It’s All about **Looking Closely and Listening Carefully**

by Heidi Mills

“Stand aside for a while and leave room for learning, observe carefully what children do, and then, if you have understood well, teaching will be different from before.” —Loris Malaguzzi

“Mr. O, you don’t want to miss this!” Jordan exclaimed as she shoved a clipboard into her third-grade teacher’s hands and began pulling him toward her table. Jordan knew her teacher would appreciate the conversation she and her friends were having over a book about the Titanic that they were composing together. She knew that he would want to take notes to capture their questions, connections, ideas; their ways of negotiating; and most important, their passions as readers and writers. Jordan also knew that her teacher would most likely want to invite them to highlight a strategy they were using during whole-class strategy-sharing at the conclusion of writing workshop. Her teacher accepted her invitation and joined the group with clipboard, paper, and pen in hand, eagerly anticipating what he might learn about them as readers and writers. Jordan also knew that her teacher would most likely want to invite them to highlight a strategy they were using during whole-class strategy-sharing at the conclusion of writing workshop. Her teacher accepted her invitation and joined the group with clipboard, paper, and pen in hand, eagerly anticipating what he might learn about them as readers and writers. He suspected they might also shed light on his understanding of how to craft a compelling nonfiction text.

While this story reflects a moment in time in Tim O’Keefe’s third-grade classroom, it also portrays a solid pattern within our school culture. At the Center for Inquiry in Columbia, South Carolina, our interactions with children constantly remind us how important it is for children to be known but also to know they are known and valued by all learners in the community. Steve Hefner, the Richland School District Two superintendent, said, “At the Center for Inquiry, everything and everyone matters.”

A couple of years ago, Kaytlyn entered Julie Waugh’s fourth-grade classroom for the first time. After a day or two, while the students were cleaning up and preparing to go home, Mrs. Waugh asked Kaytlyn, “How’s it going here? What do you think about your new school?” Kaytlyn responded matter-of-factly, “I feel smarter here. People care about what I have to say. I have time to say what I am thinking and people listen to me. And you listen to me.” The school’s belief that children are at the heart of the community and the curriculum was visible for Kaytlyn from the moment she entered our campus.
Recently, the parent of a kindergarten student commented on how much she had learned about the democratic nature of the school by shifts in her child’s talk. She also noticed changes in his perceptions of himself as a learner. Her child, Chase, was trying to speak at the dinner table. After several failed attempts, his mother asked him to be quiet, to stop trying to interrupt because there were too many people talking at once. He responded confidently, “Mrs. Barnes said I have the right to hear and be heard!”

The Center for Inquiry is a small school partnership that was established in collaboration between Richland School District Two and the University of South Carolina. Inquiry is at the heart of curriculum and community within classrooms and across the school (Mills & Donnelly, 2001; Mills, O’Keefe, and Jennings, 2004). In this issue of School Talk, we (classroom teachers, university partner, and lead teacher) share some of the insights and strategies that have helped us interpret and support our children’s learning over nine years of collaborative research and weekly curricular conversations (Mills, 2001). For us, inquiry is not a method of instruction or set of activities, but a stance we take toward learning and learners (Short & Burke, 1996). In the same way, we believe that assessment is not a collection of tools alone, but is all about looking closely and listening carefully. With this stance we are united philosophically, yet, in each classroom, curriculum is unique because we believe that teachers must collaborate with the children to make the theory their own in their own ways.

Teaching Readers and Writers

We have come to realize that teaching well means getting to know children well, which requires a shift in perspective. Rather than teaching reading and writing, we believe it is our right and responsibility to teach readers and writers. By looking closely at and listening carefully to children as readers and writers, we are able to pay attention to the strategies they use to construct and share meaning. We explore how children learn to read and write while using reading and writing to learn. We learn about our children’s favorite authors, the genres they access most frequently, the connections they make within and across engagements, the kinds of questions they pose, the issues and ideas that capture their hearts and minds. We learn about our children’s home cultures, their habits, passions, and fears. We know we need to pay attention to our students’ strengths and needs to respond in ways that make a difference moment by moment, child to child, day in and day out. And the children learn to inquire into their own processes as well as those of their friends and teachers.

Across the school, teachers know children, children know one another and their teachers, and we all know ourselves as readers, writers, and learners.

These interrelated stances make it possible to broaden our notions of curriculum and assessment. Teachers and children continually interpret each other’s insights, ideas, and questions and, in so doing, collaboratively inquire. As a result, everyone has a voice in curriculum and assessment, and we can teach responsively.

Kidwatching

While the teachers at the Center for Inquiry access professionally published assessment and curriculum materials when those materials serve them well, their most telling assessment strategies and most compelling curricular decisions emerge from classroom conversations and authentic classroom data. Even the best assessment tools reveal certain things and conceal others. Thoughtful teachers use these tools, they aren’t used by them.

Through careful kidwatching (O’Keefe, 1997) we have learned the value of looking at children with new eyes. Most important, we have adopted a seek-to-understand stance by attempting to look at life, literacy, and learning through the children’s eyes. In this issue of School Talk, we show how teachers in one elementary school get to know their children deeply, while helping the children learn about their classmates and their teachers, and about themselves as readers, writers, and learners. Although these three stances are unique, as these stories demonstrate, they are also interrelated, inseparable. K–1 teacher Dori Gilbert pulls everything together at the end of this issue through a photo and artifact essay that illustrates the richly diverse ways she gets to know kids while helping them learn about themselves and one another in the name of collaborative inquiry.
When Kids Become Kidwatchers

by Jennifer Barnes

One March morning, I was kidwatching as usual in my kindergarten classroom, clipboard and sticky notes in hand. I carry sticky notes with me throughout the day and jot down direct quotes or observations of the children at work. At the end of each day, I easily file the notes in my kidwatching notebook by accessing tabbed pages reserved for each child. I then make instructional decisions from authentic data that reveals children’s understanding of skills, strategies, and concepts.

On this particular day, I turned to find Clirae behind me—looking quite like me! Her pencil poised in mid-air exclaimed, “I’m going to go around in here to list down and look at what the children are doing.” Clirae was kidwatching! She had a sense of agency. Her tone was not evaluative but, as with all good kidwatchers, she was sincerely interested in the learning processes of those around her.

As an experienced classroom teacher, I have completely reshaped my beliefs about how children learn over the past several years. I have done so by carefully watching and recording my students’ statements and actions. By getting in the habit of kidwatching, I record unforgettable, spontaneous incidents from which the most powerful teachable moments emerge. But when Clirae took on a kidwatching stance, I learned more about myself, the students, and other children than ever before! When she shared her observations with me, I got a glimpse of our classroom through her eyes. And, while I learned about her, she was learning more about her friends, herself, and the learning process.

by Susanne Pender

Listening to my students, I have come to realize that talk is the most powerful teaching resource. I learn more about what to teach and how to teach it as I listen to my children. One place where talk is a particularly helpful resource is during reflective conversations before, during, and after reading and writing workshop. Not only do these conversations foster, for the children, a deeper understanding of the literacy learning process and a sense of what good readers and writers do, they give me an appreciation of strategies the children are currently exploring.

At the end of each writing workshop, time is reserved for authors to share strategies from which others can learn. Presentations may include the use of an author’s favorite craft, demonstration of a skill or strategy, or the sharing of a dilemma in hopes of getting advice from fellow authors. Because we live and learn within an environment of trust, editorial suggestions and revision recommendations are both solicited and welcomed. Recently Brianna, a third grader, began writing about a trip to the beach. At the end of workshop time, she announced that she was proud of her introduction and chose to share it, adding, “I know that good authors try to capture their audience’s attention, so this is how I began my story”:

Imagine a light breeze across your face and the slight sting of salt on your tongue. Birds cry in the background and the roar of the water gives you warning that the wave just might reach your toes if you stay long enough for the tide to return.

Two students complimented Brianna on her use of descriptive language to create a picture in the reader’s mind and on the way she established the mood of her piece in her lead. They demonstrated how they internalized the mood of her piece in their work. They demonstrated what they had learned about Brianna as an author and the ways she was helping her young colleagues appreciate what good writers do.

Next Chloe told the class that she was using dialogue in her story and was paying close attention to using quotation marks and indenting lines in the correct way. She read a few excerpts and then asked her peers if she had given the reader enough information to support her extensive use of dialogue. She knew from past peer conferences that she often used dialogue without enough narrative information for the reader to understand what was actually happening in the story. Chloe was showing us all how important it is to know our strengths as well as our needs as authors.

Both Brianna and Chloe demonstrated how they internalized the process of reflection and then turned to their young colleagues within the learning community to teach and learn from one another. To grow as authors, they needed to know themselves and others. In the process, I learned in ways that deeply informed my construction of further opportunities for them to grow as writers.
Knowing Kids through Written Conversation

by Tim O’Keefe

What difference does one child or a few children make in helping us think about how to teach? The short answer is that it makes a world of difference. Every child helps us to become better at our craft. Every single child who looks into our eyes on a daily basis helps us to better understand all children. I couldn’t teach with any certainty before listening to each child read, have written conversations, or confer with individual authors. Only after I have a sense of who my kids are as readers and writers can I really begin to make wise instructional decisions. The following vignette illustrates the importance of making learning intimate (Ayers, 1993).

During the fall of third grade, we read The Music of Dolphins by Karen Hesse for a whole-class literature study. In this moving book, a feral child, Mila, is “rescued” from her ocean life with her dolphin family and brought to a research center to be studied by a group of scientists interested in language acquisition. Initially, Mila thrives and learns quickly how to communicate and to give the scientists what they desire. Eventually she languishes and can only think of returning to her home in the sea off Cuba with her dolphin family. Jordan and I had a “written conversation” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 582) about the story. Excerpts from the written conversation follow:

Tim: What do you think Mila meant when she said that she was a “face of bones”?

Jordan: I think she meant that Mila was looking miserable. Do you think her dreams are trying to tell her something?

Tim: I think her dreams meant that she was afraid that she was forgetting what it was like to be a dolphin. What do you think her dreams meant?

This interaction demonstrated that Jordan was fast becoming a confident and competent language user. It is important to note that just a year earlier, she had difficulty reading anything but highly predictable texts. In the year between second and third grade, Jordan came to love literature and became one of the most active participants in our class literature discussions. She showed that she could go beyond literal comprehension of texts to interpret and share her own meanings.

Jordan’s final response that it was “kind of suspicious” was a precocious hypothesis. Jordan may have noticed that Mila had been tricked before in the story (Mila did not know, for example, that the door to her room was being locked for her “protection”).

I consider interactions like this one as golden opportunities to document what I notice about my readers and writers. In this case, I noted that Jordan came to this written conversation invested as a reader and ready to communicate her insights and ideas. It was the most sophisticated book she had ever read, and she really loved this story. Her written conversation reflected her passion for the story and connectedness with the characters. Her responses reflected the tension in the story and character analysis—it is kind of suspicious… I think she is not on the right sea—as well as the mood—Mila was looking miserable. She was comfortable making predictions and going out on a limb about the ending and clearly relied on her experiences with story to interpret and make predictions about this one.

Through her questions and responses, she showed that she was interested in my opinions, yet Jordan was confident in those she constructed for herself. In this written conversation, there were no shallow questions or mimicked responses, only a genuine desire to learn from each other.

While I was conversing on paper with Jordan, other children were accessing each other as writing partners. When we reconvened for our whole-group strategy-sharing, a reflective ritual we use to conclude reading and writing workshop, Jordan and I highlighted our work with the class.

Through my interaction with Jordan, I was able to demonstrate the power of deep questioning—which we contrasted to questions requiring only yes or no answers. Jordan, who initially didn’t think she would be able to handle this book, was validated as a strategic thinker; her friends appreciated the depth and breadth of her questions and responses. Perhaps most important, she was affirmed as a reader. The Music of Dolphins was, in many ways, Jordan’s breakthrough book. It helped me to convince her that she did not need to read the same “safe” picture books she had been rereading throughout the year. She was ready and willing to take on new genres and, in so doing, push herself as a reader.
Oh my gosh,” Zakiya sighed and then gasped. “I just realized how much I used to dominate our conversations.”

I had just shown my fifth-grade class a videotape that Heidi Mills made to capture our class engaged in literature circles last year. I chose it because I thought that it nicely illustrated how a successful literature discussion was conducted. The students took notes and reflected as they watched.

When debriefing began, Laura suggested, “I'm not quite sure that roles are the best idea.” I sensed that my idea of a productive literature circle was about to change. As the conversation continued, the students suggested that we revisit the basics of literature circles and the notion of roles. Their questioning of roles was timely because Harvey Daniels (2002) himself had recently revised his stance on them and urged other teachers to do the same. In his words, “In our network of schools, we no longer use role sheets, either for initial training or book club meetings. Our teachers find that other, more open-ended tools support later discussion, without risking the mechanical turn-taking often associated with overuse of role sheets” (p. 99).

Following my students’ suggestion to reassess the notion of roles in literature circles, I decided to show them Harvey Daniels’ (2001) video, Looking into Literature Circles. The students felt a genuine sense of empowerment when they realized that I was going to invite them to watch the professional video for inspiration to redesign their own literature circles using Harvey Daniels as a distant teacher.

As before, they took notes while watching the video. Then they compared their own literature discussions with the ones on the professional tape. Comments and questions erupted throughout the classroom, and before long we had compiled an impressive list of new ideas and strategies for our literature circles. We thoroughly discussed topics such as investment in conversations, accountability to one another in the group, equity across group members when speaking, and strategies for promoting participation. We selected the more popular suggestions from the list and created a new list for use during our next literature circle. Moving us beyond individual roles such as summarizer, discussion director, and recorder, my students planned an open-response assignment where they wrote freely in their journals in preparation for literature circle discussions, and the role of tallying individual comments of group members was replaced with an individual reflection sheet. With new structures in place and a newfound enthusiasm for literature circles, the students were eager to begin.

During literature circles the following day, I truly appreciated the impact of this invitation. Everyone was invested in the discussion, well prepared with thoughtful comments and questions, respectful of each other’s voices, and showing more pride than I had seen previously. These were by far the best literature circles that my class had ever conducted. Creating strategies with children and allowing them to take ownership in their learning has not only restructured our literature discussions, but it has led me to see the power of co-creating curriculum and assessment strategies across the curriculum. My students came to better know themselves and one another as readers, and at the same time, they became important colleagues and mentors to me.

Using Video to Reflect on Literature Circles

by Brent Petersen

Knowing each other through literature discussion.
As a teacher, I strive to create productive learning engagements that help me know children better while challenging them to write creatively, connect content in new ways, and reflect on themselves and the learning process. Using templates (a few words of guidance offered verbally or visually) is one way that we accomplish this goal. Templates give us freedom within structure, and help us get right to the heart of what matters. Based on my belief that language shapes thought, I construct templates as scaffolds to promote thought and conversation.

Exploring Complex Issues: The day after September 11, 2001, I gave students a page divided into quadrants with a few thought-provoking phrases. With some quiet writing time, students were able to use the template to organize their ideas about an extremely complex event to share in conversation with the entire community.

Morning Math Message: Each morning, I create a mini-inquiry/mathematical challenge (a math message) related to a concept or idea the class has been investigating, and the children use a range of strategies to consider solutions on their own. One child shares his or her strategies for addressing the challenge, while the other students respond with questions, connections, and appreciations (the internalized template) that clarify and challenge the math content we are exploring. Students' responses based on these three simple words help me understand their knowledge while they are pushed to thoughtfully challenge answers, consider diverse ways to solve problems, and appreciate one another’s math work and process.

Response to Read Alouds: When we share visual responses to read alouds, I often ask the children to “sketch to stretch” (Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996, p. 528). One student shares his or her sketch and chooses three people to offer their interpretations of it. The template that guides their comments has been established from the beginning of the year: “I wonder . . . ,” “I notice . . . ,” “I predict . . . ,” and “I appreciate . . . .” This shared language encourages us to be thoughtful and precise, broadens the interpretive possibilities, and allows us to know one another in new ways.

Some Thoughts on Templates

- Create templates based on what students need to know.
- Be flexible. Listen to students’ comments about templates and incorporate their suggestions.
- If templates do not work, don’t be afraid to change.
- If students see you creating templates, talking about what you did and why, they will start creating them, too.
- Pay attention to children while they use templates to question, reflect, interact, and respond. You will come to know each child better.

The Power of Templates

by Julie Waugh

An Administrator’s View

by Lyn Z. Mueller

Every morning, I greet the children as they are dropped off in front of the school. I frequently ask our fifth-grade safety patrol members what they are reading. One day Hayden told me the latest events in the book that he and some of his peers were reading for literature circles. Martha mentioned that they recently watched a videotape of a literature circle conversation from fourth grade and exclaimed, “Boy, have we changed!” I asked Bethany what they had learned from reviewing the old tape, and all three of them responded by listing their planned changes. They halted the conversation to open car doors and said, “Just come and see!” Of course I did, eager to observe their new processes.

Across our school, teachers know the children well; the children know one another and themselves; and they gladly share their insights, strategies, and questions with me. They know I want to understand the everyday rhythm of teaching and learning. In order for me to be accountable to learning and learners, it’s critical that I value and support the processes of learning and the authentic kidwatching data that shows teachers’ concerns for their students.

The previous classroom vignettes illustrate the power of this inside-out look at teaching and learning and the great value of looking at assessment as getting to know one another very well. In the photo/artifact essay that follows, Dori Gilbert draws all of these stories together by illuminating a sample of the rich, multifaceted strategies that she uses to learn about her students and to foster their understanding and appreciation of one another, while encouraging children to get in touch with themselves as readers, writers, and learners.

As a member of our school’s learning community who is, at the same time, learner, teacher, and administrator, I am privileged to witness the processes and products of teaching and learning when teachers share student artifacts, kid-watching notes, instructional planning ideas, material development, or student reflections; or when I witness strategy-sharing sessions, student interactions, and teacher-to-teacher conversations. Throughout our school, it is clear that knowing children—and children knowing themselves, each other, and their teachers—is how assessment is defined and honored as a cornerstone of collaborative inquiry.

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We go public with kidwatching observations via weekly newsletters in which we highlight what we are learning from the children.

Our Featured Scientists have kept us busy investigating their personal queries! J'Wan had us wondering why water level increased when putting objects in it. Kaitlyn had us predicting the strength of a chicken’s eggshells, Kathryn demonstrated magnetism through certain objects, and Regan tried to make cooked spaghetti “come alive” using chemical reactions—what brilliant scientific minds!

Excerpt from weekly newsletter

Strategy-sharing sessions are a popular daily reading ritual. The reader who was “coached” publicly shares one strategy used to make meaning from the text; the strategy is then documented on our “What Good Readers Do” list.

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Next Issue: The January issue of School Talk will focus on Rethinking Grouping.