The Power of the Conference *Is* the Power of Suggestion

MONETTE COLEMAN MCIVER
SHELBY ANNE WOLF

McIver and Wolf examine writing conferences in one fourth-grade classroom to see how the students in this class came to engage in such sophisticated talk about writing.

Nestled amidst the rolling hills of a Kentucky suburb rests an elementary school where nine and ten year olds are engaged in literate activities. In Mrs. Olinski's fourth-grade classroom these activities—reading stories aloud, writing poetry, listening to peer authors and voicing opinions, to name a few—are engaging to students chiefly because they have a deeply committed teacher. Mrs. Olinski is one of six case-study teachers who participates in a Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing (CRESST) sponsored research project interested in how state-wide performance-based assessments have affected classroom instruction in both writing and mathematics.

During the past year and a half, we visited Mrs. Olinski's classroom for three two-day periods to observe her instruction and to ask her questions about the Kentucky Educational Reform Act (KERA) and the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS), an assessment component designed to monitor students' academic progress. As well, our conversations with her students gave us valuable information about their attitudes toward working and writing in this classroom. As an exemplary teacher, Mrs. Olinski was chosen specifically because we were interested in her personal knowledge base as well as how she used this knowledge to talk with her students about writing. We borrowed this pseudonym from E. L. Konigsburg's (1996) Newbery Award-winning novel *The View from Saturday* because the practices exhibited by the teacher in this case closely resemble those of the teacher in the story. Mrs. Olinski, both fictional and hypothetical, used questions to encourage her students to take risks because "sometimes to be successful, you have to risk making mistakes" (Konigsburg, 1996, p. 120).

On a recent visit, we had the opportunity to eavesdrop on an intriguing conversation taking place during writer's workshop time. There were two small boys, one Black and one White, sitting in the book corner, deeply engaged in a student-to-student writing conference. We sat quietly and listened as Richard, the African American student, animatedly read his football poem to Joseph. Rubbing his freckled hand against his forehead, Joseph listened intently before responding, and his response was based on his dual role of reader and peer:

JOSEPH: Okay, I have a question. Is this supposed to be like a story?

RICHARD: No, a poem. A poem doesn't have to rhyme.

JOSEPH: [agreeing] But it doesn't flow like a poem. You need to make it flow more like a poem.

RICHARD: [perplexed] You mean add a comma? You mean add a pause?

JOSEPH: [struggling to articulate his thinking] To where your words connect like a poem. Since it's not a rhyming poem, your words are kinda . . .

RICHARD: Choppy?

JOSEPH: Yeah, that's why I asked, 'cause it sounded more like a story.

After this brief discussion, Joseph still was not satisfied with the exchange or his ability to adequately convey his needs as a reader to Richard. Recognizing that they were conveniently situated in the book corner, Joseph reached behind him, pulled out a book of poetry and encouraged Richard to look at the poems as a model even though they were rhyming poems. They talked about the poetry book, and then Joseph offered Richard the following sound advice: "Some poems kind of stop. But then [they] will start flowing again. It's kind of like a waterfall when it gets plugged up. But then it unsticks and starts flowing again." We sat in amazed silence as we watched these nine-year olds discuss the written text like professional authors and editors. But they were not professionals. They were little boys. Now *we* were the ones asking questions. How could these tiny kids possibly be having such a high-level conversation, and what exactly was happening in this classroom with respect to reading and writing?

Our questions reminded us of an anecdote Annie Dillard (1989) shared in her book *The Writing Life* about two neighborhood boys who challenged her notion of audience. Brooding over a recently completed essay about a moth and a candle that she considered too cerebral because only a Yale critic understood it, Dillard opted to forego any further writing work and settled down to eat a bowl of popcorn and read a book. Just then, two little first-grade neighbor boys dropped by to visit. During the course of their fellowship together, one of the boys, Brian, wandered over to Dillard's desk and noticed her drawing of a burning candle.

Brian said, "Is that the candle the moth flew into?"

I looked at him: WHAT?

He said, and I quote exactly, "Is that the candle the moth flew into, and his abdomen got stuck, and his head caught fire?"

WHAT? I said. WHAT? These little blue-jeaned kids were in the first grade. They came up to my pockets. Brad, on the floor, piped up, "I liked that story." (Dillard, 1989, p. 55)

This interaction bewildered Dillard in much the same way that Mrs. Olinski's two students made us pause. Like Dillard, we temporarily underestimated the literate activities and language young children were capable of understanding. We had assumed that children as young as these fourth and first graders would be more naive in their interpretations of waterfalls and candles.

Yet, for Dillard, this state of surprise was put into perspective quickly, for just before leaving, Brian asked, "Did you *write* that story . . . or did you type it?" The literacy lesson behind this language story (Harste, Woodward, & Burke, 1984) is that no matter how much we may underestimate what children are capable of understanding, continued attention to their language gives us constant feedback about what they really know. However, the question asked by Dillard's little friend is one that neither Joseph nor Richard would ask because they well understand the difference between the skill of typing and the art of writing, and this knowledge allows them to help their peers unplug their writing and make it flow.

Mrs. Olinski knew that providing her students with a rich, literate environment was key to their success.

Still, the question of how these two fourth-grade boys came to engage in such sophisticated talk about writing remained to be seen, but we believe one of the answers lies in the way that Mrs. Olinski conducted writing conferences. The conferences, modeled throughout the school year, provided a powerful example for Joseph as he assumed the role of reader and gave Richard the feedback needed to "unstick" his poem. And this was no isolated incident because Mrs. Olinski's students consistently assumed the roles of critical but curious readers capable of telling their peers when they were confused about a piece of writing or how they might consider making it more engaging. Mrs. Olinski's proficient use of query gave her students the encouragement they needed to make suggestions about content and form. And her modeling and her students' subsequent appropriation of these same practices ultimately informed her instruction and constituted a major portion of the classroom curriculum.

As an exemplary teacher, Mrs. Olinski knew that providing her students with a rich, literate environment was key to their success. While this article focuses on one element of her instruction—her modeling of effective conferencing techniques and her students' assumption of these practices—Mrs. Olinski's instruction included much more. For example, the children in this class read quality literature as a regular part of their day, and they learned that it was an indispensable tool in the writing process as evidenced by the opening discussion

between Richard and Joseph. Additionally, Mrs. Olinski routinely ended writing sessions with a group share, where she and her students offered critical and encouraging feedback to young authors. These students had numerous opportunities to interact with their own texts as well as the work of others all in an effort to become effective and artful communicators.

Nonetheless, it was the conference with its emphasis on questioning that was most intriguing to us, for Mrs. Olinski's commitment to questioning embodied not only her pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman, 1986) but also her special stance as a curious and analytical reader. Her students' responses gave Mrs. Olinski the feedback she needed to decide when and how to incorporate different illustrations and examples into her teaching that would continue to help her students grow as writers.

CONFERENCES AND QUESTIONS

Shulman (1987) explained that the art of teaching necessitates a broad knowledge base. Chief among the different forms of knowledge teachers possess were content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, curricular knowledge, knowledge about students, and pedagogical content knowledge. He considered the latter—pedagogical content knowledge—as "that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding" (Shulman, p. 8). Implicit in this type of knowledge was a firm grasp of both pedagogy and subject matter and knowledge about how both related specifically to the individual needs of learners. And, as Shulman further contended, it was this combination that separated teachers from subject matter specialists.

Writing experts tell us that conferences with children about their writing enable teachers to learn what students already know (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983, 1994). As Graves (1994) contended, "The purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing" (p. 59). Still, the art of conferencing is not simply marked by teachers acting as good listeners. While students convey what they know about writing through the creative process of writing personal narratives, poems, short stories, and editorials, teachers simultaneously respond to this writing both as instructional leaders and as interested and knowledgeable readers. Teachers use the writing conference as one way to provide the models or demonstrations that enable student writers to "discover the meanings they don't yet know" (Atwell, 1987, p. 94). Thus, the writing conference is an optimal moment for teachers to employ their pedagogical content knowledge or "the most powerful analogies, illustrations, examples, explanations, and demonstrations—in a word, the ways of representing and formulating the subject that make it comprehensible to others" (Shulman, 1986, p. 9).

Though the conference provides the forum necessary for the demonstration of teacher knowledge, teachers must use practical methods to communicate their insights as both writing and reading experts. Most importantly, all of this must be done in a way that their students will find beneficial. Smith (1992) suggested that the use of questions promotes shared investigation. That is, questioning is a method of engaging *all* in a process of mutual understanding. Further, Dillon (1986) argued that students' questions give teachers unique perspectives on how they are making meaning. Yet this advantage works both ways, for teachers' questions exhibit their understanding as well. When a teacher hears a sample of student writing in a conference, he or she may use questions to clarify or expand its meaning. Atwell (1987) extended this thinking when discussing guidelines for teachers during the writing conference:

> In questioning students, ask about something you're curious about as an inquisitive human being. Forget you're an English teacher and focus on the meaning. What would you like to know more about? What didn't you understand? Then focus on just these one or two issues, taking care not to overwhelm the writer, asking open-ended questions that will allow the writer to talk. (p. 95)

Even though Atwell advocated "forget[ting] you're an English teacher," that role is never truly lost. The knowledge base that teachers bring to the conference continues to inform them even when they listen as interested readers. Most important, the power of the teacher/student conference is in the model it presents for students to emulate. Through these interactions, students not only learn to trust their inquisitive spirits, but they effectively become English teachers, too.

The image of not one but twenty-five teachers in a classroom emphasizes not only the integrity of distributed expertise (Wertsch, 1991), but highlights children's understanding. Thus, peer conferences provide the opportunity for students to engage in the same activities that characterize teacher/student conferences. The only way they are different is that, rather than having one teacher attempting to meet with every student, which may result in "hurried, tense and less effective" conferences (Calkins, 1986, p. 129), peers can meet with peers and give each the critical feedback all writers need to continue their work. These peer conferences, however, are dependent on the skillful model the teacher presents.

When this cycle of inquiry is complete, or when students become active peer conferencers, they assume what Commeyras and Sumner (1995) called an "independent, confident, questioning spirit" (p. 26). They willingly accept responsibility for questioning each other and providing thoughtful feedback on their peers' written work. This is more easily done when students are encouraged to do so by their peers and their teachers. Figure 1 depicts this cycle.

Teachers' integrated knowledge about subject matter and pedagogy are conveyed to their students through the writing conference. As a result of these interactions, students become critical responders to language, and they recognize as well as appreciate the requirements of good writing. With this

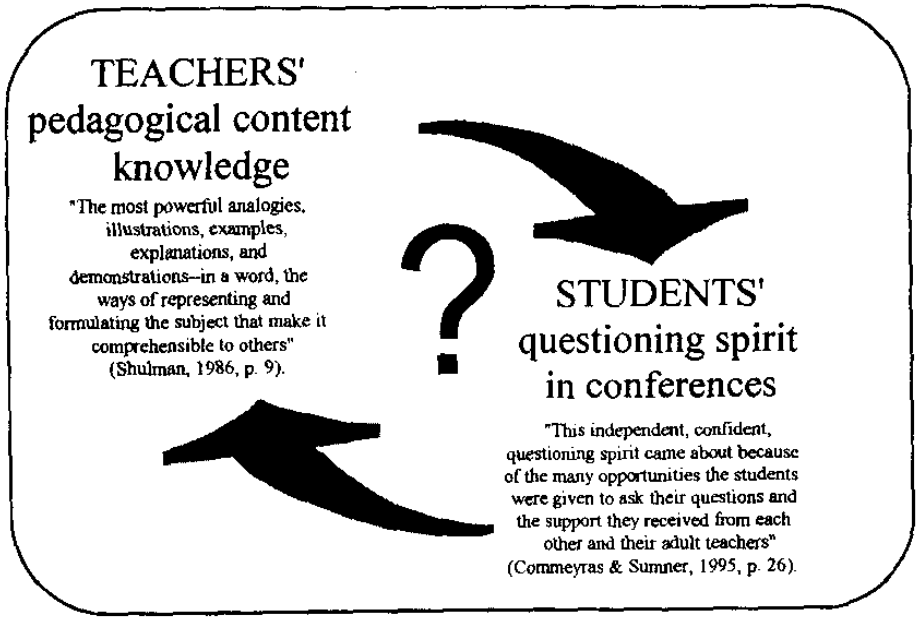

Figure 1. The Cycle of Inquiry

knowledge, they confer with their peers using the same authentic questions their teachers use, and they help every student improve his or her writing. Finally, the cycle comes full circle as the students' questions fold back into their teacher's understanding, enhancing her or his ability to serve as instructional leader and critical reader.

THE TEACHER-STUDENT WRITING CONFERENCE

In order to understand the craft of Mrs. Olinski's conferencing style, we will review and analyze a typical teacher/student conference. While it is clear that Mrs. Olinski honored the advice of some of the nation's foremost experts in writing (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1986, 1991; Graves, 1983, 1994), she also did things within her conferences that displayed her ability to move beyond their recommendations to truly exemplary practices. For example, Mrs. Olinski adhered to the experts' advice about conferencing by limiting the amount of time she spent with students (Atwell, 1987; Graves, 1994). Her teacher/student conferences rarely lasted for more than five minutes, yet they were packed with practical information which the students immediately put to use.

One day last fall, we watched Mrs. Olinski's second conference of the morning with Sarah. Sarah was writing a personal narrative describing an amusement park visit, and she wanted to share the writing she had accomplished since her earlier meeting with Mrs. Olinski. Sarah read what she completed, and then Mrs. Olinski responded positively telling her that the trip sounded exciting. Afterwards, the following exchange occurred:

MRS. OLINSKI: What was perhaps your most favorite event? Was it the ride? Could you describe the roller coaster a little more? Close your eyes, go back and look yourself in that roller coaster car. What are you thinking about right now? [Sarah was excited as she responded, saying something about dropping.] You dropped? Where did you go? Where did your stomach go? Did it jerk you and did you go like this? [Mrs. Olinski started bumping around, and Sarah giggled.] What else? What were you hearing while you were on the roller coaster? *I need words.*

SARAH: It sounded like something is being smashed.

MRS. OLINSKI: Really? How come? Could you compare it to something?

SARAH: Like how?

MRS. OLINSKI: Well, I could compare this noise [pointed to a portable fan at her side]. I find that to be a soothing noise. That soothes me like the rolling ocean.

SARAH: It sounded like a train or something.

MRS. OLINSKI: I want you to really help your reader know how fun that ride was.

This was a typical example of how Mrs. Olinski used questions to improve her comprehension of Sarah's work. She started with the representations Sarah already recorded in her

writing, and then she asked for those additional formulations that would focus the story on one particular ride and bring that experience to life. Yet, Mrs. Olinski did this as an interested, inquisitive reader, not only as a teacher. Thus, an element of her pedagogical content knowledge and, for us, her exemplary practice is an understanding of the need to read or interpret her students' work as a reader who is genuinely interested in what they have to say. In other words, she saw her students as competent writers, capable of authoring engaging work, and she was committed to doing whatever it took, in this case asking effective questions, to make sure her students attained this goal. For example, at one point in the interaction, Mrs. Olinski effectively transported Sarah to her past experience and encouraged her to imagine she was once again in the roller coaster car. As Sarah's eyes closed, Mrs. Olinski asked her "What are you thinking about right now?" Sarah became visibly excited and told Mrs. Olinski that she could feel herself dropping. Next, Mrs. Olinski tossed out several rapid-fire questions to help Sarah recreate a physical recall of her moment on the roller coaster: You dropped? Where did you go? Where did your stomach go?

Usually, when educators think of thought-provoking questions, they think of "Why?" questions, because such queries "[sit] at the very heart of learning: the spirit of curiosity" (Thomas, 1988, p. 555). But questions are context specific and, as such, are not hierarchical (Smith, 1992). As Dillon (1987) advised, "No specifiable types of questions or questioning behaviors can serve through [the] range of classroom practice, no more than any can serve across the diverse fields of question-answer practices" (p. 61). Thus, Mrs. Olinski's choice of questions—while not centered on "Why?"—symbolized her curiosity as a reader. Through this particular interaction, Sarah learned that her reader, in this case Mrs. Olinski, would appreciate more details about her roller coaster ride. At the same time, Mrs. Olinski's decision to ask "Where?" questions highlighted her willingness to use those practices that best supported and pushed Sarah to become a more competent and effective writer. By asking "What?" and "Where?", Sarah could include those words and phrases that would further engage her reader perhaps even more so than a "Why?" question would have at this point in her writing. To use Shulman's (1987) words, these questions showed Mrs. Olinski's "own special form of professional understanding" (p. 8) and exhibited her own competency as an astute and attentive reader/teacher.

Mrs. Olinski's use of physical recall, however, was not limited to asking where Sarah's stomach went. When this conference took place, both Sarah and Mrs. Olinski sat side by side on a small bench. This physical proximity allowed Mrs. Olinski to add actual movement to the effectiveness of these physical recall questions. She asked Sarah, "Did it jerk you and did you go like this?" while literally knocking into Sarah as if they were both sitting in that roller coaster car. To better appreciate Sarah's harrowing roller coaster ride, Mrs. Olinski solicited information about the motion of Sarah's stomach and the movement of her body. Mrs. Olinski literally nudged her shoulders and hips into Sarah which caused her to giggle with glee because of the sheer fun of playing around with her teacher. However, although the conference was productive and amusing, Mrs. Olinski was still the teacher, and as such she reminded Sarah that she must recapture this moment in written language when she said, "I need words."

Usually, when teachers think of thought-provoking questions, they think of "Why" questions.

The ability and willingness to instruct was ever present in Mrs. Olinski's teacher/student conferences. Following all of the physical recall questions and fun, Sarah told Mrs. Olinski that "It [the ride] sounded like something is being smashed." With this statement, Mrs. Olinski assumed both reader and teacher roles. As a reader, she understood that it would be helpful if Sarah could compare the sound she remembered to something unique and fresh that might enable her readers to create a vivid picture in their minds. As a teacher, Mrs. Olinski also recognized an opportunity to introduce figurative language in the form of a simile or metaphor. She quickly took advantage of this "teachable moment" not only by providing Sarah with an appropriate example but by using what we have come to call an *oppositional metaphor.* Instead of staying in the moment with Sarah and using a metaphor that could have easily been associated with the roller coaster's smashing sound, such as a car crashing, Mrs. Olinski chose an opposite sound, comparing the soothing sound of a fan to a rolling ocean. By doing this, Sarah could not simply follow her teacher's lead, but she had to actually create an appropriate example of her own. Thus, in using oppositional metaphors, Mrs. Olinski essentially *gives* to her students *without giving everything away.* She helps them see the type of language they need to include, but she respects their ability to find the right words, and more importantly their own words, to make their message.

In creating her own metaphoric response, Sarah quickly replied, saying that the roller coaster smashing "sounded like a train or something." Before closing this conference, Mrs. Olinski reminded Sarah that her job as a writer was to make sure that her reader could fully appreciate her roller coaster experience. She sent Sarah back to her desk to continue her writing with the these final words to help focus her task, "I want you to really help your reader know how fun that ride was."

Just as Mrs. Olinski asked her fourth graders to keep their audience in mind when they were writing, she wanted them to remember the kinds of questions and techniques she used in her teacher/student conferences and carry them into the

peer conferences. The model Mrs. Olinski provided for her students not only helped them get to the essential information that will make the reading experience more fulfilling for the reader, it was also carried out in a fashion that took care not to destroy the writers' desire to continue their work. This is an important characteristic of writing conferences because sharing writing, whether with a teacher or a peer, is not always fun. Often, it involves criticism.

THE STUDENT-TO-STUDENT WRITING CONFERENCE

As the school year progressed, the expertise evident in Mrs. Olinski's teacher/student conferences began to be evident in peer conferences. The students found themselves taking many risks in these peer conferences while maintaining their independence and confidence as questioners. On the same day that Joseph gave Richard the help he needed to make his football poem flow, Joseph found himself the recipient of criticism about his own writing. Although Joseph had proved himself an expert on poetry in his conference with Richard, this was not the case with exposition. Joseph's partner, Marc, wanted him to understand that his "wolf article" did not meet the requirements of expository writing. Marc thought that Joseph was acting as if the same requirements for a personal narrative applied to an informational article. Thus, contrary to the conference at the opening of this piece, which centered on the need to make a poem flow, the next conference focused on exposition and how it was tightly bound to an honest representation of facts.

Situated in another corner of the classroom, Joseph read his wolf article while Marc focused his attention on what Joseph said. The text caused Marc to start the discussion with questions.

MARC: I got three questions. How long were the wolf's legs? You said the doctor was amazed and stuff?

JOSEPH: I don't know.

MARC: Well, look it up in the book. Did they say how old the wolf was?

JOSEPH: Well, it doesn't matter.

MARC: Well, it's an informational piece and you gotta put in stuff that's important.

JOSEPH: No, this is a piece about the cubs being born. I read a book to get this information.

MARC: This is an *article* about a wolf, so you should go back to your book to get as much information as you can to explain it.

JOSEPH: So, write 'em [the questions] down so I won't forget.

MARC: [Began writing.] How old is the wolf, and why was the doctor amazed?

In this conference, Marc needed to help Joseph understand that his choice of genre—an informational article—required him to be true to the information learned from the text. He reminded Joseph that he had to "put in stuff that's important" because that was the purpose of his article—to educate his readers and help them learn important information about a wolf. However, Marc's need for more facts did not mean that Joseph had to remove his voice from the writing. Calkins (1991) wrote specifically about voice and research projects with students and suggested that, "We will write with voice when we have read, questioned, dreamed, argued, worried, wept, gossiped, and laughed over a topic" (p. 201). Marc's questions pressed Joseph to engage in just this type of activity. Joseph needed to read and question his topic further in order to bring more life and details into his article, not only in terms of voice but also in terms of content. Calkin's advice suggests that disagreements fuel voice, but they also contribute to critical feedback on the actual written text. And as this conference showed, Joseph resisted Marc's advice, even though he asked Marc to write down the questions so he would not forget them. Joseph reluctantly accepted the mistakes Marc noticed in his wolf article, even when it meant that he was not yet done.

In Anne Lamott's (1994) witty book about writing, *Bird by Bird*, she encouraged aspiring writers to find a trusted friend to read their work and offer feedback, reminding them that "writing is so often about making mistakes and feeling lost" (p. 163). Yet, Lamott recognized how difficult this can be.

> I know what a painful feeling it is when you've been working on something forever, and it feels done, and you give your story to someone you hope will validate this and that person tells you it still needs more work. You have to, at this point, question your assessment of this person's character and, if he or she is not a spouse or a lifelong friend, decide whether or not you want them in your life at all. Mostly, I think an appropriate first reaction is to think that you don't. But in a little while it may strike you as a small miracle that you have someone in your life whose taste you admire, . . . who will tell you the truth and help you stay on the straight and narrow, or find your way back to it if you are lost. (Lamott, 1994, pp. 163–164)

Although Joseph so eloquently and effectively helped Richard understand that "poems are like a waterfall," he now found himself in the unenviable position of asking for feedback on his own writing. Marc's honest reaction, expressed primarily through his questions, gave Joseph the help he needed to "stay on the straight and narrow" even though it was a somewhat painful experience.

Writing is painful—as any writer will tell you—but if you are in it for the long run, it also involves great pleasure and personal satisfaction. In Mrs. Olinski's classroom, students did not withhold their sincere and honest reactions to their peers' writing, fearing repercussions or hurt feelings. Joseph,

Richard, and Marc, in fact all of the children we talked to in this class, recognized that they were members of a community, and that writing conferences and revision were central to their roles as readers, writers, and peers.

Richard conveyed this sentiment in an interview when he shared his portfolio pieces with us, talked about his thoughts on writing, and commented on the instruction in his classroom. For him, the writing conference gave him powerful suggestions that honored his individual voice and enabled him to become a better writer. While his peers took care not to be too critical or judgmental, they also knew that surface-level suggestions about writing did nothing to assist the writers in their attempts to pay close attention to the needs of their audience or the requirements of a given genre (Wolf & Davinroy, 1998). Thus, they worked effectively and diligently through the discomfort inherent in writing feedback toward more substantive revisions.

Writing is painful—as any writer will tell you—but it also involves great pleasure.

Joseph's desire for a more lyrical poem encouraged Richard to "tweak" his writing by considering structure, eliminating words, and creating the pauses that Joseph thought would help the poem flow. In our interview, Richard reflected on why he chose to follow the advice: "Joseph's a good conferencer. He'll really give you good ideas." Ideas, in fact, that propelled this self-proclaimed "football man" a little further down the field of writing.

At the end of our interview we asked Richard if he had any questions for us. Many of the children we interviewed across Kentucky asked us about our research, the workings of our tape recorder, and the weather in Colorado. But the children in Mrs. Olinski's class asked different kinds of questions: "Where did you come up with *these* questions?" "What do you like about writing?" and "Have *you* ever done a feature article on yourself?" We found ourselves amused, but also enchanted to be on the other side of the interview protocol. And, Richard topped it off. He thought for a moment, and then looked up with a steady gaze, "How do we become a better writer?" But without waiting he answered the question himself saying, "Oh yeah. We do a lot of things with, like, just one piece . . . like conference and going over it and conference and going over it." Noting the repetition in his talk, we challenged him a bit and asked him if he found all this revision "boring." He said he didn't. Instead, he matter-of-factly stated that questions, conferences, and the resulting work of revision "just make our piece stronger." And strong writing is possible when writers receive focused feedback from inquisitive and interested readers who take their jobs as both reader and teacher seriously, even when these reader/teachers are nine and ten years old.

CONCLUSION

As the student-to-student and teacher/student writing conferences in this classroom illustrate, that special amalgam of subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, or pedagogical-content knowledge adequately represents Mrs. Olinski's instructional technique and the conferencing skill that her students assume throughout the school year. Mrs. Olinski articulated this connection when she said, "It's me understanding what the concept is and then helping the kids understand what that concept is. I do it through mini-lessons. I do it through conferencing. I do it through interacting with the writing." But she also did it through questioning since this was her primary method for highlighting the information that she needed as an inquisitive reader and for conveying the knowledge she had as a writing expert. Summarizing the importance of conferencing in her writing curriculum, Mrs. Olinski declared, "the power of the conference is the power of suggestion."

But suggestions, if provocative enough, move beyond subtle shadows and implied hints to the real substance of writing. The substantive ideas and suggestions evident in the conferences discussed here hover in classrooms like Mrs. Olinski's where the art of writing and consistent, careful modeling inevitably settle into the daily processes and products of young authors. Knowledge about writing flows freely in this classroom where all—teachers and students alike—are considered to be competent and critical readers and writers. At times, the flow of information may get "plugged up" because criticism about writing can be difficult to take. But the satisfaction of "unsticking" the writing encourages all to persevere and maintain this writing community. In short, the children in Mrs. Olinski's class saw themselves not only as good questioners and helpful conferencers, but as true *writers*. ●

Notes

1. The work reported herein was supported in part under Educational Research and Development Center Program, PR Award Number R305B60002, as administered by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The findings and opinions expressed in this report do not reflect the position or policies of the National Institute on Student Achievement, Curriculum, and Assessment, the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, or the U.S. Department of Education.
2. Our colleagues include Hilda Borko and Rebekah Elliott at the University of Colorado-Boulder and Brian Stecher and Sheila Barron of the Rand Corporation.

References

Atwell, N. (1987). *In the middle: Writing, reading, and learning with adolescents.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. M. (1986). *The art of teaching writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Calkins, L. M. (1991). *Living between the lines.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Commeyras, M., & Sumner, G. (1995). *Questions children want to discuss about literature: What teachers and students learned in a second-grade classroom.* (NRRC Year 2 Project 1.9.2 Research Report). Athens, GA: University of Georgia and University of Maryland, National Reading Research Center.

Dillard, A. (1989). *The writing life.* New York: HarperPerennial.

Dillon, J. T. (1986). Student questions and individual learning. *Educational Theory, 36,* 333–341.

Dillon, J. T. (1987). The multidisciplinary world of questioning. In W. W. Wilen (Ed.), *Questions, questioning techniques, and effective teaching* (pp. 49–66). Washington, DC: National Education Association.

Graves, D. H. (1983). *Writing: Teachers & children at work.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Graves, D. H. (1994). *A fresh look at writing.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Harste, J., Woodward, V., & Burke, C. (1984). *Language stories & literary lessons.* Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Konigsburg, E. L. (1996). *The view from Saturday.* New York: Atheneum Books.

Lamott, A. (1994). *Bird by bird: Some instruction on writing and life.* New York: Pantheon Books.

Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher, 15,* 4–14.

Shulman, L. S. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard Educational Review, 57,* 1–22.

Smith, S. G. (1992). What is it to question? *Soundings, 75,* 129–146.

Thomas, D. K. (1988). Why questions and why answers: Patterns and Purposes. *Language Arts, 65,* 552–556.

Wertsch, J. V. (1991). *Voices of the mind: A sociocultural approach to mediated action.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wolf, S. A., & Davinroy, K. (1998). "The clay that makes the pot": The loss of language in writing assessment. *Written Communication, 15,* 419–464.

Monette Coleman McIver is a doctoral candidate at the University of Colorado at Boulder and 1998 AERA/Spencer Doctoral Fellow.

Shelby Anne Wolf is an associate professor at the University of Colorado at Boulder and a National Academy of Education Spencer Postdoctoral Fellow.

MEMBERSHIPS AVAILABLE IN NCTE COMMITTEES

Public Doublespeak: A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Public Doublespeak will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to create a series of concrete classroom exercises (lesson plans, discussion outlines) calculated to focus student attention on particular uses of language that the committee is prepared to call irresponsible; and alert the profession generally to the forces that in the committee's judgment are misusing the language: government and its military personnel, industry and its advertisers, educators, you and me.

If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by **October 10, 1999,** explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Secondary Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.

Instructional Technology: A limited number of memberships in the newly reconstituted Committee on Instructional Technology will be available to interested members of the Council. Major functions of the committee will be to study emerging technologies and their integration into English and language arts curricula and teacher education programs; to identify the effects of such technologies on teachers, students, and educational settings, with attention to minority, disabled, and disadvantaged students; to explore means of disseminating information about such technologies to the NCTE membership; to serve as liaison between NCTE and other groups interested in computer-based education in English and language arts; to maintain liaison with the NCTE Commission on Media and other Council groups concerned with instructional technology.

If you would like to be considered for membership in this group, send a one-page letter by **October 10, 1999,** explaining your specific interest in the committee, relevant background, and your present professional work to: Administrative Assistant to the Secondary Associate Executive Director, NCTE, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096.