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Conferring With Elementary Students to Enhance Literacy Skills

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CONFERRING WITH ELEMENTARY STUDENTS TO ENHANCE LITERACY

SKILLS

By

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Introduction

Rationale

In my early years as a teacher, I struggled to find a way to meet the needs of all my students in reading and writing. Walking into my classroom my first year as a second grade teacher at a local suburban school, I was very naive to the wide range of needs that my students would have. As I started teaching, I found the hardest part was figuring out their exact needs. I tried a variety of strategies, but the strategy that seemed to stick the most was meeting with students frequently on an individual basis. Meeting with them one-on-one allowed me to determine what each student needed in order to improve his or her reading or writing. I could then make a plan for how to help them, which usually included meeting with them individually to ensure this growth happened. Now that I am three years into my teaching career and have tried out a few other ways to help improve the literacy (reading and writing) of students, I am still drawn to these one-on-one conferences, otherwise known as conferring. This has led me to my question: *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?*

Within this chapter, I will first discuss my personal experience with conferring. Then, I will describe my own professional connection related to my work in the classroom as well as how an expert in the world of education would define conferring. Following this, I will highlight the possible stakeholders involved in my research on conferring and the significance of this capstone project. I will conclude by breaking down the additional chapters of this capstone project.

Experience

As I introduce this topic I will begin by outlining my personal experience with conferring as a student. Transitioning into my professional experience, I will lay out my experience with conferring as an educator as well as some learnings I gained from a conference I attended.

Personal Experience. As I think of conferring, I am brought back to my pre-service training to become a teacher. Towards the end of student teaching, my cooperating teacher encouraged me to observe other classrooms in the building. As I looked at the schedule of almost all elementary classrooms, I saw the words "Reading Groups" or some variation of this. I decided to investigate to see how other teachers use this time with their students. These observations led to my initial confusion of what reading groups should be/look like in a classroom. The format was very different depending on the grade level or classroom that I was in. I went back to my college cohort and asked other student teachers what their structured reading groups looked like, which furthered my confusion. I came to the conclusion that guided reading groups looked different depending on the district, school, grade level, and even teacher.

This experience caused me to think back to my own experience growing up with guided reading groups. My first experiences go back to my suburban elementary school with my second grade teacher. There was always the "best teacher" in each grade and in second grade, that was my teacher. She was younger, encouraging, and the mom of one of my best friends. I couldn't wait to start the year with all of my friends and my teacher. I was enjoying every part of school, all except for the dreadful time after lunch. After lunch each day we had our reading block. At this time, we brought out our big textbooks

and our workbook. Some days we read aloud in a popcorn reading style, some days we read on our own and answered questions in our journal and some days we filled out a workbook page. Each day we did this, my love of reading slowly decreased. It was boring, difficult, and anxiety inducing.

After class each day, I went home to my mom, dad, and sister. My sister was three years older than me and had a passion for reading. As I got home each day we had a snack and would read together on the couch. We would often read picture books or Junie B. Jones, and I just loved the way my sister helped me read. She gently led me to become a better reader. She would help me sound out tricky words and we would discuss what happened in the story. We discussed the characters, the problems and solutions, and how we could relate the characters or the problem to our lives. Eventually, with her increase in homework and the start of after school sports and groups, we could not read together as much, but she did not leave me alone to read. She would give me books to read, books that she had previously read and enjoyed. When she got home after her busy day at school, she would ask me questions about my reading. We had discussions about the characters and explored how the characters changed over the book or over a series. Our reading together had purpose and she helped coach me through it all. My reading at school had no purpose besides to please the teacher and get a good grade for my report card.

Professional Experience. I saw the same need for this type of coaching and purpose from my own students. Starting in my first year of teaching, I was insanely overwhelmed with everything that came with being a new teacher. I was trying to find a way to meet the needs of all of my students through large group instruction while also

figuring out a way to meet the needs of my students individually. I struggled to implement the various types of groups including guided reading groups, strategy groups, and book clubs. I felt jumbled in all of the requirements that came with meeting with small groups. I found myself leaning instead to where I was most comfortable, meeting with students one-on-one. At this time, I did not label it as "conferring," but I did meet with students to help them with whatever they needed. During this one-on-one time, I worked with students on engagement around reading, reading strategies, fluency, and comprehension. Whatever the student needed I was able to focus on it with them. I spent the most time with students who needed help finding a purpose behind reading, just like my sister did for me.

As I moved into my second and third years of teaching, I began to feel more confident in guided reading groups, books clubs and even the occasional strategy group. However, I was missing my consistent one-on-one meetings with my students. My students desired to have this personal connection. They desired to read to me one-on-one. They desired to become better readers and to hear tips on how to become better writers. They desired to be complimented on their hard work individually. Although I felt the desire to confer with my students on reading and writing, I did not feel that it was a practice that was encouraged, at least at my school. We were encouraged to meet with students in a small group for reading so that we could reach more students at once. Individual conferences were a little more acceptable for writing because the differing needs of the students were more visible, but I still did not feel like it was encouraged. It was not something I received training on until I attended a conference over the summer

titled "Reading Conferences: Powerful Goal-Directed Instruction Using Skill

Progressions."

      This past year, I attended the Summer Literacy Institute at Hamline University

and attended a session by Jennifer Serravallo where I was finally able to put to words

what I viewed was so necessary for myself as a young reader as well as for my students.

She discussed this idea of conferring, which brought me right back to the couch with my

sister reading Nancy Drew. Jennifer Serrvallo (2019) defined conferring as, "tailoring

your instruction to each student's strengths and needs" (p. 1). The Oxford Dictionary

(2020) defines conferring as, "to discuss something with somebody, in order to exchange

opinions or get advice." Conferring is a conversation with the student in order to work

together to improve as a reader or writer. When an educator confers with a student, the

educator and the student sit side by side to discuss their reading or writing (Allen, 2009).

This is not a time for the educator to do all of the talking, but rather for the educator and

the student to examine the student's reading and writing skills and strategies to

determine, together, how to improve them (Calkins, 2013).

      Serravallo (2019) highlights that there are a lot of components to the conferring

process, but they all involve the teacher, the student and books. During this personal

connection with the student you can be assessing the student, coaching or teaching them a

strategy, complimenting their growth, creating a goal with them, or even doing a

partnership and club conference (Serravallo, 2019). Serravallo (2019) emphasizes how

conferring is really a way to honor the literacy of each student: "Conferring helps

teachers do the important work of seeing the rich and beautiful variety of individual

students in the classroom, and to honor and cherish where each student is with their

learning" (p. 1). Conferring allows the educator to meet the educational needs of every student in their classroom.

Leaving this conference, I felt motivated and encouraged that conferring can not only help my students improve their literacy skills but also help their social emotional growth through the personal connections. Going into this school year, I had every intention of setting up my literacy block around conferring. Even with this great intention and drive, I have struggled greatly. I have struggled to organize my time and materials in order to make conferring beneficial. Timing, organization and creating individual instruction and goals are a few things that I struggle with while implementing conferring. I hope that from this research and project that I can get a better understanding of what conferring is and how to implement it in order to see growth in the literacy skills of my students. I also hope to gain the research needed to present the benefits of conferring and how to successfully implement it to my colleagues at my school.

Significance of Capstone Question

There are many stakeholders that I can think of when it comes to conferring including parents, students, and families. Conferring can help students and their parents because with positive family-school connections, teachers can share about the conferences with parents, who can work on the strategies at home. In my opinion, the main parties that will benefit from conferring are educators and their students. Conferring will directly impact students and teachers for a number of reasons. Teachers can both meet the individual needs of their students as well as develop personal relationships with their students while working on their reading and writing one-on-one.

Currently at my suburban school we are in a balanced literacy reset, which means that we eliminated our reading curriculum and have instead implemented the different aspects of balanced literacy with our priority standards. The different aspects of balanced literacy, as defined by Fountas and Pinnel are whole group instruction, small group instruction, shared reading and writing, independent practice and assessment (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). We are in our third year of this reset and overall the teachers at my school struggle to fit all of the aspects of balanced literacy into their school day. There are a lot of different parts of balanced literacy and not a lot of time during our school day. Doing this research on conferring might be a way to solve this problem to help alleviate some of the pressure on the teachers.

As Jennifer Serravallo (2019) explained, there are many different types of conferences that should happen between a teacher and a student. These include an assessment, goal setting, teaching/coaching, naming strengths, and collaborative conferences. Conferring could cover and help improve many aspects of balanced literacy, including the assessment, small group instruction and independent work. Conferring could also help teachers implement the Gradual Release of Responsibility model, another aspect of Balanced Literacy (Bingham & Hall-Kenyon, 2013). With conferring, teachers provide support at first but then allow students to work on the strategy independently, similar to gradual release of responsibility. I look forward to learning more in my research and sharing it with my colleagues in order to help alleviate some pressure around literacy by using the conferring process.

Conclusion

This chapter served as an introduction to the professional and personal context of my research and project. Throughout my research, I hope to answer the question: *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* My personal experience with conferring as a young girl with my sister was one that greatly impacted my literacy growth and my love of reading and writing. Although I received this one-on-one support at home, I wonder what my experience and literacy today would be like if I received the same instruction as a student. This wondering has led me to want to research and implement conferring in my classroom so that my students will have a similar experience. Professionally, I hope that I can create a professional development to help inform and encourage my colleagues to use conferring in their classrooms.

In Chapter Two, I will explore and review the literature surrounding the different components of conferring. Chapter Two will begin with an explanation of conferring by various experts in the field and then will then focus on the three main components and research supporting the effectiveness of them in the classroom. Chapter Three will highlight the specific details and rationale of my professional development on conferring. Chapter Four will conclude with my reflections and plans moving forward.

CHAPTER TWO

Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to determine the benefits of conferring with students in reading and writing. In chapter one, I addressed my personal journey with the process of conferring, both in my own education and as an educator. In this chapter, I will review research that answers the question, *how does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* The term conferring is fairly new to the field of education, but the aspects that make up conferring are well researched and deemed effective in education. For this reason, much of my research will be on the effectiveness of the three main aspects of conferring: assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting (Serravallo, 2019).

This literature review will start with an in-depth explanation of what conferring is based on definitions from current experts in conferring. This first section will identify and briefly introduce the three main components of conferring, assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting. This will serve as a segway into the next three sections which will include more in depth research and the connection to conferring for assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting. The research will prove how conferring helps improve the literacy skills of elementary students. Each section will have a connection piece that will explain what it looks like in the conferring process based on the experts. Not all literacy experts think that conferring is the best form of literacy instruction (Reutzel & Clark, 2011; Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). The next section of this chapter will explain those who are opposed to conferring and their reasoning. For this

Capstone Project, I will be creating professional development, so this chapter will continue into its last section on effective professional development strategies. The chapter will end with my personal connections and a chapter summary.

Conferring Experts and Definition

The term "conferring" is rather new to the world of education, but the foundational ideas and the specific aspects of conferring are timeless. In this first section of research on conferring, I will break down the definition of conferring by experts in the field and identify the individual aspects of conferring, which are formative assessment, individualized assessment and goal setting.

Conferring as Defined by the Experts. There are a few recent literacy experts who have focused their research and attention on conferring. The first researcher is Patrick Allen (2009). Patrick Allen is a current educator and the author of a book called *Conferring: The Keystone of Reader's Workshop* (2009). Allen (2009) defines conferring as an art, as he explains, it is, "an active process wherein we sit side-by-side with children, put ourselves in the moment, listen carefully, and reflect and respond in ways that encourage and nudge them forward as learners" (p. viii). Conferring, according to Allen (2009), is a time to individualize instruction for students in reading or writing in order to move students toward independence. Along with helping students academically, conferring also provides educators the opportunity to get to know our students personally (Allen, 2009).

Allen (2009) also discusses the difference between a conference and conferring. A conference is the actual meeting between a teacher and a student (Allen, 2009). Conferring is the process that happens during this conference (Allen, 2009). The

conference is the meeting or the thing, while conferring is active engagement in the meeting (Allen, 2009). For the purpose of this paper, I will use these two words interchangeably.

Below is a quote highlighting the importance of conferring and the vast ways that conferring is used in Allen's (2009) classroom:

Conferring provides an opportunity for my students and me to discuss and explore ideas together - everything from word-level strategies used to uncover the meaning of unfamiliar words to understanding how sensory images can deepen a reader's understanding of texts. Conferring helps me uncover a reader's learning in a manageable, thoughtful way while leading to documentable data - everything from how he or she is determining the attributes of a character's emotions to how book choice is affecting the reader's understanding of the text he or she is reading. Conferring helps me find out new things about the reader and provides an intimate opportunity for a shared "coming to know" - everything from the variety of texts a student chooses to his or her burgeoning understanding of how the life cycle works during a read of nonfiction. Conferring naturally becomes a thinking routine that is valued and appreciated by both my students and me (Allen, 2009, p. 32-33).

In this quote, Allen (2009) discusses one of the components of conferring, which is individualized instruction. Our students are all at vastly different levels and all need different strategies and levels of support. Conferring allows the educator a chance to offer individualized instruction and support to the students (Allen, 2009).

Another expert in the field of conferring is Jennifer Serravallo (2019). Serravallo spoke on and authored two books relating to conferring. In her most recent book titled *A Teacher's Guide to Reading Conferences* (2019), Serravallo defines conferring as individualized meetings to adjust instruction to each student's strengths and needs. Serravallo (2019) further describes conferring as, "a conversation with a student, a time to offer individualized instruction, a time to provide assessment-based guidance, a time to offer guided practice and feedback, a time for students to work, a time to teach the reader" (p. 3). Along with identifying some things that conferring is, Serravallo (2019) also emphasizes that there are some things that conferring is not. Conferring is not a quiz to test the knowledge of students, a time to reteach the whole class lesson, or a time for only teacher talk (Serravallo, 2019).

Serravallo (2019) emphasizes that conferring is a time where the instructor can sit and listen to your students, not just a time for direct instruction. Conferring involves the teacher taking a step back and doing research on the student while they are discussing their reading or writing. In conferring, the student is not the only one learning. The teacher is also learning about the rich background and strategies used by the reader/writer to identify where the student is with their learning (Serravallo, 2019). This highlights another component of conferring, assessment.

Jennifer Serravallo is also the co-author of another book on conferring with Gravity Goldberg titled *Conferring with Readers: Supporting Each Student's Growth & Independence* (2007). Goldberg and Serravallo (2007) emphasize how literacy, including reading and writing, is a very personal experience and is different for every student. Goldberg and Serravallo (2007) highlight that a student's reading or writing, the

strategies students use, and the opinions and feelings they share, vary from student to student. Student literacy is very personal and our instruction should match this as well. Conferences, where the teacher is working one-on-one with students to emphasize their strengths and provide strategies to continue making growth towards independence, is a way to make instruction much more personal (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007).

An influencer of Serravallo and Goldberg (2007) is Lucy Calkins. Lucy Calkins is a coauthor and the series editor of the reading, writing, and phonics units in the *Units of Study curriculum* (2013). In Lucy Calkins' book *A Guide to the Writer's Workshop*, Calkins (2013) emphasizes how conferring is a way to give individual feedback to students. Meeting one-on-one with students is a great way to emphasize strategies that students are doing well as well as things that they need to work on (Calkins, 2013). Calkins (2013) explains that her conferences have both a compliment, or something that students are doing well, as well as a teaching point to help move the student forward in their reading journey.

In her writing, Calkins (2013) brought in research by John Hattie. Although Hattie has no research or information on conferring directly, he does have a lot of research on individualized instruction and feedback (Shaughnessy & Moore, 2008). Hattie in his research on best practice in education found that teachers need to meet the wide range of student's learning strategies (Shaughnessy & Moore, 2008). In order to meet the needs of each student, the teacher needs to appropriately challenge the students and then provide individualized feedback and instruction to meet the challenge (Shaughnessy & Moore, 2008). Educators need to find the correct level of challenge that is not too hard or too easy (Shaughnessy & Moore, 2008). Once you have found the appropriate challenge for

each student the educator must then provide feedback to assist them in meeting this challenge. Hattie explains this by saying, "The greater the challenge, the higher the probability that one seeks and needs feedback, but more important is that there is a teacher to ensure that the learner is on the right path to successfully meet the challenge" (Shaughnessy & Moore, 2008, p. 1).

Aspects of Conferring. All of the experts listed above identified what they envision a conference will look like and the specific aspects of it. While they all labeled different names for the aspects of a conference, all of their aspects fit well into three components; assessment, individualized instruction and goal-setting. This next section will serve as an introduction to how each conferring expert uses assessment, individualized assessment, and goal-setting in their conferences.

Assessment. One of the benefits of conferring is the opportunities it allows for assessing students. One way to do this is what experts call an assessment conference (Serravallo, 2019). In an assessment conference, the educator is getting to know where the reader or writer is on their journey (Serravallo, 2019). The educators job during an assessment conference is to observe the student in their literary work in order to understand what they need more practice on (Calkins, 2013). There are a variety of tools and ways that educators can structure an assessment conference, including using open-ended questions or a running record. These will be covered later in this chapter.

During an assessment conference, the educator gains a great perspective of where the student is academically. The educator is observing and listening to the student to gain an idea of their strategy knowledge, or what strategies they are effectively using and what strategies they are missing (Allen, 2009). Over a few assessment conferences, patterns

begin to emerge on what a student is missing from their reading or writing. These "patterns that emerge over a period of time provide a detailed portrait of the reader" (Allen, 2009, p. 15) and allow you to recognize what direct instruction needs to be provided.

As the conferences increase over the year, the educator also gains information on historical patterns of the student's academic growth. During these multiple conferences, the educator can see the improvement of the student over time (Allen, 2009). All of the patterns of growth of the reader or writer can be documented into records. Leaving these assessment conferences, the educator now has detailed documentation of the student's strengths and areas of growth as well as an idea of where to start instruction (Allen, 2009).

Over time, these assessment conferences could turn more informal as the educator and student begin to learn more about each other (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). If the educator notices what the student needs academically without having the assessment conference, this component does not need to happen formally.

Individualized Instruction. After doing the assessment conference to determine what skills the student is missing in order to improve in their reading or writing, the next component is to individually instruct the student (Allen, 2009). Now that the educator knows what skill the student is missing, they can develop strategies to help them reach this goal (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). During this conferring time, the educator will explicitly instruct a student by teaching a strategy to the student and allowing them to practice the strategy with the help of the educator (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007).

Typically, during this individualized instruction, the educator would start by complimenting the reader on something that they are doing well in their reading or writing (Calkins, 2013). It is important to compliment the reader, especially at the beginning of the year, so that students feel safe and that they are a competent reader or writer (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). In order for students to feel comfortable trying a new strategy or even opening up to read or share their writing with an educator, they need to feel that the educator is someone who respects them as a reader or writer (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). If they feel comfortable, they will be more likely to take risks and try whatever strategy the educator will provide for them.

After the educator has complimented them on their reading, the educator can now teach the student a specific strategy that will help them grow in their literacy. It does not have to be a new skill each time they meet with the student, in fact it should never be a new skill each time (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). If educators follow up on strategies readers learned at a previous conference, it provides them additional time and space to ensure they can do the strategy independently as well as holds the students accountable to implement the strategy (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007).

Goal Setting. A final component of conferring is goal setting. Many conferences end with the educator and the student having an agreed-upon goal that the student will continue to work on (Serravallo, 2019). This goal will relate to whatever educators previously taught during the individualized instruction. Allen (2009) explains this goal setting process by saying, "An outcome of every reading conference is for the reader to walk away with a plan, or goal, in mind (either one she decided upon, one chosen

together, or one that you as the teacher chose)" (p. 15). Goal setting provides the student and the educator a plan so that both can begin working towards improvement.

It is important to not just end the conference with "good job," but rather with a goal for the student to reach before the next time you meet together (Calkins, 2013). Without an agreed upon goal, the student and educator will leave thinking, "Now what?" If there is a goal, the student has a direction of what they need to work on and the educator has a specific skill that they can find strategies for to provide at future conferences.

Summary. In conclusion, conferring is a process where an educator will sit side-by-side with a student to assist them in their literacy growth. Conferring is a chance for the educator and the student to have real-world, authentic conversations about either reading or writing in order to help that student continue to improve (Allen, 2009). The conferring process will start off with an assessment conference. During this conference, the educator will observe the student while they are reading or writing. The educator will look for a specific skill that the student is lacking in their reading or writing. This skill could be their stamina, work ethic, or a specific skill they are missing like analyzing a character or adding specific details (Allen, 2009). After the educator has identified a specific skill, the educator can provide specific instruction to the student. This instruction will include both a compliment of something the reader is doing well, as well as explicit instruction and modeling of the strategy they are going to implement. This strategy can be a new, or previously addressed, strategy that will help the student independently access the skill they are lacking. The conferring process will end with the educator and the student agreeing upon a goal for the student to work on for the next conference.

In the next sections of this chapter, I will further explore and bring in research on the three main aspects of the conferring process: assessment, individualized instruction and goal-setting. I will highlight what these look like in a conference as well as highlight research that proves these are effective in education. Following that, I will bring in some opposing viewpoints to conferring. The viewpoints will include the view that we should focus our attention on whole and small group instruction and that conferring is lacking the peer interaction important for students' growth. I will end this chapter by providing some research on effective professional development to help with the project part of this Capstone Project.

Assessment

As addressed in the previous section, the first part of the conferring journey is to assess the student to determine where they are at academically. In this section of my research, I will be defining two types of assessments and providing research on the benefits of formative assessments. Afterwards, I will explain some specific types of formative assessment that can be used in a conference. The section will end with a description of what assessment looks like in the conferring process.

Types of Assessment. Assessment plays a huge role in the educational world. For the educator, assessment is used to help determine where a student is academically in comparison to where they need to be. There are two main types of assessment in education: summative and formative assessments (Volante & Beckett, 2011). While both are valuable to our teaching, they serve very different purposes. Volante and Beckett (2011) summarize summative assessments as assessment of learning and formative assessments as assessments for learning. A summative assessment is a test, project or

assignment given at the end of a unit to determine what the student knows now that the instruction is done (Volante & Beckett, 2011). Some examples of summative assessments include an end of unit final or project. Formative assessments on the other hand are given during the instruction to help the educator determine how to adapt instruction or identify which students need extra assistance (Volante & Beckett, 2011). Some examples of formative assessment include short quizzes, exit tickets, journal reflections, or a rough draft of an assignment. Conferring is one example of formative assessment. Although there are benefits of summative and formative assessments, the purpose of this paper is to define and explain conferring, which is a type of formative assessment, so I will only highlight the benefits of formative assessments.

Benefits of Formative Assessment. Volante and Beckett (2011) summarized four major studies on formative assessments. Based on these four large assessments, they found that "specific formative assessment practices have a direct impact on student learning and achievement" (Volante & Beckett, 2011). Volante and Beckett (2011) highlight that when we use formative assessment, we are not teaching to an individual test but rather we are teaching to the individual student. During formative assessments we can determine where each student is individually and then provide individual feedback to the students instead of just giving them a grade and then moving on (Volante & Beckett, 2011). This allows the student and teacher time to change instruction and focus learning in order to meet the end of unit goals (Volante & Beckett, 2011).

Roskos and Newman (2012) took a deeper look at formative assessment as it relates to literacy. They define formative assessment as small, frequent checks on students to identify students that are understanding the material and then using those

results immediately to alter instruction as necessary (Roskos & Neuman, 2012). Using formative assessment in instruction allows teachers to close the gap between what a student is able to do in that moment and what the student needs to be able to do according to the standards (Roskos & Neuman, 2012). When we assess students during the process of learning, educators are then able to identify who needs extra support and give them that support to ensure all students are meeting their goals by the end of instruction (Roskos & Neuman, 2012).

Formative Assessment in Conferring. The main type of formative assessment that educators use in conferring is observing the students and recording reading or writing strategies and processing (Serravallo, 2019). During a conference, the educator's main focus is observing the student and asking them questions to determine where they are at academically. During an assessment conference, educators stop talking and instead take time to listen to the student (Serravallo, 2019). This is different from direct instruction where educators are often prompting students and helping guide them in their thinking and answers. During assessment conferences educators need to stop and listen to the student. When educators take a step back to listen to the student, they will both begin to understand where the student is instructionally, but also begin to connect on a deeper level (Calkins, 2013).

Taking a step back and listening to a student is so important during conferring because this active listening is not something we see in the typical school day and in assessments. Suzanne Porath (2014) did research on the impact of our words during formative assessments, specifically in conferring. Porath (2014) indicated that during most literacy instruction, educators use the Initiate-Respond-Evaluate (IRE) pattern of

communication. In this type of communication, a teacher will ask a question, the student will answer, and the teacher will indicate if the response is correct or not (Porath, 2014). In contrast, the focus of the educator during this formative assessment is to listen to the students' reading or thinking while writing and focusing on authentic questions to guide the students thinking (Porath, 2014).

Keeping Records. Observing and prompting students is important, therefore educators need to make sure they are writing down these observations. Documenting their observations allows the educator to go back to analyze the information the student provided to better guide instruction (Calkins, 2013). MacDonald (2006) highlights the importance of using anecdotal records as well as keeping some other artifacts in order to understand the full literacy story of each student. MacDonald (2006) uses a system called pedagogical documents to help trace the learning of each student. In this type of documentation, you record what the student says as well as collect samples the student has done throughout the year (MacDonald, 2006). This gives you a full picture of how the student's literacy has grown throughout the year to share with the student, their family, or even administration. Observational assessment along with documentation is a great way to assess and record the literacy growth of students, specifically in a writing conference.

Another specific type of anecdotal notes that educators use in conferring is called running records. Marie Clay (2017) explains running records as observing and recording what students do and say while they are reading. During a running record, an educator will observe one student while they are reading (Clay, 2017). As the student reads the book, the teacher records which words the students are reading correctly and which

words are read incorrectly (Clay, 2017). If the student reads the word incorrectly, the

educator will record what type of miscue it is (Clay, 2017).

Not all running records do this, but after the student is done reading, the educator

could ask the student to retell what they read and ask them comprehension questions and

the student's responses are recorded word for word (Gillett & Ellingson, 2017). After the

student is done, the educator can then use this running record to determine what the

student needs educationally. The educator can analyze the running record to determine

what area of their reading this student needs direct instruction and practice in (Gillett &

Ellingson, 2017). Running records can be used as an assessment during the conference to

record the thinking of the student. The results will then be used to inform the educator on

the next steps towards improving the literacy of the student.

The Assessment Conference. The process of conferring with a student should

start with an assessment. While an educator is one-on-one with a student, it is important

that they use this time well (Serravallo, 2019). This time should not be used to reteach the

whole group lesson but rather meeting the individual needs of the student (Serravallo,

2019). In order to meet the individual needs of the student, the educator needs to know

what instruction they need. To discover what individual instruction and practice they

need, the educator needs to assess the student, which is why the first part of the

conferring process is the assessment conference.

In an assessment conference, the educator will sit alongside the student and listen

to their reading or writing process (Allen, 2009). The educator's goal is to discover what

the student's thinking, strategies, strengths, and weaknesses (Allen, 2009). The educator

will ask open-ended questions to discover what is missing from the student's processing

in order to move forward into more complex writing or a harder level in reading (Serravallo, 2019). As the educator is asking questions and listening to the student read or watching the student write, the educator is running through all of the aspects involved in literacy growth to determine what is missing.

Jennifer Serravallo (2015, 2017) provides reading and writing hierarchies that help educators determine what skill is missing from the student's literacy toolkit. In the appendix (figure 1 and figure 2) are the hierarchies that Serravallo (2015, 2017) provides to help educators as they are assessing students. As an educator is sitting with a student, they can ask questions that determine if they have met each of the goals listed (Serravallo, 2015, 2017). The educator should start the top of each list and ask questions geared to each skill listed (Serravallo, 2015, 2017). If they are secure in that skill, the educator can then move down the list and ask about the next skill listed (Serravallo, 2015, 2017). To be secure in a skill in reading means that the student grasps an understanding of that skill within the complexity of the level or book they are reading (Serravallo, 2015). For the reading hierarchy (Figure 2.1), if the reader has become secure in each of the skills, they can move onto the next reading level and begin at the top of the hierarchy again. In writing, the student is secure in a skill when they can display it in multiple different writing samples or in different genres (Serravallo, 2017).

Assessment conferences are the first conference that the educator has with a student. Once a student has become secure with a skill, the assessment conference occurs again to determine the next skill for the student to work on (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). This research phase at the beginning of a conference process is essential for the educator to understand where the student is (Calkins, 2013). Now that the educator

knows what skills the student is missing from their reading and writing instruction, they can then form individualized instruction and then set goals for the student to achieve in order to grow in their literacy skills.

Summary. This section addressed assessment, one of the aspects of conferring. Assessment during conferring is considered a formative assessment because the educator is determining where a student is compared to where they need to be at the end of the unit or year. This assessment allows the educator to determine what skills are missing from their literacy in order to continue moving up in reading levels or improving their writing skills. The educator will use this assessment information to inform their individualized instruction. In this next section of chapter two, I will highlight research on the benefits of individualized instruction and what this looks like in the conferring process.

Individualized Instruction

Now that the educator has done the assessments to determine what skills the student is missing, the next component is to provide individualized instruction for the student. In this next section of chapter two, I will be defining and highlighting the benefits of individualized instruction. I will end with a description of what individualized instruction looks like in the conferring process.

Definition of Individualized Instruction. All of our students are very different and deserve to receive instruction that is at their level (Allen, 2009). As Serravallo (2019) says:

Every child is unique and individual and we have to match our instruction to each. There is a place for whole-class instruction, but most of the time we should work

with kids individually and/or in small groups. And even when kids are in small

groups, it's still important to give individual feedback (p. 28).

All of our students deserve individualized instruction but our students who struggle the

most academically especially need scaffolded instruction in order for them to succeed in

the classroom (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017) Individualized instruction is one way to

ensure our struggling students get the support they need to access the whole group

classroom instruction.

Individualized instruction is meeting with students one-on-one to provide tailored

instruction fit for them. This instruction is designed specifically for the student to help

them grow to meet the needed standards (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). Individualized

instruction includes giving positive feedback for what the student is already doing and

providing students with a strategy to help them in their growth. The positive feedback is

usually a compliment on something they are doing well on. The educator could

compliment them on a strategy they gave them to practice in a previous conferring

session, or just something they are doing well on in their reading or writing (Serravallo,

2019). The compliment can serve to boost the confidence of the student while also giving

them words to describe what they are doing in their literacy work (Calkins, 2013). After

the compliment, the educator will teach the student a strategy to help them improve on

their reading or writing. The educator will model the strategy for the student and then

scaffold the student as they try out the strategy (Allen, 2009).

In schools today there are programs, often intervention programs, that are

designed to provide individualized instruction to students from other teachers other than

the classroom teacher (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). Many of these programs include

a pull-out model where students are pulled out of the classroom to receive individual instruction from a teacher different from their homeroom teacher (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). Although these programs are helpful, research has shown that classroom teachers are the best to provide individualized instruction to students because they know the grade-level expectations, the student's individual needs and where the student is in comparison to their classmates and the time in the school year (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017). Teachers know their students best and should be the person providing individualized instruction to them.

Skill vs. Strategy. During the conference, the educator should be teaching the student a strategy to help them progress in their reading or writing. In the field of education, oftentimes educators use the terms skills and strategies as synonyms (Afflerbach, Pearson & Paris, 2008). These two terms are very different things and the difference helps clarify what individualized instruction should look like. Afflerback et al. (2008) studied these two terms definition, background and history before coming up with working definitions. They define reading strategies as, "Deliberate, goal-directed attempts to control and modify the reader's efforts to decode text, understand words, and construct meaning of text" (Afflerbach, et al., 2008, p. 368). On the other hand, they define reading skills as, "Automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency, and fluency and usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved" (Afflerbach, et al., 2008, p. 368). In shorter words, strategies are tools for students to be able to do these skills independently (Afflerbach, et al., 2008). When you assess a student, you are determining what skill, the automatic action in their reading or writing, that they are missing in order to continue growing. In

order for the student to start doing these skills independently, the teacher provides a

strategy, an exercise to access this skill, during the individualized instruction.

Serravallo (2015, 2017) provides strategies in her books *Reading Strategies* and

Writing Strategies that help students reach the skill they are missing. Referring back to

figures 1 and 2, educators can pick a skill on Serravallo's (2015, 2017) reading or writing

hierarchies. Throughout her book, she highlights a variety of strategies to help students

do this skill independently and automatically in their literacy work. For example, if a

student is struggling with the reading skill of determining the problem and solution, the

educator can provide the student with the strategy of looking to the reactions of the

character to determine the problem (Serravallo, 2015). Providing the student with the

strategy is the individualized instruction.

Benefits of Individualized Instruction. Individualized instruction has a lot of

benefits for both the educator and the student. I have summarized the benefits into two

sections: academic growth and social-emotional growth.

Academic Growth. In many of the classrooms, the whole group instruction is

designed to meet the grade level standards and goals. This helps the majority of our

students but for our struggling students, they are receiving instruction that is too hard for

them (Allington, 2013). Our striving readers are being asked to read and comprehend

books that are too hard for them. Our striving writers are being asked to write well above

what they are able to do independently. While educators are not always able to change

their whole group instruction to meet the needs of every student, educators can meet with

students individually to give them instruction at their level (Allington, 2013). If they

continue to get individualized instruction at their level, the students will most likely move

up to grade level and then the whole group instruction will no longer be unattainable for them (Allington, 2013).

Individualized instruction provides direct instruction at the level of the student, which directly helps our striving students but it can also help our on and above grade level students (Allen, 2009). When we provide individualized instruction to students we are giving them instruction at a higher rigor level (Allen, 2009). We are challenging these students in ways that we might not normally be able to in our whole group instruction (Allen, 2009). All students benefit from individualized instruction.

In a recent study by Liebfreund and Amendum (2017), they studied the impact that individualized one-on-one instruction would have on below grade level readers from kindergarten to second grade students. In comparison to the classmates that received small group support, they found that these striving readers were more confident in their reading abilities, grew in their ability to use their reading strategies independently and were more likely to transfer these skills to their independent reading (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017).

In another study by Connor et al. (2013), they studied the impact of students in first, second and third who received individualized instruction compared to students who did not. Connor et al. (2013) found that individualized instruction in reading is more effective than similar reading instruction that was not delivered one-on-one. The students receiving individualized instruction, especially in the first and second grade classrooms, grew faster in their reading levels than the students who did not (Connor et al., 2013).

The study also revealed that this individualized instruction needs to happen more than one time (Connor et al., 2013). In order for the individualized instruction to be

effective, the instruction needs to happen consistently, especially in the younger grades (Connor et al., 2013). The study also found that if this individualized instruction happens consistently over the grade levels, it is even more effective (Connor et al., 2013). They found that the students who received individualized instruction over their first, second and third grade years had significantly higher reading skills and levels than those who received less or no individualized instruction (Connor et al., 2013).

    Social-Emotional Growth. When educators meet with students on a one-on-one basis, they are building relationships with students that cannot be created in a small or whole group setting (Allen, 2009). When educators meet with students they get to know them personally. They get to know their likes, dislikes, their reading and writing habits, their confidence level (Allen, 2009). Along with getting to know the student, the educator is also building trust and strengthening the relationship with the student (Allen, 2009). The student needs to know that the educator cares for them before they will take in the information they are giving them and try it in their reading or writing (Calkins, 2013). The student needs to know that the educator cares for them and a conference is one way that the educator can show this.

    A part of individualized instruction, especially in conferring is to provide feedback, or academic praise, to students. This praise during individualized instruction has great benefits but the most important benefit is the motivation and engagement of the student (Hale, 2017). If the student hears how well they are doing at reading or writing and what specifically they are doing well at, they will continue to try to use this in their reading and writing. When educators tell students what they are doing well it creates a feeling of competence, and therefore encourages them to continue putting effort towards

their work (Hale, 2017). Academic praise creates motivation in the student to show how well they can read or write.

Along with motivation and engagement, individualized instruction can provide students with needed feedback to help with their social-emotional development (Cassidy, Ziv, Mehta & Feeney, 2003). When students receive instruction and feedback on an individualized basis it impacts how they view themselves (Cassidy et al., 2003). When students receive positive feedback from their educators, this can positively impact the way they look at themselves and their self-image (Cassidy et al., 2003).

Individualized Instruction in Conferring. Individualized instruction in a conference is a chance to teach the reader based on the conversation that happened earlier in the assessment conference (Allen, 2009). After assessing the student to determine where they are at instructionally, the educator is now able to teach the student a strategy that will help them improve as a reader or writer. In this part of the conference, the purpose of the conference is identified for the student (Allen, 2009). The teacher highlights what they want the reader or writer to do to improve.

Individualized instruction in a conference includes two parts: giving feedback and providing a strategy to work on. In a conference, the educator will give the student a compliment on something they are doing well (Serravallo, 2019). This compliment will both help the student feel confident in their reading or writing, as well as help encourage the student to continue doing things that help their reading growth (Serravallo, 2019). An educator telling a student that they are doing a certain strategy well gives the student the words to describe something that they are already doing (Calkins, 2013). This encourages them to continue using this specific skill in their reading or writing (Calkins, 2013).

Along with giving feedback to students, the individual instruction in a conference also includes teaching a strategy to the student. After the assessment conference, the educator has a skill that the student needs to integrate into their reading or writing. The educator can now pick a strategy that they want the student to work on (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). It is important the educator picks the strategy and plans the instruction prior to the conference to ensure the individualized instruction is short and clear (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). The educator will pick one skill to focus on so that it does not overwhelm the student with tasks to accomplish (Allen, 2009). The educator will provide the strategy to the student with the goal of them eventually doing the skill attached to the strategy independently (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007).

To start the individualized instruction on the strategy, the educator should name the strategy the student will be using and then model it for the student (Serravallo, 2019). After the educator has modeled for the student what the strategy is, the student can then try it out in their own reading or writing (Serravallo, 2019). As the student is working, the educator will slowly release the scaffolds so that the student is working independently with the strategy (Calkins, 2013).

Summary. Individualized instruction is meeting with students one-on-one to provide tailored instruction fit for them. After doing the assessment conference, the educator now has skills that the student is missing from their literacy. The educator can identify strategies that will help the student start to implement these skills in their literacy automatically. The individualized instruction will include introducing the strategy and practicing it together. The conferring process ends with the educator and student

determining a goal based on this strategy. The next section will address the benefits of goal setting along with what it looks like in the conferring process.

Goal Setting

As stated in the previous sections, the conferring process begins with the educators assessing the student to see what skills they are missing. After the assessment, the educator will plan individualized instruction to provide positive feedback and strategies for the student to work on. A final component of the conferring process is to set a goal for and with the student. This section of chapter two will highlight what goal setting is, the historical benefits of goal setting and what goal setting looks like in a conference.

Definition of Goal Setting. Goal setting is identifying specific strategies or tasks that individual students will work towards achieving (Schramer, 2018). In literacy, goal setting would be giving a student one strategy to practice independently implementing in their reading or writing (Schramer, 2018). The purpose of goal setting is to encourage the student to practice the strategy in order to successfully implement it in their automatic reading or writing life (Schramer, 2018). Goal setting provides students a chance to self-evaluate where they are compared to where they need to be academically (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Along with knowing where they are academically, it also gives them a road map, or specific ways, to get to where they need to be (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005).

There is a difference between the academic expectation that students have to meet at the end of the year and goal-setting. An academic expectation is the level each student must meet at the end of the unit or year based on the standards (Madden, 1997). These expectations are decided solely by the educator (Madden, 1997). On the other hand, goals

are expectations that the student will meet at any given point in the year (Madden, 1997).

Along with goals occurring freely throughout the year and given units, the educator and

the student individually decide on these goals together (Madden, 1997). Although it is

important to think of two as separate, they do and should intersect. The overall purpose of

these smaller goals that we set with students is to help all students meet the end of year

expectations.

Madden (1997) describes three things that goals should be: specific, an

appropriate level of difficulty and have a close level of proximity. Every goal that

educators give students should be specific (Madden, 1997). Goals cannot be broad like, "I

will improve on my spelling." Goals should be specific so the student knows when they

have reached it (Madden, 1997). Goals should also be at an appropriate level of difficulty

so that the student is able to reach this goal (Madden, 1997). Finally, goals should be able

to be reached in a reasonable amount of time (Madden, 1997). If a goal takes too long to

reach, the student could get frustrated and give up.

All of our students are different and need different things, so each student will

have a unique goal set for them to reach (Newman, 2012). When goal setting with a

student, the educator will usually bring in some data for the teacher and student to look at

together, like a test, reading or writing sample (Newman, 2012). The teacher and student

identify an area the student needs to improve on and then make a plan for how they will

improve on it (Newman, 2012). This plan usually involves jobs that the teacher will do

and jobs that the student will do in order to achieve the goal (Newman, 2012).

Goal setting is a process between the educator and the student (Rader, 2005).

Research has shown that students achieve better in school when they are included in the

goal setting process (Rader, 2005). Students need to feel that they have some self-control in their education (Rader, 2005). Along with the "what" in education, students also need to know the "how" of their education (Rader, 2005). This means they need to be involved in the process of how they will meet their end of year goals (Rader, 2005). Rader (2005) highlights that one way to do this is by setting goals with the student. Including the student in creating goals helps them to understand what they need to do in order to continue to grow (Rader, 2005). Goal setting helps all stakeholders (students, educators, administration, families) know what is needed in order to achieve success and what path we need to take in order to get there (Rader, 2005).

Benefits of Goal-Setting. Goal setting with students improves student's accountability and motivation (Schramer, 2018). When students set a goal either by themselves or with the help of an educator, they have a say in their learning (Schramer, 2018). The student now knows what they have to do in order to improve academically (Schramer, 2018). Students become motivated to meet these goals and improve themselves (Schramer, 2018). Since students are motivated to achieve these goals, they are more likely to stay driven to achieve the goals (Madden, 1997). If the educators and their classmates celebrate when the student achieves their goal, the motivation and accountability continues to increase (Schramer, 2018).

Another benefit of goal setting is that it saves time (Newman, 2012). Many educators do not prioritize goal setting in their classrooms because they think it will take more time to implement but really it is saving time (Newman, 2012). Newman (2012) explained this when he said, "Goal setting is about setting priorities and zeroing in on teaching and learning priorities. When viewing in this way, goal setting is actually a time-

saving tool that helps place everyone in charge of their own learning." This hyper-focus on students' needs helps each individual student grow much quicker than if they only received whole group instruction, which is focused on what the whole group needs (Newman, 2012).

Students become self-directed and independent in their work when they have goals (Newman, 2012). When students have specific goals to work towards, they can begin their work independently because they know what the end result is that they are working towards (Newman, 2012). Students can also begin to celebrate their own successes independently as well (Newman, 2012). Instead of waiting for the teacher to congratulate them on their work, students can begin to see when they are successful on their own because they know exactly what success looks like (Newman, 2012). For the same reason, goal setting can help students who struggle to focus (Newman, 2012). Goal setting gives students one thing to work on. They will be able to focus on one task and easily refocus when they become distracted or overwhelmed (Newman, 2012).

Creating goals with students also makes communication with families about the progress of their students much easier (Newman, 2012). Educators can easily share with families what goals the student is working on at school. This helps the parents to understand where their student is and also how they can help them at home (Newman, 2012).

Meeting with students to create these goals has social-emotional benefits as well. When we meet with students and create goals with them in order to succeed, we are telling the student that they are able to succeed and worth our time in helping them achieve (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Giving small goals to students who have given up

believing they can succeed in their education, gives them small steps to work towards

(Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). After many successes reaching their small individualized

goals, these students will eventually believe that learning is possible (Stiggins &

Chappuis, 2005).

Goal-Setting in Conferring. In conferring, there needs to be a balance of

responsibility when it comes to setting goals with students. Serravallo (2019) explains

that educators cannot simply give the goal to the student, for this creates compliant

students. Educators also cannot allow the student to pick the goal completely on their

own in conferring, for they may pick goals they have already accomplished, or goals that

are not at the correct level of difficulty (Serravallo, 2019). Instead in a conference,

educators will sit next to students and help them reflect on their reading or writing so far

(Serravallo, 2019). The educator will bring in what they noticed during their assessment

and what they worked on for the individualized instruction to find a goal that both the

educator and student agree on (Serravallo, 2019). The goal should relate to the

individualized instruction part of the conference. Based on what you taught the student

during the individualized instruction, the student and educator can make a goal on what

they will work on, related to the strategy you provided, for next time (Serravallo, 2019).

This goal that is decided on by the educator and the student, provides the student

with the next steps that they will be working on between conferences with the educator

(Allen, 2009). The goal gives them something to work on in their independent reading

and writing to continue improving towards the determined skill that is currently missing

from their reading or writing (Allen, 2009). Sometimes when working with students,

educators can end an instructional small group or one-on-one time with a, "good job" or

"keep working" but the student does not know exactly what they did well or what to keep working on (Allen, 2009). Giving them this goal gives them a purpose and the tools needed to independently improve their skills (Allen, 2009).

The goal that you and the student provided should be attainable and something that they can independently work on. One way the educator will know they have given the student a goal that is achievable independently is if when the educator leaves, the student is excited and willing to write or read (Calkins, 2013). If the student is feeling overwhelmed or hesitant in starting writing or reading again, the goal might be too hard for them to attain individually (Calkins, 2013).

One strategy that is helpful to students during the goal setting part of the conference is to make the goal visible to the student (Serravallo, 2019). The educator can put the goal on a post-it note or on a goal-setting form. Having the goal be visible helps remind the student of what work they need to do before meeting with you the next time (Serravallo, 2019).

Not every conference will the educator teach the student a new strategy but you will usually change or alter their goal in some way. It is important to follow up on students on previous strategies to see how they are progressing towards achieving this skill and then edit or alter the goal depending on how the student is progressing towards independently accessing the skill (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). Even if you do not change instruction or the strategy, the educator can still edit the goal. If the educator gives the student the same goal they had at the end of the previous conference, they can become unmotivated or discouraged (Goldberg & Serravallo, 2007). Editing the skill, even slightly, gives the student a new goal to work towards.

Summary. Each conference will end with the educator and the student crafting a goal. This goal will be active steps the student will do between then and the next conference. These active steps will help ensure that the student implements the strategy into their reading or writing. If they implement the strategy into their literacy, the student should become closer to or will be able to use the skill independently and automatically in their reading or writing. The goal is at the appropriate level for the student so they can implement it independently.

Some literacy experts disagree with the pedagogy surrounding conferring. In the next section of this chapter, I will address some of their reasons.

Opposing Viewpoints

Not all literacy experts believe that conferring is best practice in literacy instruction. Some literacy experts believe that small group instruction is best practice because you meet with more students at one time. Other experts believe that conferring is not best practice because it eliminates peer interaction, which is valuable in literacy instruction. This section will highlight these views that oppose conferring.

Small Group Instruction. Conferring is the process of meeting with students individually. Some experts believe that meeting with students individually is not as beneficial as spending that time meeting with students in small groups. Reutzel and Clark (2011) argue that our literacy instruction should be spent with small groups doing tier two instruction. One common thing in education programs today is the Response to Intervention (RTI) program (Reutzel & Clark, 2011). In this program, standardized assessments help determine which students need additional instruction and resources in order to succeed (Reutzel & Clark, 2011). In this RTI program, there are tiers of support

based on how the students score on assessments (Reutzel & Clark, 2011). Tier one is basic whole class instruction, tier two is providing interventions to students based on what they need, and tier three is intensive individualized interventions to students, usually in the special education process (Reutzel & Clark, 2011). Reutzel and Clark (2011) argue that in order to meet all of the students who qualify for tier two support, the educator needs to organize small group instruction instead of individualized instruction. Small group instruction is gathering students who all need help on the same skill and providing instruction and strategies to all of them at once (Reutzel & Clark, 2011). Reutzel and Clark (2011) argue that this is a more effective use of time for educators than individualized instruction.

Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) also argue that small group instruction is best for our differentiated literacy instruction. As educators, one of our responsibilities is to differentiate instruction for our students who need extra support and the best way to provide this is in small flexible groups (Watts-Taffe, 2012). Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) highlight research that indicates that students, specifically in kindergarten to third grade, made the most gains in their literacy when they received small group support. This small group support was flexible so the students moved around in their groups based on what they needed instructionally (Watts-Taffe et al., 2012). Watts-Taffe et al. (2012) emphasize the importance of meeting the needs of all students using small groups that students move flexibly between based on what skills and strategies they need.

Peer Interaction. Conferring with students fosters communication between the student and the educator, but not with other students. Some educators argue that conferring eliminates one very important part of literacy instruction, peer interaction. In

small group instruction, Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) argue that peer interaction is key to students' growth in literacy skills, as well as social-emotional skills. Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) note that small groups, "support dialogue, builds relationships, and promotes critical thinking" (p. 61). When students are working with other students, they get a chance to learn next to and from their classmates (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). This peer interaction helps students to both grow in their relationships with each other because they can gain a sense of trust and respect (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017).

The peer interaction can also help students grow academically (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) studied the impact of small group instruction on teachers and students and they found that the interactions between the educators and the students were very different. Wyatt and Chapman-DeSousa (2017) found that the educator was not always teaching but rather had a facilitator role. The educator would facilitate conversations and learning between the students so they ultimately learned from each other (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). These conversations and peer interaction between the students pushed them to think more critically (Wyatt & Chapman-DeSousa, 2017). Conferring misses this peer interaction that occurs during small groups.

In another study, Matthews and Kesner (2003) looked at the academic and social emotional gains of students who participated in peer interactions in literacy. In this study, Matthews and Kesner (2003) cited a lot of sociocultural perspectives to highlight how peer interactions can positively impact students' self-perceptions of themselves as a whole and as a literate self. Matthews and Kesner (2003) found that the first graders they

studied were highly motivated by getting to work with their peers during literacy tasks but the academic data varied based on the students. They found that students who struggled connecting with their peers or had a lower social status among their peers did not necessarily benefit from peer related literacy tasks (Matthews & Kesner, 2003). All forms of literacy and learning have benefits and drawbacks, just like in conferring.

   Summary. In this section I highlighted two opposing viewpoints to conferring. In one viewpoint, some experts believe that classroom instruction time should be spent either in whole group or small group instruction. Other experts believe that peer interaction is important in the literacy growth of students and conferring does not account for that. After researching both conferring and small group instruction, I do believe that there is a time and space for both small group and individualized instruction in the classroom. To account for the missing peer interaction and time spent instructing more students, small group instruction could be implemented along with conferring.

   In this next section of chapter two I will be highlighting some of the research around professional development. For my project part of my Capstone Project, I will be creating a professional development around conferring. In order to make this professional development beneficial, the research done on best practice for professional development will be highlighted.

Effective Professional Development

   In this section I will be highlighting what are some proven effective ways to organize and implement successful professional development. My Capstone Project will be a professional development sharing the research around conferring as well as some

possible conferring documentation and organization that educators can use in their classroom.

What is Effective Professional Development? The world of education is an ever changing system. In order for educators to know how to continue to provide effective instruction, educators need ongoing professional development and support (Porche, Pallante & Snow, 2012). Effective professional development should, "help teachers incorporate effective elements into their teaching, support their continued use of them, and then percolate the elements throughout a school and ultimately a district" (Porche et al., 2012, p. 650).

Professional development in the world of education is training and activities that help educators more effectively teach (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Effective professional development should result in the teacher gaining more knowledge and practice to implement in the classroom and therefore positively impact the students' learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Aspects of Effective Professional Development. Below I will address some aspects of professional development that have been studied and determined as effective. I have divided these aspects into three subtopics: content or what the professional development should be teaching, delivery or how the professional development should be organized, and educator response or how the educator should feel and be able to do once the professional development is done.

*Content***.** Bates and Morgan (2018) summarize research done on professional development and strategies found to be effective during professional development. One effective strategy used in professional development is ensuring the leader of the

professional development knows the content, including current research and studies on the content, well (Bates & Morgan, 2018). The leader should know all aspects of what is being taught at the professional development and provide opportunities to explore all of the research and information around that topic (Bates & Morgan, 2018).

Effective professional development should not just focus on the subject matter but rather needs to include how students learn (Holland, 2005). Effective professional development should help educators understand how students learn so educators know how to change their instruction to best meet the students' learning habits (Holland, 2005).

Along with ensuring the correct content and pedagogy is addressed, the leader also needs to make sure that the content can directly connect to the curriculum or what instruction is being done in the classroom (Holland, 2005). Holland (2005) highlighted key research that links the likelihood of the strategy being applied in the classroom to the direct alignment the new strategy had to the current curriculum. If the new topic, skill or strategy directly relates to what is already occurring in the classroom, educators can more easily, and therefore are more willing, to apply it to their classroom instruction (Holland, 2005). Educators applying what they learned in professional development to their instruction and classrooms should be one of the top goals of our professional developments.

Finally, the leader of the professional development should ensure that the participants have some background knowledge of the topic (Taylor, 2006). The educators participating in the training should have some previous experience with the topic, and this previous experience should be addressed at the beginning of the professional

development (Taylor, 2006). The adult learners should be given the opportunity to find existing connections to this topic in order for them to find it beneficial or something they can be successful at (Taylor, 2006).

  Delivery. Another aspect that should be in professional development is a variety of active learning opportunities (Taylor, 2006). Just like students, educators do not learn best by being lectured at, they need to engage in the work in order to see how they can apply it to their own classrooms (Taylor, 2006). This might look like looking through students' work, planning units or lessons based on the skill being taught, or participating in discussions around the topic (Bates & Morgan, 2018). If educators engage in active learning on a topic, the information will go from just memorizing the content, to actually implementing it into the classroom (Taylor, 2006). One specific type of active learning that should occur is modeling by the presenter (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). These models can provide the participants with a vision of what the topic looks like in practice (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

  Collaboration is also important when leaders are planning professional developments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Educators should get the opportunity to talk to their job alike peers about what is being discussed in professional developments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Through collaboration, educators can articulate their thinking, participate in discussions and learn from their peers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

  Along with working with trusted peers, the leader of the professional development should also be someone the participants trust (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Professional developments are more beneficial when they are led by an expert from the

school, like a coach or other leader in the school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Along

with being individuals that the educators trust, having the leader of the professional

development be a member of the current school or district allows for access to the leader

for further coaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

   Educator response. The professional development should be able to be directly

implemented into the classroom or in instruction. One way to ensure that the educators

make steps to apply what they learned to their teaching is through reflection (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2017). Reflection in professional development is giving the educators

time and space to determine how the presented information relates to them and their own

teaching (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Giving educators time to reflect on what they

just learned and how it relates to them moving forward is important in professional

development.

   Peterson, Taylor, Burnham and Schock (2009), studied the impact that reflection

conversations between educators and a literacy coach had on their individual instruction.

In their study, Peterson et al. (2009) found that when the leader (usually an instructional

or literacy coach) participated in reflections with educators, the educators' instruction

was impacted. When the coach sat down and had conversations with the educator after

the professional development, they were able to reflect on what their instruction looks

like now and how to effectively include the new learnings into their instruction (Peterson,

et al., 2009). Reflection between educators and coaches can be very powerful and lead to

changes in instruction based on the professional development (Peterson, et al., 2009).

   Professional developments that are done and over in one session have been

proven to be ineffective (Bates & Morgan, 2018). One training on a skill or strategy is not

enough time to effectively learn and be able to apply it to a classroom. The educators

need time and space to learn, reflect and plan before they can implement it into their

classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). This takes time, which usually means

professional developments should be over weeks, months or even years (Bates &

Morgan, 2018). There is no determined best timeline for how long a professional

development should be, but there is significant research that training should occur over

multiple sessions with time between professional developments where the leaders are

available to educators to help them do the tough work of implementing these strategies in

their own classrooms (Porche et al., 2012).

Finally, Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) studied professional

development related to self-efficacy. Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) noted that

the likelihood of educators taking the strategy learned in a professional development and

applying it in their classroom related to the educators' self-efficacy (Tschannen-Moran &

McMaster, 2009). Self-efficacy in educators is their perceived ability to make a positive,

educational difference on all of their students (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

They claim that in order for a professional development to be successful, the educator has

to feel that they can effectively apply the strategy in their classroom and that it will

positively impact their students (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009).

Tschannen-Moran and McMaster (2009) studied which form of professional

development would best create this self-efficacy in educators and they found that creating

authentic mastery experiences for the educators best developed self-efficacy in the

educator around this new skill. A mastery experience here would be the educator being

able to successfully apply the strategy in their classroom. If the educator is able to do this,

usually with the support of the professional development leader, and see the positive

results, they were most likely to integrate this strategy in their typical instruction

(Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Educators need to see that the strategy they are

being taught works in their classroom, with their instruction, and with their students in

order to fully implement it into their teaching tool belt (Tschannen-Moran & McMaster,

2009).

    Summary. Professional development in education is providing teaching,

modeling and guided practice for educators. Effective professional development requires

a leader versed in the content, opportunities for active engagement, collaboration,

reflection and opportunities to engage in the material over other professional

development sessions or with the leader in their own classroom. Professional

development is considered successful if the educators directly apply it in their classrooms

and it helps the overall growth of the students. I hope to use all of these aspects of

effective development in planning my professional development for the Capstone Project.

Below I will summarize the contents of this chapter and cover what will be addressed in

the coming chapters.

Rationale and Conclusion

    Throughout this chapter I have provided an overview on conferring and its three

main parts. When synthesized, the research gathered helps answer the question, *how does*

conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students? The research that I have

provided highlights the effectiveness of conferring, therefore I plan to implement

conferring in my own classroom to improve the literacy skills of my students. Through

this research, I have found many important factors to successfully implement conferring in my classroom.

First and foremost, I need to implement all aspects of the conferring process in my classroom. The process of conferring has three main components that all work together to ensure all of the students' needs are being met. Near the beginning of the process, I need to assess the student to determine what skills they are missing from their reading or writing. This process involves sitting down shoulder to shoulder with the student to listen and watch them read or write.

After I have identified a skill they are missing, I will develop strategies that I can provide to the student to help them develop this skill. This individualized instruction of the strategy should start with complimenting the student so they start the conference feeling confident in their reading or writing. I can then introduce a strategy to the student and provide some guided practice.

At the end of the conference, the student and myself will come up with a goal together. This goal will provide the student with guidance of what to work on in their independent reading and writing until the next conference. This goal should be created with the student so they have some ownership with the process. It should also be visible to the student somewhere in their classroom or materials so they remember the goal.

Another factor to keep in mind while implementing conferring in my classroom is to keep all of these assessments, strategies and goals documented. This data gathered from the conferring process tells the story of each student's growth in their reading and writing. This is beneficial to share with all stakeholders around the student including administration and the family of the student.

Finally, in implementing conferring in my own classroom, I also need to be sure to provide opportunities for my students to engage in peer interaction around literacy. Conferring does not allow for students to engage with their peers when developing their reading and writing skills. I will be sure to incorporate small groups and social interaction around reading and writing.

Chapter Summary. This chapter began with an overview of the exerts of conferring. The experts identify three main components of conferring: assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting. The chapter continued to provide historical research on the benefits of each component of conferring and how it presents itself in the conferring process. After reviewing these three components, research was brought in about some opposing viewpoints to conferring. This chapter ended with research on effective professional development to help plan the project part of my Capstone Project.

With all of this research in the forefront of my mind, I will continue onto the next chapter where I will describe the professional development I will be creating around conferring. Chapter three will include an overview of and research supporting the professional development, the setting and participants of the professional development and a timeline for completing this professional development. Following this, Chapter Four will include my final reflections and plans moving forward.

CHAPTER THREE

Project Description

Introduction

The review of literature on conferring with young readers and writers highlighted the powerful and positive impact conferring has on the literacy (reading and writing) growth of students. The benefits emphasized in the literature review proved that the research question *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* is a relevant and valid question to target and engage in for a professional development. In developing this professional development, I hope to not only inform teachers of the power of conferring on the literacy growth of students, but also provide support for navigating the implementation of conferring in their own classrooms.

In the following chapter, I will describe my project: a professional development on conferring with students. I will begin by highlighting the research and rationale behind my professional development style. Following this, I will explain in detail my professional development and what it entails. The chapter will continue with an explanation of the setting and target audience that this professional development was created for. This chapter will end with a timeline for project completion.

Research and Rationale

In the previous chapter, I did an in depth review of the literature surrounding best practice in professional development. In this section I will summarize the research supporting the professional development practices that I included.

One researched based practice that I included in my professional development is active learning. Almost all of the research I found on professional development

emphasized the importance of active learning. Educators, just like students, need to actively engage in the material instead of sitting through a lecture (Taylor, 2006). In order for educators to feel comfortable with the content and applying it in their own classrooms, they need a chance to actively engage in the material (Taylor, 2006). This could look like practicing the skill with example students, discussing in small groups how the skill can be implemented, or looking at student work samples to see how they can implement the skills (Bates & Morgan, 2018). Research says that when educators engage in active learning on a topic, the information will go from just memorizing the content, to actually implementing it into the classroom (Taylor, 2006).

Another research based practice I implemented in my professional development is to allow time for reflective conversations with trusted coworkers and the leader of the professional development afterwards. Collaboration is a key aspect in education and therefore should be incorporated in professional developments as well (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Having collaborative conversations with subject alike peers can be just as beneficial as listening to the leader of the professional development share (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). When teams are given time to collaborate, they can learn from each other and make a plan for how to implement the skill based on what is best for their students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Educators should also get the opportunity to reflect and collaborate with the leader of the professional development. Research indicated that when educators get the opportunity to sit down and reflect with the coach or leader, they are more likely to implement the strategy or skill into their classroom (Peterson, et al., 2009). During this reflection conversation with the coach and the educator, they can discuss what their

instruction looks like now and how to effectively include the new learnings into their instruction (Peterson, et al., 2009).

The final researched based practice I incorporated in my professional development is to spend more than one session on conferring. Professional development topics shouldn't be covered over just one session (Porche et al., 2012). In order for professional development to be effective, the training should occur over multiple sessions with time between professional developments where the leaders are available to educators to have those reflective conversations (Porche et al., 2012).

Along with researching best practices for this professional development, I also thought reflectively about what I would benefit from a professional development. In my planning, I reflected on what parts of professional development I have found to be the most beneficial. In this reflection, I determined that I learn best when I get the chance to reflect on my background knowledge before beginning. This encouraged me to include a brainstorm at the beginning of session one to allow the educators to reflect on what they already know about each component of conferring. This allowed them to bring their background knowledge forward, while also allowing me to see what they already know.

During this reflection time, I also determined that I have learned some of the most impactful things from participants in the professional developments, not just from the leaders. I have gained many insights from talking to other educators participating in the professional development that I would not have gained from the leader of the training. This encouraged me to include a time in my professional development for a whole group discussion where educators will share out their experiences and advice in implementing conferring.

These researched methods, as well as my own personal reflections, helped form my professional development. In the next section, I will describe my professional development in detail starting with an overview of the entire training and then breaking down into the details of each session.

Project Description

This professional development was designed to span over the beginning three months of the school year. The content was spread out over three separate sessions with time for reflection and working with the coach individually or in grade alike teams between. The first session occurred during workshop week at my school. The next session was in October and the third in November during our monthly professional development work days. The professional development sessions lasted for three and a half hours each.

Along with the three professional development sessions, I was also available to teachers both individually and in group settings to see how they were doing with implementing conferring in their classrooms. After each professional development session and during our monthly staff meetings, I shared ways that I can help teachers as they are learning how to confer with their students. I offered my support in these ways: modeling, co-teaching, observing, offering feedback or planning a conference with teachers either individually or in their grade alike groups.

Session One. The first professional development highlighted what conferring is, some of the background research, and covered the first component of conferring, assessment. I began by introducing myself and identifying my learning targets. Afterwards I addressed what conferring is and explained the three main components of

conferring. I also spent some time reminding the participants of the difference between a skill and a strategy. For our assessment conference we will focus on skills. Strategies will come in during individualized instruction and goal setting. After this I proceeded with some active learning. I set up three stations around the room, one for each aspect of the conferring process. The educators went to each station and brainstormed on chart paper what they envisioned each component looks like in the conferring process. I encouraged them to jot down anything that comes to their mind when thinking about each component in the classroom. These brainstorms were revisited in future professional developments when each component is addressed.

After the brainstorming in the first session, I moved into focusing specifically on assessment in the conferring process. We began by looking at what the teachers believe assessment in a conference would look like based on the brainstorm activity. Then I highlighted what the experts say assessment can look like in the conferring process and some data supporting this. After reviewing some of the research, I played a video of an example conference. This video showed an educator walking through the process of doing an assessment conference. After the video, I provided the participants with a note sheet that can be used during an assessment conference (Serravallo, 2019). This note sheet has questions to ask based on all of the skills on the Reading and Writing Hierarchies (Serravallo, 2015, 2017) and a space to write notes during the conference. We watched the video again and this time the participants practiced using the note sheet.

After reviewing the note sheet, I had the participants break into grade alike small groups. In these groups, they created criteria to determine if a student has proficiency in a skill or if this skill is something that needs to be worked on during a conference. Each

group received one of the skills listed on our assessment note sheet. They created criteria based on guided reading level so I had them work in grade alike groups. I had each group begin at the guided reading level that students at their grade level should end the year with. After showing them an example of what this criterion would look like, I had them work in small groups, using resources provided by our school. They created the criteria on a piece of paper and when they finished I collected them all. After the professional development I compiled all of the criteria together on one document to shared out with the entire staff.

I ended the professional development with the teachers writing down a goal for how they will implement assessment conferences into their classroom during the first month of school. Before leaving I also highlighted for the educators the many ways that I can help assist them in the process of implementing conferring into their classrooms and provided addition copies of the note taking form used.

Session Two. The second session began with a review on the conferring process. Afterwards allowed teachers to reflect with each other on how their assessment conferences have been going in their classrooms. This reflection included sharing with someone near them and then sharing out to the whole group. After the reflection and review of what conferring is, we dove into the main content of the session, which is a focus on individualized instruction, the second component of conferring.

We began by reviewing their brainstorm on individualized instruction from session one. I then focused our attention to individualized instruction during a conference using this statement: "Once you have identified an area of need from the assessment conference, you can focus in on that skill and provide strategies for that student to

progress on that skill." We watched another video example of an educator providing individualized instruction during a conference. In small groups, the educators discussed the assessment and individualized instruction that was demonstrated in the video both in small groups and with the large group.

After reviewing the video, I put the educators in mixed small groups, with members of each grade level. Each group was assigned one skill from the skills we have been reviewing. The group, using resources, developed strategies to help students at various levels and grades become proficient at this skill. Before they began their work, I showed a few example strategies for one skill and then gave the group worktime. They had many resources available to the educators to help aid them in planning of these strategies. Our district has the *Reading Strategies* and *Writing Strategies* books by Jennifer Serravallo (2015, 2017) as a core resource so this was their main resource for developing strategies for individualized instruction during a conference. Similar to session one, I gathered all of the skill based strategies and compiled them into a long list after the meeting. In the end, every educator had a list of strategies for each one of the skills they have assessed for.

The educators then went into a time of planning individualized instruction for one of their own students. Prior to this session, I asked the educators to bring in evidence from one of their assessment conferences, including a work sample or notes from the conference. For the remainder of the session I allowed the educators time to plan individualized instruction for this student using the work samples and the newly created list of strategies. The session ended with me asking how I can assist the educators as they

continue to implement assessment conferences and begin to execute individualized instruction conferences.

Session Three. For the third and final session of this professional development, we reviewed assessment and individualized instruction and then dove into the last component, which is goal setting. I provided the teachers with a Padlet with the questions, "How are assessment conferences going in the classroom? What support do you need?" and "How is individualized instruction going in the classroom? What support do you need?" After reflecting on this Padlet, I began the session with the brainstorm poster paper on goal setting that they created during the first session.

Once the introductory reflection was done, I reviewed what goal setting is and the importance of doing this process with the student. Research was emphasized to show the importance of doing this goal setting along with the student instead of just providing the goal for the student. After covering the research, I broke the educators up into two groups based on grade level. The upper elementary and primary groups watched two different videos of a full conference. These conferring videos showed the assessment, individualized instruction but had an emphasis on the goal setting. The groups discussed the goal setting process in their small groups before coming back into the larger group. In the large group again, I provided materials for goal setting with a student. I provided a goal setting sheet that has a teacher and student version that can be used universally.

The educators then worked together to plan goals for three of their students. Prior to the session, I told the educators to bring work samples or notes from the conferences of three students. During this work time, the educators worked alongside each other to plan for possible strategies and goals they could create with each of these students. I

emphasized that this is not the goal they will be giving the student, but rather these are ideas for possible goals based on the strategies they are working on to create with the student during the conference. It is important that the student has a say in their goals.

As a last activity, we met again all together and had a discussion on how conferring is going in their individual classrooms. I posed questions like "What has worked well," "What has been the hardest part of conferring," "How do you organize your literacy block schedule" and "What support do you need?" After this discussion, I shared one last resource. This resource was an organizational tool for the educators to use while planning their literacy block, which now includes conferences.

The last session ended with a reflection on how conferring is going. I provided the teachers with a Google survey as an assessment piece. This survey asked the educators specifically how the implementation of each component (assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting) is going and the impact each component is having on their students. This allowed me to identify where each educator was at with their implementation and what benefits or drawbacks they already saw while implementing conferring. The survey also asked what questions the educators still have, anything relating to conferring they would like addressed, and how I can support them moving forward. This ending assessment piece was helpful to get feedback on how the professional development went while also getting an idea of the impact conferring is having on all of our students. In the next section I will explain my school setting.

Setting

The setting of this project was a suburban school in the upper Midwest. My school is one of six elementary schools in the district. At the time this suburban school

district served 11,509 students in grades K-12 over its two kindergarten centers, six elementary schools, three middle schools and two high schools.

The specific elementary school that this project occurred in serves 531 first through fifth grade students. As a school our demographics were 56.5% white, 12.2% Hispanic, 10.9% Black, 10.3% Asian, 9.9% two or more categories and 0.2% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. As a school 41.5% of our students were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, 15% receive special education services and 11.8% speak English as a second language. The most common languages spoken by our students other than English were Spanish, Somali and Tibetan. Based on national assessments, the students at this school scored one half to two years ahead of their peers in math and reading.

At the time, my school had 40 licensed teachers along with 7 other licensed professionals, 14 paraprofessionals, 1 administrator and 13 other non-licensed staff. Out of the educators at my specific school, 100% of them were licensed and 61% of them had an advanced degree. This professional development occurred throughout the beginning of the school year during our monthly professional developments with time to reflect between the sessions. Next I will address who this professional development was created.

Target Audience

This professional development targeted the educators that work with students on their literacy growth. This included all grade level teachers, special education teachers, our reading intervention teachers and our English Language support teachers. There were twenty-one grade level educators (grades first-fifth), five special education teachers, seven reading intervention teachers and two English Language support educators that participated in the professional developments. Other educators, like our specialist

teachers, were given the option to attend if they would like more information about supporting the literacy of their students. Two specialist teachers attended. The next section will highlight my timeline for completing this project.

Timeline for Completion

A timeline for completion was used during this entire Capstone process. This timeline was incredibly helpful to ensure I completed all necessary tasks on time. Below I will give a detailed description of my timeline.

My Capstone journey started with the development of my question in the February of 2020. The development of this question, *how does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* allowed me begin my work on chapter one. Chapter one, developed in March of 2020, was a personal narrative of why I choose to research and create a project on conferring. I then spent the rest of March, April and May of 2020 on researching conferring. Through these many months of research, I gathered research on conferring, specific information on each component of conferring, some drawbacks to conferring, and research on effective professional development, which would be used in the creation of my project. This information was compiled into chapter two, a literature review, which was completed May 2020. Also in May of 2020, I began to plan for my professional development on conferring. These initial plans were collected and formatted the beginning of chapter three. A rough draft of chapter three was completed in May 2020 but this chapter was revisited after completing the project portion of my Capstone.

Summer 2020 began with working on my Capstone Project. I spent June planning and preparing for this professional development. I started by breaking my professional

development into three separate days, one day for each component of conferring. I determined what research I wanted to include during each session. During the middle of June, I planned for the specific activities and handouts that would be presented during the professional development. In July 2020, I collected all of this information and created the presentations, script notes and agendas for each session. I wrote and compiled all of the necessary elements of this project at the end of July 2020. Along with the project, I also spent the end of July 2020 reflecting and gathering my reflections for chapter four. Chapter four was completed in early August 2020.

My professional development was designed to spread over three sessions, each session lasting three and a half hours. The sessions occurred on September 1st, October 9th and November 6th. These dates were already designed to be workshop days at my district so we were able to fit in my information during the morning of each workshop day. Prior to each session, I met with my principal and literacy coach to review my plans for that session. Between each session I met with teams and individuals to help in the implementation of conferring.

This timeline was used to help in the completion of the entire Capstone paper and project. Although adapted throughout the entire process, the timeline ensured I completed everything on time. In the next section I will summarize this chapter and introduce chapter four.

Summary

In creating this professional development, there were some researched based practices that I kept in mind. The first key practice I included in my professional development was active learning. I provided opportunities for educators to practice

conferring as a whole group as well as discussed the information and dove into student examples. Another key practice based on research that I included was including opportunities for the educators to collaborate with their peers and with me. Educators worded together each session on making plans for implementing conferring into their classrooms. The educators also had the opportunity to work with me between the sessions. While working with educators or teams between sessions I offered to help them plan or model, co-teach, observe, offer feedback or plan for conferences. Finally, I ensured that this is not a one-time professional development by scheduling three separate sessions with time for reflection between.

      This chapter outlined the guiding research and the detailed plans for my professional development. It also highlighted the setting and audience of this professional development. The chapter ended with a timeline for completion of this professional development. Chapter four will explain my reflections and plan now that the research and project is completed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusions

Introduction

As I come to a close on this Capstone process, I am brought back to what started me on this journey. I reflect back to my time with my sister reading together on the couch. We would enjoy books together while she gently pushed me to be a better reader and eventually a life-long reader. Fast forward to my own classroom, I was always drawn to conferring, or meeting individually with students to help them with their literacy, reading and writing, growth. During this one-on-one time with my students is where I saw the most engagement and where I could most easily meet the needs of each student. It wasn't until I attended a session at the Summer Literacy Institute at Hamline University on conferring that I was able to connect these two experiences. Through experiences at the Hamline Literacy Institute, time with my own students and my own personal experience growing up, I was led to my question, *how does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?*

In this chapter, I will reflect on this Capstone Project process as a whole. I will begin by discussing what has been impactful to me as a learner. This will connect to a review of the most impactful research through this process. After, I will discuss the implications my project has on myself and the field of education as well as highlight some limitations to my project. Afterwards, I will address any future research or recommendations related to my project as well as describe how this project will be used for myself and could be used by others. Finally, I will end with some benefits of this project to the field of education and a final summary.

Major Learnings

As I reflect on this process, I am amazed at what I have learned and how I have grown through this process. When I began the process of discovering the answer to *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* I was naive to the idea that one idea or product can fix all issues. In the early stages I was confident that conferring would be the band aid to fix any and all issues that we have with the literacy growth of our students. Conferring could help solve the achievement gap we have. Conferring could help all students read and write on grade level. Conferring could make all students life-long readers and writers. Although there are benefits to conferring with students, I quickly learned that the conferring process will not magically solve all of these problems. Along with the many benefits that conferring has, my research also highlighted some drawbacks to conferring, including the lack of social interaction. Through much research and practice with my own students, I came to the conclusion that conferring is a great tool that should be used in the classroom, in collaboration with many other tools, to help students grow in their reading and writing.

Through my research, I also began to recognize that I was not alone in my struggle to organize and implement conferring in the classroom. Meeting with students one-on-one can be hard to plan for and keep records. During my research I was comforted that my fellow educators also struggled with this. Recognizing this led to a change of focus for my professional development. Although I still addressed what conferring is and the benefits of it, the majority of my professional development was used to help educators in the implementation of conferring in their classrooms. I formatted my

video examples, handouts, discussions and activities around what executing conferring would actually look, sound and feel like.

Along with learning more about myself and my connection to conferring, I also learned more about myself personally as a learner. Throughout this process, I discovered that I am capable of much more than I ever could have imagined. A year ago I could have never imagined that I would be finishing a project this time and energy consuming. To be honest, I am still amazed at what I have accomplished! When we began this Capstone process, my professor had us look through other Capstone Projects to see exactly what our end product will look like. I left this class crying, thinking I would never be able to accomplish this big of a project. Along the way, piece by piece, I began to realize how influential our thoughts can be. Our thoughts are a very powerful tool that can be used positively and negatively. At the beginning of this process, right after that first class, my thoughts were all negative - "You're writing is not good enough for this project," "You won't have time for this," "You haven't been in the field of education long enough to do this." I stuck to it, and thanks to some amazingly positive supporters, I started to change my thoughts to be more positive. These positive thoughts gave me the drive to keep going when I wanted to give up and helped me realize that I am capable of finishing this. The impact positive thoughts have on me and what I am capable of is something I will take well past the submission of this Capstone Project.

This capstone process challenged me to grow in many different ways. My eyes were opened to the idea that although conferring has a lot of benefits, it will not solve all of our problems around the literacy growth of our students. Specifically, during the research stage, I began to recognize the drawbacks to conferring, like the lack social

interactions with their peers and the time and organization conferring entails. Through

my research, I also realized that I was not alone in my struggles with implementing

conferring in my own classroom, which heavily impacted my final project product.

Finally, I learned that my thoughts are a powerful tool that I can use positively to do

some pretty amazing things! Along with all of these personal reflections having an

impact on this capstone process, the literature I found also greatly impacted my project.

In the next section, I will highlight how researchers like Serravallo (2019), Allen (2009)

and Calkins (2013) impacted this process.

Literature Review Revisited

In the early stages of my research, I found that the specific experts on conferring

were the most helpful. Jennifer Serravallo (2019), Patrick Allen (2009) and Lucy Calkins

(2013) were the experts that I focused much of my beginning research on. These experts

identified the three major components of conferring - assessment, individualized

instruction and goal setting. These three components turned into the bulk of my research

and eventually a majority of my project.

After identifying these three main components, my research turned to identifying

the benefits of each individual component. My research then differed depending on the

concept. When looking specifically at formative assessment and the benefits of it,

Volante and Beckett (2011) were vital. Liebfreund and Amendum (2017) were my key

researchers when defining and determining the benefits of individualized instruction. In

terms of goal setting, Madden (1997) helped me to grasp the definition and Newman

(2012) identified major benefits to goal setting with students. Even while researching

each individual component, I referred back to the main experts when explaining how each component related to the overall conferring process.

I also circled back around to Serravallo (2019), Allen (2009) and Calkins (2013) during my work on the project for ideas on how best to implement conferring in the classroom. Many of them had handouts and video examples of conferring already that I could either include in my work or take ideas from them to create my own.

Finally, the review of literature on best practice of professional development was also crucial to the development of my project. Although I had participated in many professional developments, I had never planned and executed a professional development. This research on best practice in adult learning helped me get an overarching idea of what I wanted my professional development to look like. Through this research from experts like Bates and Morgan (2018), Holland (2005) and Taylor (2006), I determined that my professional development needed to be active and reflective with many opportunities to discuss with their fellow teachers and also with me.

All of my research greatly impacted my work around conferring, both with this project and with my own application of conferring in my classroom. In reflection on the conferring process, many implications to myself, other educators, and to the field of education come to mind. In the next section, I will address some of these implications.

Implications

This professional development is intended to be used by school leaders and coaches to help with the understanding of and the integration of conferring to their school building. Specifically, for my school, this will be integral in helping educators fully implement our literacy resources. A few of our literacy resources have portions of the

guides that refer to conferring. The educators at my school have struggled implementing these components because of the amount of other resources to be implemented and the newness conferring is to the educators. This professional development, along with helping educators implement conferring in their daily literacy block, will also help in fully implementing our resources.

Along with being used at my school, this professional development was created with the intent for other districts and schools to use. Educators, at other districts, could take this professional development, the videos, the handouts, and other notes and present it to the entire district, a specific school, or even a small group of educators. This resource could be used to inform educators on what conferring is, some of the benefits and best practice in implementing it in the classroom at any district or school.

As of now, there is no direct implication at the policy and state levels of education but I do think that conferring relates to and could help solve some of the issues that policy makers address when it comes to education. We, as educators, need to be meeting the variety of needs coming into our classrooms. From social emotional needs to academic needs, these students need to be given the proper tools individually to help them succeed. Conferring provides a way for educators to meet with students one on one to work on these needs with them in order for them to be successful. Along with providing another way to support students, the data surrounding the benefits of conferring would also support alternatives to our typical school schedule. The data supports one on one instruction, which could be better supported in smaller classes or alternative daily schedules.

Along with being used at my current school, I hope that this professional

development is used by others to help their educators understand what conferring is and

how it can be applied to their classrooms. When reflecting on the implications of this

project, I also recognized that there are some limitations with this professional

development.

Limitations

One limitation to this professional development is the required text, *A teacher's*

guide to reading conferences by Jennifer Serravallo (2019). The district that this

professional development was planned for just purchased this book as a core resource,

along with some of Jennifer Serravallo's books. This book would cost the district, school,

or individual groups of educators money to purchase. Although you do not need to have

the book to successfully implement conferring in your classroom, this book provides

many helpful examples, note-taking handouts and organizational tips that will make the

implementation much easier.

Another limitation is this professional development was developed with one

specific school in mind. The activities were created based on the number of educators

that this school has. The research brought forward was drafted with an idea of previous

knowledge that the educators have. If another school district uses this work, there might

need to be additional research provided on certain concepts, like the difference between

skill and strategy. There also might need to be changes to the activities based on the

number of participants.

Along with limitations for others implementing this professional development, I

also recognized one limitation for my own work and research. While there will be many

benefits to the work and teaching other educators about conferring, my project was not designed to definitively answer my research question *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?* Currently, there is no way for the educators to quantitatively measure the benefits conferring has on the literacy skills of their students. There are some reflections put in place during the professional development to discuss anecdotal observations on how the educators see conferring impacting their students, but there is no concrete data gathered to definitively prove the benefits of conferring on their students. Based on the newness of this subject to the participants, collecting quantitative data did not make sense. In the next section, I mention some possible ways to measure the impact conferring has on students through further research.

Future Research

Based on the limitation above, the next step in research should be designing a controlled study to identify the specific impact and benefits of conferring on the literacy development of students. In a controlled study of conferring, the specific benefits and drawbacks of conferring could be identified. It would then be interesting to compare conferring to other methods of literacy instruction, like guided reading groups, strategy groups, whole group strategy lessons, etc.

If this type of large study is not feasible, there could be other ways to study the impact conferring has on students' literacy growth on a smaller scale. The standardized test score of students' who participated in conferring could be compared to students' who did not participate in the conferring process. Growth on guided reading levels could be compared from year to year for each student.

This professional development was designed to explain what conferring is, the benefits of conferring, and how to implement it in your classroom effectively. In my opinion, the next step would be to do more detailed research on the exact impact conferring has on students. In the next section, I will highlight how I will use this project and how others could use this project.

Using the Project

My original plan was to execute this professional development this upcoming 2020-2021 school year. Due to some unforeseen circumstances, including the possibility of continuing distance learning in the fall and a new principal, we are unsure if this will still happen. If I am unable to execute this professional development this fall, we will reschedule it for the spring or during fall of the next school year. Although the date of my execution of my professional development is not yet finalized, my plan to use conferring in my classroom is. I plan to begin the conferring process in my classroom within the first few weeks of school and continue throughout the school year.

This project was also intended to be shared out with others to use. Throughout my initial planning, research, and development of my project, I have worked with a large variety of literacy professionals. These literacy professionals, both inside and outside of my district, have been integral in the creation of my research question, the gathering of my research and the execution of this professional development. I plan to share this project with these amazing literacy professionals. I hope that they can use it to inform themselves, colleagues, their school or even their district about conferring and the benefits of it.

Along with the direct literacy leaders that I know, I also hope that this professional development can be used by other leaders, schools and districts. This professional development was created with all of the needed materials for another person to utilize it. The needed materials include the slideshow presentations, script notes, all digital handouts, links to videos and materials lists for both the educators attending and the leader of the training. I am hopeful that other interested leaders or programs will utilize at least sections, if not the entire professional development to inform their teachers of the conferring process and its benefits to their students.

Benefit to the Profession

This professional development is beneficial to education because it provides educators with yet another tool to help students' reach their literacy, or reading and writing goals. Meeting the literacy needs of every student in your classroom can be overwhelming for any educator. Students vary in their interest, their stamina, and the number of skills they have in both reading and writing. All of these needs cannot just be met in a large group lesson. Conferring gives educators another tool to use along with other tools to help each student experience literacy growth.

Summary

At the start of this paper, I shared my history and heart around conferring. I shared the personal connection that I had with my sister and how that led to me loving to read. This connected to how I saw the same results when I conferred with my own students, just like when my sister conferred with me. Through these one on one meetings, my students not only grew in their literacy skills, but also grew in their love to read and write! Through these experiences and some other educational experiences, I felt drawn to

the idea of conferring which helped develop my question *How does conferring improve the literacy skills of elementary students?*

Throughout chapter two, I highlighted key researchers in the field of conferring, which helped me to identify the three main components of conferring - assessment, individualized instruction and goal setting. As I continued into chapter two, I brought forward research on each specific part of the conferring process to make it clear the purpose of and the benefits of each component in the overall conferring process. Chapter two also addressed some drawbacks to conferring and best practices around adult learning. This information on adult learning, helped transition into chapter three which addressed my professional development project around conferring.

Chapter three explained in detail my professional development on conferring. Along with explaining the specific details of each session of the professional development, this chapter also explained in detail who this project was designed for. The specific details of the population of students and participants were described. Chapter three ended with a timeline of completion of my project.

Throughout this chapter I addressed my key reflections in completing my Capstone Project. This chapter began with a reflection on my own personal learnings as well as some key highlights from my research. I addressed how both of these greatly impacted my final project. This chapter addressed some key implications for myself and the field of education. I continued with some limitations to my project, which connected to some future research possibilities. Chapter four ended with a description of how to best use this project and how it is beneficial to the field of education.

At the time this paper was written, the Coronavirus epidemic had just started and greatly impacted our educational system. Educators had to be more creative than ever to support our students electronically. At my school, we closed our doors during the middle of March indefinitely. This required our educators to plan online instruction for the remaining three months of the school year and for summer school. The most impactful instructional tool for myself during this distance learning was conferring. Online group meetings came with a lot of difficulties, which led me to start planning one-on-one meetings instead. I was easily able to implement all three components of conferring onto this online format. Through conferring online, I was able to support my students' growth by providing individualized instruction for them in both reading and writing. As I go forward with unknowns on what the fall will look like, I am confident that I will use conferring with my students regardless of if we are in person or online. I will also share this knowledge of conferring to my fellow educators, both in my school and outside of my school, through my professional development.

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APPENDIX

Figure 1. *Determining where to start in a reading conference* (Serravallo, 2015).

Figure 2. *Determining where to start in a writing conference* (Serravallo, 2017).