



Conferring for Engagement: Reader to Reader, Heart to Heart

Check in frequently with striving readers to ensure they are well matched to the texts in their hands.

WHY

When a striving reader is enthralled with a book, all kinds of benefits ensue. It follows that monitoring his or her level of engagement without disrupting it is vital. To assess whether rich meaning-making is occurring, we must get into “the room where it happens”: the mind of the reader. A reader-to-reader, heart-to-heart conference is the best way to verify that a well-chosen book is working its magic.

WHEN

Engagement is tenuous for a striving reader in the early pages of a book. Initial disorientation is frustrating and may lead to abandonment. It’s important to confer at the outset to make sure he gets into the book and derives pleasure right away. Once reading is underway, it’s important to check in if you notice signs of disengagement:

- Decline in reading volume (few pages read, bookmark not moving)
- Distraction (staring into space, roaming around the room, going to the bathroom)
- “Forgetting” the book at home or in his cubby or locker

If the striving reader is well matched and progresses through the book, it’s important to confer toward the end of his reading experience to help him synthesize ideas and to identify next-up books.

HOW

Steph emphasizes that classroom discourse should sound conversational rather than interrogational, and that’s particularly true of conferences. Consider what you know about



the child, his reading behaviors, and the book he has chosen, and gauge the extent of the conference accordingly. For example, if a student is hunkered down with the third book in a series he loves, he probably needs little from you other than ample reading time. If, on the other hand, he's chosen a book that you know to be complex, he will likely benefit from a brief orientation. Pose open-ended questions and take your cues from the reader:

- How is the book so far?
- How are you getting into the book?
- What is the book making you think about?

Sample Conference 1

Vicki had read the first chapter of *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker when Annie asked, "How's the book so far?" "It's good but confusing," Vicki said. "I can't figure out who's talking. It seems like it's *Pax* because we hear his feelings, but it says 'he' instead of 'I'." Annie commended Vicki's observation and question about the narrator and suggested that they look at the text together to figure it out. As Annie studied the first page, she saw that it was a third person omniscient narrator—precisely what Vicki had noted without having a term for it. She also noted that the focus alternated chapter by chapter from *Pax* to Peter, signaled by a silhouette of a fox or boy around the chapter numeral. Annie explained that the narrator is all-knowing—that he describes both *Pax*'s and Peter's feelings, and that he tells their stories separately chapter by chapter. Vicki was highly motivated to read *Pax* because her friends were reading it. Once her impressions of the narrator were validated and explicated, she was off and running.

Sample Conference 2

Annie had been watching fifth grader Diego read *James and the Giant Peach* for several minutes, pleased that the classic still circulates but curious whether it would hold a contemporary reader's attention. Diego's eyes came out of the book and his gaze went to the window. Suspecting disengagement, Annie pulled alongside him and asked gently, "It looks like you're taking a break from reading. What is the book making you think about?" Diego replied, "I just don't understand how James's aunts can be so mean." Annie realized that not only was Diego highly engaged, he was so moved that he needed to come out of the book temporarily to ponder the weight of the characters' cruelty. Annie spent a few minutes processing the aunts' bitterness with Diego before he resumed reading.

There is an art to these conferences: Too much direction is stifling and deprives the reader of his independence; too little direction in a complex text may cause a loss of confidence and faltering.