

Monitoring Peer Conferences in a Multi-Age Classroom: What's Really Going On?

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This study investigated the perceptions and expectations for peer conferences. Data was gathered through: questionnaires, observations and field notes, recorded conversations and transcripts of peer conferences, large and small group discussions, individual interviews, and student writing samples. Four different types of peer conferences emerged: Sharing/Listening, Nonspecific Urging, Questioning, and Discussions/Suggestions. Students indicated that the Discussion/Suggestions conferences were the most productive, and that, a times, conferencing left them frustrated. These writers appeared to believe that it was the conference partners responsibility to help improve the writer's piece through specific suggestions. Further questions to be explored: (1) If elementary students become aware of the types of conferences they participate in and their perceptions of the different types of conferences, will they be able to readily recognize those conferences when they are participating in them? And if they are able to recognize the different types of conferences will they be able to use them to increase revisions in their writing? (2) Will classroom discourse about the different types of conferences help students to rethink their ideas about conference productivity? (3) Are small group conferences more appropriate for elementary students than one-to-one conferences?

Conferencing is at the heart of the writing workshop (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983). For the past twelve years I have used the concepts of writing workshop in my classrooms from Kindergarten through fifth grade. Inspired by the work of Harste, Graves, Clay, and Calkins, I modeled conferencing, had my students conference with each other, and have seen some revision and editing after conferencing. However, their revisions have been minimal, and thus, I suspect that elementary students do not fully understand that peer conferencing should lead to a rethinking or reviewing of a piece of writing.

Logically, as teachers model how conferences help them to rethink and then revise a piece of writing, older students should be able to see the connection between talking and writing. Whereas, we might expect primary students to make various surface changes such as adding adjectives or using action verbs, and correcting errors in conventions, we expect that intermediate elementary students would make deeper meaning changes after conferencing, such as clarifying and expounding on ideas using personal examples. Elementary classrooms in which I have introduced writing workshop use peer conferencing, and the teachers report that they hear students clarifying thoughts orally and helping each other use more vivid adjectives and action verbs. However, in final drafts not much change has occurred from the first draft to the final copy.

So what is happening between the lively sharing opportunities of peer conferences and revisions? Are elementary students sharing ideas and making oral clarifications during conferences? And if they are, do they understand that these clarifications should be incorporated in their writing? More importantly, if students do understand that conferences should help them clarify and expound on ideas are they able to act on that understanding in terms of revisions?

Emig (1971) and Graves (1983) gave impetus to a workshop approach to writing which included the concept that talking was a necessary component of writing development and essential for children's creation of text. From a constructivist perspective, discourse in the classroom provides active learners (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Vygotsky, 1978) an opportunity to maintain high cognitive engagement, consequently enabling learners to construct meaning and to enhance their own literacy growth (Brozo & Simpson, 1999; Langer, 1995). Questioning the author (Beck et al, 1997) provides peers with queries to prompt each other to consider meaning. Although Beck and her associates were discussing reading strategies, it seems reasonable to use the same strategies during writing (Shanahan, 1997; Harste, Pierce, & Cairney, 1985; Graves, 1991; Kucer, 1985; Tierney & Leys, 1984) because peers have added opportunities when the authors they want to question are there in their midst.

Posing questions during conferences offers listeners the opportunities to voice opinions and viewpoints which should cause the writer to refer to the text to verify, argue about, interpret, and, perhaps, change ideas until the listener comprehends the intended message and meaning is constructed (Anderson, 1984; Bruner, 1986; Piaget & Inhelder, 1969; Probst, 1994; Smith, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978).

The research supports the idea that the role of peers in the writing process should be valued and used (Emig, 1971; Graves, 1983; Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1994; Lane, 1993). In reviewing the research on peer conferencing much is done at the college, high school and middle school levels (Bruffee, 1978; Freedman, 1992; Gere & Abbott, 1985; Harris, 1995; McIver & Wolf, 1999; Atwell, 1987; Rief, 1992) which suggests that students show written improvement in their final drafts after conferences. However, very little research addresses the effectiveness of elementary peer conferences on revision of texts. Research shows that conferences develop audience awareness (Calkins, 1994; Dahl, 1988) and increases enthusiasm for writing (Graves, 1983). Graves (1983) and Lane (1993) propose that peer conferencing also enables students to reflect on their writing and that peer responses aid in the understanding of what the audience does or does not understand. Bruffee (1978) purports that peers can meet each other on common ground, and that, cognitively, they are equals and can assist in the assimilation of ideas. If higher level psychological processes originate in social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978), then it seems reasonable to expect that peer conferences should provide a scaffold for learners by allowing them to observe higher levels of cognitive processing in others, and, thus, to participate in the same practice. When students share their thoughts, ideas are made available for all to inspect, and discussions provide an opportunity to expand students' limited perceptions (Almasi, 1994; Bruner, 1986; Gambrel & Almasi, 1996).

Building understanding through clarification and idea development, audience awareness, and responding to peers does appear to occur during conference talk. However, the answers I sought regarding peer conference effectiveness on revisions of texts were not given to me in any text. Are elementary students able to understand that the conversations they have about a piece of writing should lead to rethinking about their piece, and ultimately lead to revisions in their writing? The purposes of this study are (1) to investigate and share information about the perceptions and expectations elementary students have concerning peer conferences; (2) to observe and share information about the conversations that occur during peer conferences and (3) to discuss what intermediate elementary students perceive to be productive conferences.

Method

Participants

To investigate these inquiries, observations were conducted in a communications classroom of twenty-four fourth- and fifth-grade students, 7 girls and 17 boys in a predominantly white, middle to high income suburban neighborhood in a southeastern state of the United States. All participant names have been changed to protect participant confidentiality. All but two of the students took a statewide comprehensive assessment test for writing last year and the range of scores was 2.0 to 4.5 (on a 0 - 6 point scale). The mean assessment writing score for the class was 3.3. According to standardized tests and district reading assessments these students are all reading at or above grade level.

According to student questionnaires none of these students participated in the Writing Workshop approach to writing the year prior to this study. All of the students reported that they wrote at least three times a week in their classrooms. Most topics were teacher assigned and peer conferences were mostly for editing purposes. Revisions were the result of teacher comments and directions written on individual drafts prior to a final copy. Questionnaire responses relate that last year they did share their writing with their classmates on occasion and some had published "books" of their personal writing during their primary years.

Procedure

Both reading and writing workshop approaches across the content areas were used in the communications class. Current daily Writing Workshop includes various components in a fifty-minute block of time: (1) five to ten minutes of teacher modeling and mini-lessons; (2) silent composing time; (3) self-revision; (4) peer conferencing; (5) revision as a result of peer-conferences; and (6) publishing. During any given day, after the initial mini-lesson or modeling, students could spend the remaining writing time as needed, composing, conferencing, revising, editing or publishing, which included typing their stories on desk-top computers.

Data on peer conferences was gathered in a number of ways. First, individual questionnaires were filled out to determine individual experiences with conferences and students' perceived notions and expectations of conferences. Second, ninety-six individual peer conferences were recorded on audio tapes over a twelve-week period. These conferences were conducted without an adult present because during writing workshop this is what most often happens: students pair up and confer about their writing without the teacher present. Next, a follow-up semi-structured interview with each writer was conducted. Writing

drafts and at least one final copy were obtained from each writer. During each peer conference on a single piece of writing, students used a different colored pen for revisions to differentiate between conferences.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were made of all the recorded conferences. Comparisons were made among all the data collected to see how closely student perceptions were aligned with actual behaviors in the conferences. The preconference questionnaire responses, the engaged behaviors during the conferences, and the individual conferences provided insight about students' preconceived notions as well as their perceptions of how the conferences helped them as writers. The data also provided an understanding that although these students did not always follow the techniques modeled by the teacher, they were able to relate what occurs in a good conference, i.e., good listening skills, talking about the piece, asking questions and offering suggestions.

Questionnaires

A clearer picture of what the term "peer conference" initially meant to these students was obtained through the questionnaire. Four of the students reported not knowing what a peer conference was. Of the other twenty students half of them related that a peer conference involved reading stories and talking about them, while the other half specifically wrote that in addition to listening to the stories, a peer conference meant giving ideas to make the story better. After the students filled out the questionnaires an impromptu discussion took place (I=interviewer). Transcription of the tape the same day provided a recollection much like a videotape of the body language the students presented that is not captured on the audiotape.

- I: Billy, you said there has been a change in the way you've been conferencing since you started in second grade. In what ways?
- B: Well, we'd read it and say what we liked, then what needs to be added, oh, so, no, it's the same.
- C: Yeah, we just basically listen to the stories and say we liked it, and then we tell ours.
- I: How did you learn to do peer conferences?
- C: Well, our teacher Mrs. ___ said to, that's in second grade, our teacher was Mrs. ___, and she said to read our stories to each other and listen and tell what we liked.
- A: Yeah, we listened and said what we liked.
- C: Yeah, our teacher didn't do conferencing like [Ms. C___].
- I: What do you mean?
- C: Like, last year [Ms. C___] told us that we should make changes.
- B: Yeah, but that's when they give you stuff to add.
- I: Explain what you mean "gives you stuff to add."
- C: You mean like details and stuff? (Interviewer gives

a non-verbal cue to continue) Well, sometimes, like if they say to use a really good word and not a baby word like "said" they could say "why don't you use the word replied," stuff like that.

- I: What about you, J___? You wrote that you have changed the way you conference. In what ways?
- J: Well, Mrs. ___ in third grade told us to add details, so we always tell each other to add stuff, I mean you can always add more stuff, and not only that they help me more than when I was in third grade, because like then it was hard to say what you meant, and now they can understand what you mean, so they help us more.

As with these four students the rest of the students relayed that their understanding of what it meant to peer conference was directly related to how their teacher introduced peer conferencing, if it was introduced at all. It would appear that some of the teachers likened conferencing to listening to stories, while others directly taught that students should ask questions, make suggestions to the writer, and that the writer should then add those ideas to improve their writing.

Of the students who reported participating in conferences prior to this year, eighty-four percent ($n=20$) said that conferences help them to become better writers. Two of the students said conferences did not make them better writers because they were good writers already. The remaining students said they were not sure if conferences helped to make them better writers.

Eighty-three percent ($n=20$) reported that they made some changes to their writing after conferences. While all students expected an equitable relationship during peer conferences, forty-four percent ($n=11$) of the students stated that they gave more help than they received. "Help" was reported to be in the form of suggestions for specific details, questions, asking for clarifications, and editing for correct use of conventions. The questionnaire responses also revealed that twice as many students felt that they provided help with idea development while they received help with conventions. They also reported in equal proportions that as listeners they gave more praise than they received. Twenty-four percent ($n=6$) of the students reported having conferences before finishing a piece.

Finally, when asked about revisions, sixty-two percent ($n=15$) of the students reported that they make revisions for themselves because they want their papers "to sound better," and so that they would become "better writers" and for others who will read their papers. Twenty-five percent ($n=6$) of the students revealed that they made revisions for the teacher so that they would receive better grades.

Peer Conference Transcripts

Students were responsible for taping themselves, and there did appear to be an initial excitement about talking into the tape recorder for all of the students. However, very quickly students appeared to get used to the tape player

and began to have the same types of conversations when I was observing in the groups as when I was not present. Each student averaged about four recorded peer conferences per piece of writing.

Most of the modeled peer conferences between the teacher and a student contained much discussion, probing, suggestions, and revisions in the writer's draft in the hopes that the students would emulate the behaviors in their conferences. Nevertheless, while all the conferences were unique, ninety-seven percent ($n=93$) of the conferences began with the writer asking, "What did you like about my story?" following their partner's response with "Should I change anything?"

Post Conference Interviews

In the post conference interviews students reported that the conferences went as expected. Most of them said they chose friends as partners because they were comfortable with each other and could be trusted to provide good ideas. Friends were also chosen because of their honesty and earnest interest in each others' work.

Fifty-eight percent ($n=14$) of the students revealed that they did not know where they needed help before going into a conference, nor did they have any ideas about what to add, and therefore, they waited for their partners to help them out. Thirty-eight percent ($n=9$) disclosed that they wanted help, but did not know what kind of help they wanted. Less than 5 percent ($n=1$) said they did have a few ideas going into each conference, and using their partners as sounding boards, gauged their reactions before adding or deleting information.

Ninety-two percent ($n=22$) of the students said the conferences were good and that they helped them become better writers. The others expressed their uncertainty about the effects of conferencing on their writing, although they did state that they liked conferences.

Over fifty percent ($n=13$) stated that everyone gave them ideas to add to their writing, although in actuality not one student received ideas from every conference. Further probing divulged that forty-six percent ($n=11$) wrote out the suggestions given to them by their partners during the conference, and twenty-nine percent ($n=7$) took notes in the margin and finished developing the ideas later at their seats. The remaining twenty-five percent ($n=6$) said they memorized what was said and added it later to the draft. These revisions were not found in the students' writings.

As the transcripts on individual peer conferences were reviewed and the interviews proceeded, it became apparent that there were four different types of conferences taking place, and that the writers reacted differently to each type of conference. For this study these conferences did not appear to be linear nor to be dependent upon writing expertise.

Types of Peer Conferences

The Sharing/Listening Conference. The Sharing/

Listening conference appeared to take place for most of the students during the first conference. This conference consisted of the reading of a piece of writing and a peer listening and then responding with comments such as "It was good." or "It's perfect. Now let's read mine." The duration of the talk after the writer finished the reading was on average less than two minutes in the Sharing/Listening Conference as the writer just accepted the comments and then became the listener. An amiable tone was noticed in this brief session between Jane and Elizabeth (Sept. 8), who both reported participating in conferences for two years prior to this year.

J: We're conferencing on our favorite thing that happened to us in elementary school. Mine is called Ms. C _____. (She reads her paper.) Oops, I missed something. (She stops reading to write.)

E: It sounds fine.

J: No, I needed to add this because it was what I added after the other conference to make it clearer (continues to read). Well, what did you like about it?

E: I liked about it when you said (laughs) the part about the boy. (laughs)

J: (laughs)

E: I thought it was funny. (laughs) And I like the part when, uhm, the confusing thing, when you got confused you would ask her to explain it, and that was cool, and, uhm, uh, uh, what can I say about it, it was really good.

J: Okay, all right, okay, read yours.

E: My story is Mr. C _____. (She reads) That's my story, what'd you like about it?

J: Uhm, that you guys had partied and danced.

J: That's it, we're good.

E: Yeah, okay.

In the post-conference interviews both Jane and Elizabeth reported that this conference was nonproductive, because they did not feel it contributed to making their pieces better. When asked if these conferences helped them to reflect on their writing before conferring with a second partner, the students reported that they did not. Looking at students' writings after the Sharing/Listening conferences, no revisions were made in any of the drafts. Some students reported going back and adding more to their stories because they had not finished telling the story. When asked if any ideas could have been sparked because of the reading of a draft to a partner, students responded negatively saying that before the conferences they knew they were not done, but they wanted to read them anyway.

The Nonspecific Urging Conference. Nonspecific urging was categorized as students listening to a piece of writing and then making general, or nonspecific, suggestions to the writer. For the writer, the tone of this conference began with an eagerness to receive help and gradually became one of frustration, and finally resignation as the conference seemed to go around in circles, and no help was received. After the reading of the writer's piece, the Nonspecific Urging

conference lasted on average less than two minutes in duration.

In the conversation below, Noah wanted to "get some ideas to make [my writing] better." He entered the conference with the expectation that his partner would help him add ideas.

- N: Uh, what did you like about it?
 C: Well I can't really pick out a certain part, I liked the whole thing.
 N: Is there anything I can change or anything?
 C: Change? Yeah, I think you could add more.
 N: Add more?
 C: Yeah, you can definitely add more, that's about it.
 N: Why did you want me to add anything?
 C: Well, I think you could give more detail about everything and that would help.
 N: Like where?
 C: Everywhere, just think of one point in the story.
 N: Okay
 C: Just think about one point and just add, and then do it with more points.
 N: Like where?
 C: Anywhere you want.
 N: Which part sounded dull?
 C: It was okay, what part sounded dull? Like at the end, it sounded kinda...
 N: (sounds defeated)
 C: Got dull, yeah.
 N: Well, what can I write there then?
 C: I don't know.
 N: Should I say why it was attacking the cage?
 C: Yeah, you can tell why this thing started attacking the cage or the girl.
 N: Okay.

In this conference Noah was earnestly seeking help, but had no idea where to begin to revise. Chris appeared to know that suggestions should be made to the writer, but does not give specific ideas or areas that need improvement. In the post conference interview Noah reported that he was frustrated that Chris did not give him any help. On the other hand, Chris stated that he thought that Noah could have added ideas anywhere, because the piece was so short. When asked why he did not give a specific idea that could be improved upon, Chris responded that he thought Noah should be able to choose the spot, since it was "after all his piece and not mine." (Chris, Sept. 15).

A noticeable characteristic of this type of conference is that the more the writer asked a question, the more vague the answers became. At the end of the Nonspecific Urging conference there was a resigned timber to the voice of the writer, and the conference ended abruptly. Students reported the Nonspecific Urging conference was unproductive and that this conference was the worst kind to have because "in this one they said what they liked, but then they just kept saying add more, add more, but they didn't tell you where, and it was so frustrating, you almost wanted to hit him! (laughs)" (Andrew, Oct. 24). Revisions were not made in

any of the drafts after these conferences. In the follow-up interviews forty-two percent ($n=10$) said they would not seek to conference with these partners again while an additional forty-two percent ($n=10$) said they would conference with these same partners. The other students were noncommittal, relaying that it depended on who else was available for a conference.

A review of Nonspecific Urging conference transcripts showed that fifty-seven percent ($n=14$) of the students who stated that they did not receive specific help during their conferences, did not in turn provide specific help for their peers. Not only was the Nonspecific Urging conference repeatedly described as frustrating, these young writers also commented that it led to hurt feelings, especially if they had just had a Sharing/Listening Conference in which they were praised, and the listener said it was great and nothing needed to be changed. "It's like going from great, don't change a thing, to good, you know?" (Jane, Nov. 6)

The Questioning Conference. The Questioning Conference was marked with numerous questions that should have prodded the writer to add missing details or to explain undeveloped ideas. However, when Jules tried to question Kyle (Oct. 9) the conversation was punctuated with short answers that did not fully expand the ideas.

- K: Jules, what did you like about my story?
 J: I liked that you got over her after she dumped you, and you said you were crushed; that's a good word.
 K: Yeah. What do you think I should add?
 J: Uhm, why'd she dump you?
 K: Because I put lipstick in her ear.
 J: Oh.
 K: What do you think I could add?
 J: Nothing. It's good.

It would appear that Jules does not know how to keep the questioning going nor how to suggest that Kyle could add that bit of information. It might also appear as if the conference was not beneficial to either partner. However, looking at Kyle's draft he did add information to answer Jules' question about why his girlfriend dumped him. On the other hand, Jules began practicing a questioning skill that had been modeled by the teacher – asking "why" questions. Jules would go on to use this skill in other conferences to get the writer to expand on the actions of the characters in other stories.

Although the Questioning Conferences were marked with many questions and answers, very rarely did the questioner suggest that the explanations be added to the paper or the writer take the initiative to ask if that information should be added. During the ninety-six recorded conferences there were a total of 118 questions asked that required expanded explanations, but only six students made revisions after explaining, and only when the listener followed the explanation with "You should put that." or "You should add that."

The tone of this type of conference was usually amiable throughout as the Writer earnestly tried to get the listener to

understand. However, whenever an understanding did not occur between the conference partners, frustration could be heard in the voice of the writer, and confusion could be heard in the voice of the listener as the following excerpt shows.

- C: Trey, would you have putt-putt [golf] after every spelling test?
 T: Yeah, after every spelling pretest. What do you mean, me personally?
 C: No, I mean like everyone, and you'd have a tournament every single time you did that?
 T: Wait a minute! Let's go back to when you said the putt-putt thing. Well, every week only the people who got the hundreds on their pretest would get to do that every week, and what do you mean by tournaments? Like when you said tournaments just now, what did you mean, the four square?
 C: Yeah.
 T: They were for everybody.
 C: Oh. (sounds confused). Do you know, like, (pause) has anyone in your class ever won?
 T: The four square tournaments? Yeah, out of, all right, see there were even numbers in both of the classes, and so we split them up into half of the class goes in these two squares. Half of my class goes into two of the squares until there were four squares, so they divided them up evenly, and it's just whoever who had the highest number of serves, say when you're in King and say it's your sixth serving, and everybody else only got four or three or two and stuff then you'd go onto the finals. The highest in each group goes onto the finals.
 C: Were the finals like in a different school?
 T: No! It's like just right there in the bus loop.
 C: Oh. (sounds confused)
 T: It's not like it was a big thing! (sounds exasperated)
 C: We're done.
 T: Well, did you find any problem with it or what?
 C: No, I think it was pretty good that you remember everything from third grade.

In separate follow-up interviews Camden related that he did not understand the way Trey wrote and could not understand his explanations, "although his explanations were very good. They had lots of details. I just didn't get it." (Camden, Nov.2).

Trey on the other hand thought he was one of the best writers in the class and that "only [Camden] didn't get it. So he couldn't help me. Everyone else thought it was a good piece, and I didn't need to add anything." (Trey, Nov. 2).

In the post conference interviews students reported that the Questioning Conferences were productive as they sparked a lot of conversation, and they as writers had to do a lot of explaining. Transcripts of their conversations confirmed that, although seventy-one percent ($n=17$) of the students explained questions in their conferences, they did not add the explanation to their drafts. Students were then questioned as to why they did not make many revisions

after a questioning conference. "Questions are more like they just want to know something, but suggestions means they think you should add that." (Katie, Nov.9) Katie's response reflected that of the other students - that questions were not viewed as suggestions for improvement.

The Discussion/Suggestions Conference. The Discussion/ Suggestions Conference was as the name implies. There was much discussion about ideas, and the conversation appeared to be a volley of questions, as well as suggestions between the listener and the writer. Ideas appeared to be suggested by both conference members, and the tone of this type of conference was lively and animated. The following is a brief excerpt of a Discussion/ Suggestions Conference between Nancy, the writer, and Alice, the listener. This conference was marked with "should I?" questions. As the ideas flowed freely and rapidly, Nancy seemed most in control of the conference and the direction in which it would go.

- N: ...Okay, then the library had a hedgehog. Maybe I should put that, the hedgehog got out safe since the library was the only one that had a little fire. That's where the fire was, should I put that?
 A: Yeah.
 N: So here's some questions like how did I react? How did the kids react? What did they say? I know I was only in kindergarten, so I didn't pay that much attention, so should I put that in there?
 A: Probably.
 N: The only part of the library that was burned was the encyclopedias, where should I put that? right at the end of the story?
 A: I think so.
 N: The fire was in the library where the gas was dripping, should I put that?
 A: Yeah.
 N: Okay, so that's what I should do? Okay, now it's your turn.

It would at first appear that since Nancy is in control, Alice's role is insubstantial. On the contrary. In this instance, Nancy is using Alice as a "sounding board." She needs someone to listen to her ideas to see if they make sense. Nancy wants to add these ideas, but if they do not make sense to the listener then meaning is not clear. It would appear that Nancy is developing a sense of her readers' needs.

In the post conference interviews students reported that they found this type of conference to be most enjoyable and productive because it caused them to think about their writing. More rereading of the text was involved during these conferences than in any of the others. Also noticeable in these conferences were authors' justifications of why information should not and would not be added to a draft. The Discussion/Suggestions conference appeared to be an avenue for the writer to get immediate feedback on ideas that were not yet developed. "It's like the more I ask myself questions, the more new questions I think of, and then I just want to hear someone say if it sounds okay or not."(Nancy,

Oct. 31).

When transcripts of this type of conference were compared with students' writings, fifty percent ($n=43$) of the total number of revisions were made during these conferences. In follow-up interviews students were asked to explain their reasoning behind the revisions made to their drafts after Discussions/Suggestions conferences. Students related that revisions were easier to make after these conferences because they would discuss a section of the story until it became clear. Jackson's comment (Nov. 16) summarizes the ideas of the students, "You don't know how to write it or even say it out loud, so they can understand it, unless you keep talking about it over and over with them, until they say, "Say it like that, and everybody'll get it!"

Discussion

Implications

It would appear that these intermediate students had definite perceptions about what made productive conferences. However, they were not able to recognize those benefits on their own. Could classroom discourse about the different types of conferences help students to rethink their ideas about conference productivity? As adults we may too readily take the stance that if we model good conferencing skills often in our classrooms, students will imitate our practices. That may be true, but it did not hold up for this group of students. One explanation may be language expertise. When teachers model conferences with students it is usually the teacher who initiates the conversations, and when student responses are short, we use a variety of questioning skills to probe for further information until the student fully participates in a dialogue. As teachers we know the kinds of questions to ask in order to fully understand what a writer is trying to say. However, this type of probing did not occur within peer conferences in this study. It seemed students tried to ask questions that would clarify meaning for them. Nonetheless, when the explanations just confounded their thinking they appeared to give up without a clear understanding of what the writer wanted to say. Elementary students may lack the level of language and thinking expertise to produce and practice such dialogue on their own.

Another important implication from this study is the necessity of monitoring student conferences. Sitting in on conferences daily will provide teachers with insights on how their students conference and what questioning and revision skills need to be introduced and developed. Furthermore, skills may be discussed in a timely manner and address the immediacy of students' needs. Teachers provide the link to the next step of growth in their students conferencing and writing development.

Conclusions

Conferencing appears to be beneficial to young writers.

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These intermediate writers seemed to realize that talking about their writing helped them become better writers. These young writers also assumed that they were already good writers based on how much feedback they received and that it was the conference partners' responsibility to help them make the paper better. If they received few suggestions the students perceived that their writings were "good." It does not appear that the students gave consideration to the fact that the amount of feedback was determined by their partners' expertise.

In their later conferences some of the writers did take more initiative in beginning the discussions as well as contributing most of the ideas followed by "what do you think?" Although this is heartening news, well over half ($n=16$) of the student authors still did not know how to rethink their drafts by themselves and had difficulty talking about revisions. All of the students concurred that peer responses were valuable, albeit they did not know how to use the value of the responses. Teachers need to scaffold conferencing development by helping students hear and use good questioning and response skills.

Practice and discussion was what these students needed in order to begin thinking about the role of peer conferences in the writing process. Elementary classroom educators need to understand that because of the nature of learning and the different developmental rates of students, they may not see the big gains they expect just because they model what the students should be doing. How do elementary teachers help students gain expertise in conferencing, or is this function not appropriate for their students' levels of expertise? This raises the question of how much modeling helps. Are we expecting a level of expertise and ability to make specific suggestions beyond the abilities of elementary students? Daily writing practice, conferences and discussions about what went on in the conferences appeared to help students construct their own knowledge of the writing process. However, even if teachers model the "how" of peer conferences, how do parallel peers raise each other to a higher level of literacy "consciousness" when it may be above what they already know? In other words, are elementary students able to scaffold learning for each other? Perhaps small-group conferences in which help comes from a variety of sources and levels of expertise in a single sitting may be more appropriate for elementary students than one-to-one peer conferences.

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