, a joke, to the sneaky warm of the winter sun when it touches a hand? As a human being. There can be no way-no single, correct, preconceived way-for one human being in the dynamic, ever-changing context of a human interaction to respond to another human being.