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THE OVER-THE-SHOULDER CONFERENCE: TEACHING AS CHILDREN READ

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In most classrooms, at one time or another during each reading lesson, the teacher can be seen bending down, looking and pointing at a book or notebook on some student's desk and talking to the student about the material being written or read. This interchange can be labeled an "over-the-shoulder conference."

Over-the-shoulder conferences are not replacements for formal conferences at the teacher's desk, nor for the disciplinary conference outside the door, but rather are brief, less-structured encounters. Over-the-shoulder conferences, loosely defined as the teacher interacting about reading material with a student at the student's seat, are neither unique nor novel. Nearly all teachers have worked with students in this manner. However, few teachers seem to make use of over-the-shoulder conferences in a systematic fashion which maximizes their effectiveness.

Advantages

Over-the-shoulder conferences have some definite advantages over the more typical, sit-down, face-to-face conference. Over-the-shoulder conferences are spontaneous: The teacher moves around the classroom, exploiting instructional moments as they occur. They are short: The teacher spends a maximum of three minutes with students, and with most students, that time can be reduced to one or two minutes. They are easy: There is no preparation required. And, furthermore, they are timely: The teacher is there when needed or wanted, rather than when an appointed time occurs.

Another advantage of the over-the-shoulder conference is that it leads to increased teacher awareness of what actually is occurring in the classroom. The peripatetic teacher (one who moves around the classroom) should be ready to learn as much as the students. Circulating among students, the teacher can pick up tangential and specific information about students and their progress by carefully observing (with all senses) the types of activities students are engaged in and the manner and ease with which they go about working on their tasks. And, of course, though the circulating is not meant to be threatening, the teacher is monitoring on-task behavior. With the teacher likely to stop by at any time, students tend to remain actively involved with their assignments.

Purposes

Over-the-shoulder conferences are both similar to and different from the more traditional sit-down conference. Many of the same types of activities are feasible in either conference. Teachers of reading use sit-down conferences for three reasons: to diagnose, to instruct, and to deepen appreciation for reading. In over-the-shoulder conferences, the teacher consciously attempts to accomplish these same three purposes while circulating among students in the classroom. However, equal time will not usually be devoted to all three purposes. While diagnosis will consume a large portion of over-the-shoulder conference time, remediation will take relatively little. There are two reasons for this: The teacher is spending such a short time with the student that effective remediation would be difficult, if not impossible, and over-the-shoulder remediation would be so fragmented that the student would profit very little from the help. Over-the-shoulder developmental instruction, however, can be quite effective, since the student demonstrates a need for a particular kind of help with his reading at a particular time and the teacher can relate to that need without being unduly concerned about integration with other skills. Such incidental teaching may or may not remain as part of the child's knowledge base, but the likelihood is great that it will, since it was meaningful instruction given at the moment of need.

The Teacher's Role

The teacher's role in over-the-shoulder conferences requires greater intensity than is required for sit-down conferences, even though the conferences have less depth. A one- to three-minute conference which focuses on one or two items cannot begin to yield the amount of information to be gained from a sit-down conference. Another major difference is that teacher preparation is unnecessary. The peripatetic teacher shouldn't normally pre-plan the probes (or tentative, exploratory questions) to be used during the over-the-shoulder conferences, although, of course, it can be done. However, such pre-planning locks the teacher into a set of behaviors and activities and limits spontaneity, which is one of the key strengths of the over-the-shoulder conference. The teacher who is cognizant of the reading process and who knows students well enough to identify their major strengths and weaknesses can react to students' needs as she looks over their shoulders.

Guidelines

Conducting over-the-shoulder conferences is simple if a few guidelines are understood and adhered to. The teacher carries a stack of note cards on these meanderings, one for each student in the class, with the students' names on the top of the cards. The teacher records the date while observing a student and then begins making notations throughout the observation and the conference itself. Dating the jotted

down notes has value for the teacher to check on who has not had a conference recently and also to give the teacher dated, annotated information to use in compiling grades, planning instruction, preparing for parent-teacher conferences, and for sharing with any other teachers who may teach the student. It is crucial that this information be available to students. The teacher may want to spend one of the over-the-shoulder conferences sharing what has been discovered during previous over-the-shoulder conferences rather than probing for new information. Or the teacher can file the cards so that students can locate them and read for themselves what strengths and weaknesses in reading the teacher has determined them to have. Students have the right and the need to know what they are doing and why.

Another guideline for conducting successful over-the-shoulder conferences is to randomize the selection of students. It is counter-productive to go person-by-person, row-by-row. It is equally ineffective to always select those students with the largest number of reading difficulties, though it is a temptation to give them “a little more help.” If the teacher conducts lock-step, round-robin, over-the-shoulder conferences, the students who need help or whom the teacher should talk with for other reasons, lose out. The teacher is *not* right there when wanted or needed, and students can determine when they are going to have their conferences and “plan” to be off task for a period of time. Also, if only those who are in difficulty have over-the-shoulder conferences, then the conference, students tacitly understand, is for “dummies.” It is a subtle, yet effective means of classroom segregation.

Over-the-shoulder conferences are to be conducted while students are engaged in seatwork (worksheets or other assignments). The teacher then circulates among the students as unobtrusively as possible, a skill which increases with practice. The teacher goes to students who either signal for a conference or who the teacher determines need a conference on the basis of the dated note cards. The teacher should balance these two selection methods, letting neither one be the sole determinant of the over-the-shoulder conference participants.

The teacher stands behind or to the side of the student during the conference. Standing is important since conversations tend to be shorter if one is standing. If the teacher sits down by the student for the over-the-shoulder conference, the chances are greater that the conference will tend to be longer than the few minutes it should be.

Cautions for the Over-The-Shoulder Conference

The over-the-shoulder conference must be considered supplemental to other conferences or instructional lessons since they are of neither the length or intensity of regular conferences. Over-the-shoulder conferences provide the teacher with additional information which, taken with the information obtained from more traditional sources, can aid the teacher in preparing instructional materials and lessons for the students.

The teacher must also take special pains to relieve student anxiety about over-the-shoulder conferences. The regular, sit-down conference is one the student or teacher has scheduled for a mutually convenient time. The student, also, prepared for this type conference and considers teacher-questioning as an essential, if not welcomed, component. But, the situation may be less relaxed if the students know that at any moment, without prior warning, and with no preparation time, the teacher may descend upon them for a mercifully, short time.

The teacher must communicate that these conferences are valuable to her as well as to the students. It is critical that teachers share their jotted-down notes with students. Doing so not only informs the student about the skills being taught, but why those skills are important to the student's success in reading. It is just as important for the students to know their strengths as it is for them to know their weaknesses. Furthermore, students' self-concepts can be enhanced if they know the teacher has observed them performing well.

Over-the-shoulder conferences must be kept short. One- to three-minutes is sufficient to make the one or two probes used during the conference. Any additional time may be counter-productive and will certainly limit the number of over-the-shoulder conferences which can be conducted in a period of time.

Summary

Over-the-shoulder conferences can be a powerful addition to the classroom teacher's repertoire of assessment/teaching strategies for teaching reading. The teacher's expertise, energy, and creativity are the only real limits on the quality of the over-the-shoulder conference. While teachers can greatly increase their knowledge of students' understandings, work habits, and skills, over-the-shoulder conferences are taxing (no doubt), since the teacher must be constantly alert to "teachable moments" and the best ways to use them. But, for the teacher who wants to systematize and incorporate over-the-shoulder conferences into daily classroom use, the benefits are well worth the effort required.