

The Influence of Student-Led Conferences on Communication and Dialogue with Parents

Carla-Ann Brown

P.K. Yonge Developmental Research School

Abstract

A sixth-grade World Cultures teacher created a system of dialogue where students reflected on their growth throughout a unit/semester and passed ownership from parents/teachers taking responsibility for assessment of student growth to students taking ownership of their reflection in the Project-Based Learning (PBL) process. The teacher wanted to understand the relationship between participation in student-led conferences/conversations and student agency in the reflection of individual progress. Data included student/family pre-conference notes, conference videos, and student/parent surveys. She found that having the student-led conference transferred ownership of personal habits of work to the students, and the structure of a student-led conference was an effective way for families to connect with their students.

Keywords: Standards-Based Grading, Project-Based Grading, Student-Led Conferences, Middle School, World Cultures, Action Research

Context and Rationale

During the 2018–2019 school year, sixth grade changed the instructional practice to be rooted in standards-based grading and built around the principles of Universal Design for Learning framework. The team's intent with this transition was to communicate to both the students and the parents a more accurate portrayal of student achievement progress toward specific skills and content learning goals and whether the student is meeting those goals. In this World Cultures class, the attainment of knowledge was demonstrated through the completion of short/long responses, group collaboration, dialogue, conversations, debates, writing assessments, and unit projects.

One of the significant aspects of project-based learning (PBL) is the reflection of individual student achievement. Throughout a unit, students sometimes spend weeks working on a culmination project. One of the challenges I noticed was that after the completion of a project or assessment of a unit, students would rarely take ownership of their reflection in reference to the completion process. Parents would look at their student's grades out of context instead of the individual student being able to take ownership of their successes throughout the units as well as areas of growth. I believed that students needed to be provided with space where they were actively participating in conversations about their learning (Minke & Anderson, 2003); this was something I felt was lacking in my classroom. Because of this reflection, I sought to find a way for my students to be able to take this ownership of their reflection in a systematic approach that would not overwhelm them or their parents.

Background and Purpose

After reflecting on student analysis of their projects, units, and work from last year, I began to wonder how I could create a system of dialogue and communication where students could reflect

on their growth throughout a unit/semester. I believed this reflection could lead to passing ownership and autonomy from the parents and teachers taking responsibility for the assessment of student growth to the students taking ownership of their reflection process. One of the ways I aimed to achieve this was through the development of student-led conferences that empowered students in my World Cultures class to share their progress, achievements, strengths, and areas of growth with their parents in both formal and informal settings. According to Borba and Olvera (2001), when students are given the opportunity to actively participate in the reflection aspect of their progress in academics and assessments through student-led conferences, there is an increase in intrinsic motivation and interest in their personal growth and learning.

PBL and standards-based learning emphasize the reflection piece of the learning process because they allow for more in-depth learning and integrate the prior knowledge of students with new knowledge and experiences. Students need to be able to explain why they chose to complete a task a certain way, how they grew throughout the process, and what they still need to work on. Based upon my journey of building the foundation of PBL in my class and my vision for where the reflection process in my classroom could lead, my primary question was: What is the relationship between participation in student-led conferences/conversations and student involvement and agency when reflecting on individual work and progress? My sub-question was: In what ways, if any, does this framework for student-led conferences/conversations influence student communication and dialogue with parents?

One of the goals of this inquiry was to create a system where students would gain knowledge and experience in leading intentional conversations with their parents about their learning and achievements. I wanted to create a space where students would have the tools in place to become the facilitators of their conferences. Research illustrates that student-led conferences support balanced communication between all stakeholders, empower student control over their learning, and increase positive relationships between teachers, students, and parents. In traditional conferences, students take a backseat while the teacher and parents guide the conversation, sometimes without the input of the students themselves. Often in these settings, students feel like the conversation is just about them, rather than inclusive of them. Conderman, Ikan, and Hatcher (2000) assert that student-led conferences can create informed communication where students take more ownership over their work and achievement, learn communication and presentation skills, practice setting goals for themselves, and plan how to execute those goals. One of the most important takeaways of student-led conferences is that students are held accountable for their learning and assessment.

Through the process of student-led conferences, I was able to highlight the importance of the student's voice. Borba and Olvera (2001) state that the structure of student-led conferences can facilitate student empowerment because they provide a space where students can "share, and discuss their strengths, [areas of growth], progress, and academic and social goals" (p. 333). Engagement in student-led spaces can also lead to family-school relationships that are tighter and more conducive to advocating for students (Minke & Anderson, 2018). Arguments for student-led conferences include the democratic argument where students take the role of leadership in the conversations, the pedagogic argument where greater student involvement leads to a deeper understanding of learning, and the administrative argument where students organize all the information they need to help them lead their conferences with their parents (Tholander, 2011).

To achieve success with student-led conferences, the teaching and learning environment needs to be centered on students gaining the intrinsic motivation to express concerns about their learning, their strengths, and areas of work (Schwartz & David, 2017). With this understanding of the benefits of creating a student-centered system of communication, my inquiry was focused on the

impact of self-reflection and personal growth using a system of dialogue where students take the lead in the conversation.

Inquiry Methods

Design and Data Sources

After documenting low levels of student reflection after completing the first unit of the school year, I started going over the reflection process of work and PBL with the students, beginning with unit 2. I created opportunities for the students and families to engage in mini-conferences at home, where they reflected on a small number of assignments and student progress. Before the students started engaging in the process, I reviewed the reflection process with them and then asked the students what they might want to discuss with their parents. Together we co-constructed the questions they thought would be essential to review with their parents. I designed an introduction letter that outlined the process of reflection for the parents. The family reflection form contained the list of work to reflect on and the questions they could use to help guide the discussion. The family reflection conferences were not just limited to discussions on grades or specific assignments but also presented an opportunity for families to discuss their child's overall learning and progress in World Cultures. Lastly, families had the option of documenting their conversations on paper or recording their conversations.

Throughout unit two, I used rubrics created for each graded assignment, student self-assessments crafted for each unit, observations, student and parent surveys, portfolio of student samples, and personal one-on-one interviews. Strategies and teaching methods throughout these two units included:

- Using learning goal sheets to help students identify learning goals that they needed to work on and make a plan for their progress towards the goal.
- Guiding students in using their self-assessments to reflect on their learning goals/targets.
- Facilitating students in using the co-constructed rubrics to assess their learning.
- Documenting student progress and feedback with observations and notes.
- Using simulations and practices for students to reflect on their work at home with their parents.
- Communicating to the parents structured questions for them to ask the students as they reflect on a major assignment or project.
 - Students could write down notes from the conference with their parents, or they could videotape the conference with Screencastify on their Chromebook. The families could choose what worked best for them.
- Using a portfolio system for students to place their work in for reflection and analysis.

Data pieces included:

- Literature on student-led conferences
- Student artifacts and portfolios
 - Short responses
 - Major assignments and projects
 - Learning goal reflections
 - Student conference reflection sheets
- Student/family conference videos or notes
- Student/parent interviews and surveys

Table 1. *Inquiry Timeline Calendar*

Month	Goals	To do
October	Literature review	<p>Early October:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finished reading literature on the topic of student-led conferences, the impact on student reflection, and conferences. <p>Mid-late October (10/15–10/31):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created family reflection questions with the students. Created and implemented step by step conversation starters for the students to use at home. Planned the introduction lesson that lays out the format for the students to get used to the conferences with their parents. Had a practice simulation of how the reflection conference could look like for the students. Had the students engage in the first family reflection conference with their parents. Administered surveys to students and parents after the first reflection conference that included questions about how they think the first reflection conference went, what they learned, how they perceived the process, and what could be done before next time.
November	Collect data/analyze data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed examples of family reflection (both paper and video). Reviewed the surveys filled out by the students and the parents to help set up for the next family reflection. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzed data on what students think/feel about the process and the conference. How did their parents react to this new structure of conversation? Mini-lessons to support the reflection process with the students.
December-March	Collect data/analyze data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reviewed examples of family reflection (both paper and video) Reviewed the surveys filled out by the students and the parents to help set up for the next family reflection. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Analyzed data on what students think/feel about the process and the conference. How did their parents react to this new structure of conversation? Mini-lessons to support the reflection process with the students.

Participants and Data Collection

Out of five class periods, I chose to focus on first period due to observations I made about students in this class period having a hard time articulating why they decided on certain academic choices and goals for the future after completing a task.

For the first student reflection, students wrote down their thoughts to seven questions to use as a tool to help guide the conversation with their parents. Questions on the reflection sheet included asking students to create goals for their next short response as well as laying out a plan for achieving that goal, strengths of the assignments (including what students thought they did well), and areas of growth (including what students felt they needed to work on) as shown in Figures 1 and 2. One of the skills we worked on before students completed the reflection form was making sure they elaborated on their claims and backed up their thinking with evidence. Simulations and practices were implemented for students to reflect on their work at home with their parents and provide them with the opportunity to refine their communication skills and receive feedback before the actual conference (Conderman, Ikan, & Hatcher, 2000).

Work to reflect on:

1. **Primary and Secondary document analysis:** I got a Meeting proficient
What I learned about primary and secondary sources was
I learned that a primary source is something physical, written, or anything from a certain time period or event. On the other hand a secondary source is something about after the era. For example, a text book is a secondary source because it talks about a certain time period but is not from it.

2. **The Effect of fire short response:** I got a mastery
What I learned about how changes in the environment impacted human decisions and lives was
The Ice age: The ice age was a time period long ago where the earth was covered in ice and snow. The early humans of this time had to adapt and form groups. This made us the people we are today.
The Nile River: The Nile River was a river in Egypt which separated two sides of Egypt. The towns people depended on this water source for food and water, as well as their everyday needs.
The Gold Rush: The Gold Rush in California was when gold was found and many people traveled to mine gold. California became a state because of how many people settled after the Gold Rush.

Strengths of the assignments (What you think you did well) Be as specific as possible.

- I think I did well on the document analysis because I used a lot of evidence from the text and made sure I said where I got the evidence. I also think I did well with detail and I made sure I connected my ideas.

- On my short response I think I did very good with the details and made sure I stated where I got my information from. I also think I did a good job of connecting my ideas with outside information.

Areas of growth (What you think you need to work on) Be as specific as possible.

I think I need to work more on adding more to what I'm explaining. Like, "The main ideal of the article was to bring people to help the pandas." Why will people come see the pandas. What is wrong? I believe I need to connect my ideas even further and think about what I can add on.

Figure 1. Student conference reflection #1

Work to reflect on:

- **Semester 1 as a whole:** Before you begin your conference, please review your grades from semester 1 world cultures class.

Step 1: Reflect on 2018, then Answer the following questions:

1. what are you most proud of from semester 1 of World Cultures? Explain why.

I am most proud of getting mastery on my semester exam. I was proud of this accomplishment because the semester exam was a really hard and complex thinking assignment. To prepare for this assignment I made sure that my graphic organizer was up to par. Doing this ensured that I got a mastery on my semester exam.
2. What inspired you about semester 1 in World Cultures? Support with examples and evidence.

I am inspired by learning about ancient greece. Learning about ancient greece has inspired me to want to know more about ancient greece. I would want to know more about the type of government ancient greece had. I would also want to know why the greeks used a lottery system.
3. What behaviors do you want to continue in the new year in World Cultures? Be specific with examples.

I want to continue to try my best in all my work. Trying my best has gotten me many accomplishments. One of these accomplishments is getting good grades. Getting good grades has gotten me closer to my dream of being a doctor.

Figure 2. Student conference reflection #3

Step 2: Think about your reflections on 2018, then answer the following questions for 2019:

1. What do I need to work on for the New Year in World Cultures?

I need to work on re-reading the work that I want to submit. Although, I get mastery on almost all of my assignments, I think rereading my work would still help. Re-reading helps make sure that your work is up to par. After re-reading on my reflection paper, I noticed many errors both grammatical and organizational. If I hadn't re-read my reflection paper I would have had a 3.
2. What is in my way from achieving my best in World Cultures? Be specific with examples and evidence.

~~There is~~
There is nothing in my way, but what I want to continue is getting good grades on my assignments. I think when I get good grades on my assignments shows I have really learned something. When I show I have learned something puts me in a higher standard which helps me graduate better.
3. What behaviors need to go in World Cultures for the new year? Be specific with examples and explain why.

What needs to go is waiting until the last minute to do my conference. Due to me waiting till the weekend before my conference duties made me have not a lot of time to discuss my issues and my goal. Not having a lot of time to discuss my grades and assignments has given me a hard time to discuss my goals and weaknesses.

The at-home conferences were not limited to discussions on grades or specific assignments but were an opportunity for families to engage in discussions about their child's overall learning and progress in World Cultures. Students could write down notes from the conference with their parents, or they could videotape the conference with Screencastify, which is a free screen recorder for Google Chrome. Families had the option of documenting their conversations on paper while taking notes or recording their conversations using their child's computer. After the conferences were over, parents were asked to complete a survey to reflect on the experience with their child.

The students completed their second conference after completing their unit 2 project on human migration and the immigrant experience. The second conference entailed students sharing with their parents what they learned throughout the project and presentation and reflecting on their learning goals. Compared to student-led conference #1, this second conference tied in the impact of perception and bias and asked students to reflect on the effect of single stories on individuals. A change I made for student-led conference #2 was that I added a student survey in addition to the parent survey for them to complete after the conference.

Data Analysis: Student Reflection Pre-Conference Sheets and Video Analysis

After collecting and reviewing student reflection pre-conference sheets and the student-recorded videos and notes from student-led conference #1, I engaged in a four-step process for summative data analysis. First, I described what I noticed about the data. Step two included making sense of the data by organizing the information into themes, and step three included interpreting what the themes demonstrated. Lastly, step four involved drawing interpretations and conclusions from the data (Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2014). As I reviewed the conferences of each student, whether it was a video recording or parent notes, I took notes on initial thoughts of what was happening as part of step 1. Figure 3 shows an example of the notes I took while listening to the audio conference completed by student AC.

Conference DATA:

██████████ (AC)

- Might be a good idea to ask kids what they would like to learn that they do not already know as part of the reflection.
- The reflection piece allows students to think back on what they can improve on
- "What part of your work are you most proud of?" AC: "collaborating with my partners"
- Ask a specific habits of work question- what do the kids want to work on
- During the reflection students were able to draw connections between different learning goals/assignments. For example, AC was able to connect how the basis of a primary or secondary source and how he could use those types of documents to analyze how the environment impacts humans.
- Students holding themselves accountable. AC "it falls on me. I haven't been bringing stuff home for mom to read over, proofread, and help become a better student".

Figure 3. AC conference data

Then, after going through all the videos and documents like the post-conference reflection completed by MM in Figure 4, I organized my notes into different themes with step 2 of sense-making. These themes included drawing real-world connections of what happened in class to conversations they had at home, the importance of collaboration, ownership of personal habits of work, and the support of parents, as seen in Figure 4. Figure 5 shows an example of the themes that emerged after I listened to CL's video conference with his mother.

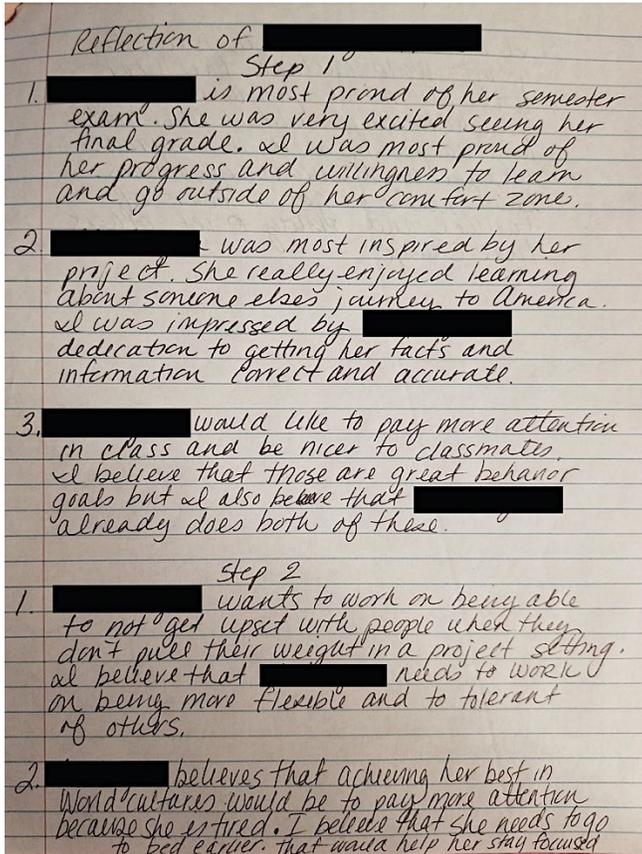


Figure 4. MM conference 3 reflection

How different pieces of data fit together?

- Collaboration importance
- Ownership of personal habits of work
- Connection to what is learned in class to real outside world.
- The support of parents.

Figure 5. The themes of data pieces

██████████ (CL)

- CL was able to create a plan of making sure he elaborates on his details for future short responses.
- Parent of CL was able to emphasize “there is never a bad question, especially with misunderstandings”. Able to communicate that with her son.
- Parents were able to connect what they see at home with what their child was telling them about their progress in school.
- CL was able to recognize the importance of not only talking and going over the work in class with the teacher, but checking his work at home with his parents. Reiterated by mom.

Figure 6. CL conference data

Data Analysis: Parent Reflection Survey

After the conferences were over, parents filled out a survey containing five questions asking them to reflect on their experience. Questions included parents reflecting on if they felt the conference was a success, what they learned about their child, what areas of improvement they were looking for, what their favorite part of the conference was, and what they would do differently next time, if anything. After collecting the responses, I analyzed them for connections. Some themes I documented included several parents finding the conference a success due to constructive communication between them and their child, parents being surprised at the level of awareness demonstrated by their child, and several parents wanting their child to work on focusing on finer details as an area for improvement. I also found that several parents reflected that the conference was a way for students to question their progress and that several of their students had a goal of learning how to collaborate with others. Figure 7 shows a collection of parent responses to question 2 of the parent survey, which asked them what they learned about their child during the conference.

I learned that he wants to learn how to study and answer his questions in a new way and that makes me very proud of him because he is usually very shy and reserved in his approach to anything.

I've learned that my child wants to work harder and learn more in this subject.

He wants to learn more about time periods in history.

I've learned more about her specific learning interests.

That she might be struggling a little with her understanding of the material, but she knows how to improve.

That he should be a little more detailed about what he is.

That she is learning a lot in this course, but has a goal of improving her attention to detail as well as gain deeper insight about topics discussed in class. This dialogue allowed me the opportunity to hear my daughter articulate her understanding of analyzing primary and secondary sources, and I was absolutely in awe.

Figure 7. Parent survey question 2 responses

Findings

After analyzing the conferences and my themes for connections, I was able to claim that having the student-led conference format transferred ownership of personal habits of work, including decision making and goal setting to some of the students themselves. Several students were able to defend why they made certain decisions in their academic life. Evidence for this claim in conference #1 came from seven of 23 students comments being related to personal habits of work they could improve on, including from one student “setting better goals to learn from my mistakes” to another saying that “they would make better use of their Win Wednesday choice time [the personalized learning structure used in sixth grade] to strengthen their understanding of the material” as seen in Figure 8. It seemed that several students were able to pinpoint and recognize a concrete step they would need to take in trying to achieve their learning goals.

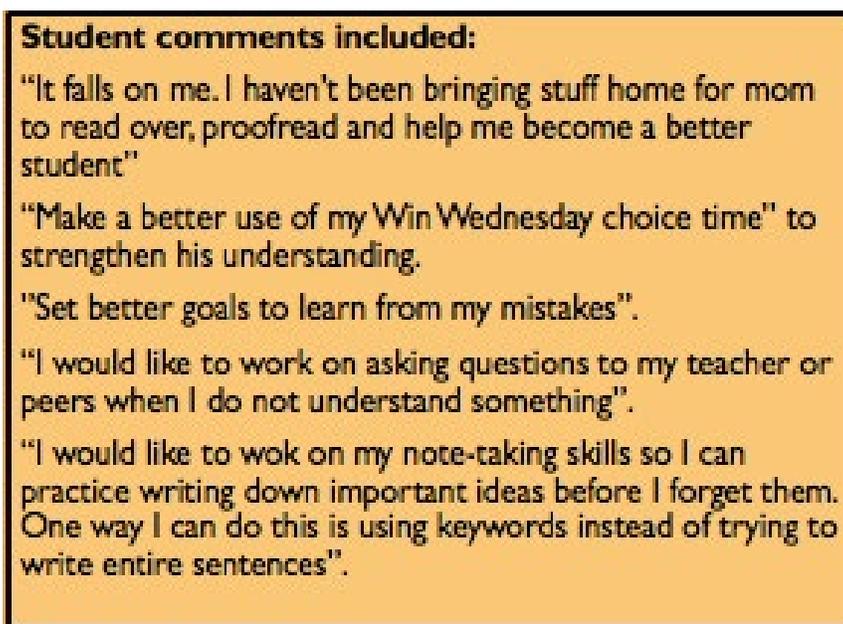


Figure 8. Student responses about personal habits of work

After I went through the 55 parent surveys, my second claim was that the structure of a student-led conference where students take the lead in sharing their learning, progress and reflect on their work with parents is an effective way for some families to connect with their students in an intentional way. I came to this conclusion because of the 55 responses from the post-conference survey after conference #2; 11 parents replied that the best part of the conference was simply connecting with their child. They liked having that time set aside to just talk with them. In addition to that, five parents commented that hearing their students give in-depth answers and share their understanding of a topic made them reflect on the disconnect between how much the students knew to what the parents thought they knew. Figure 9 shows some of the parent responses to the question on the parent survey, which asked them about their favorite part of the conference. With the reflection survey, I was encouraged and pleased to learn that the parents enjoyed having a conversation with their child that had a goal and objective but was not restrictive. It was beneficial that the students were able to conduct the conference in whichever way they thought best for their family.

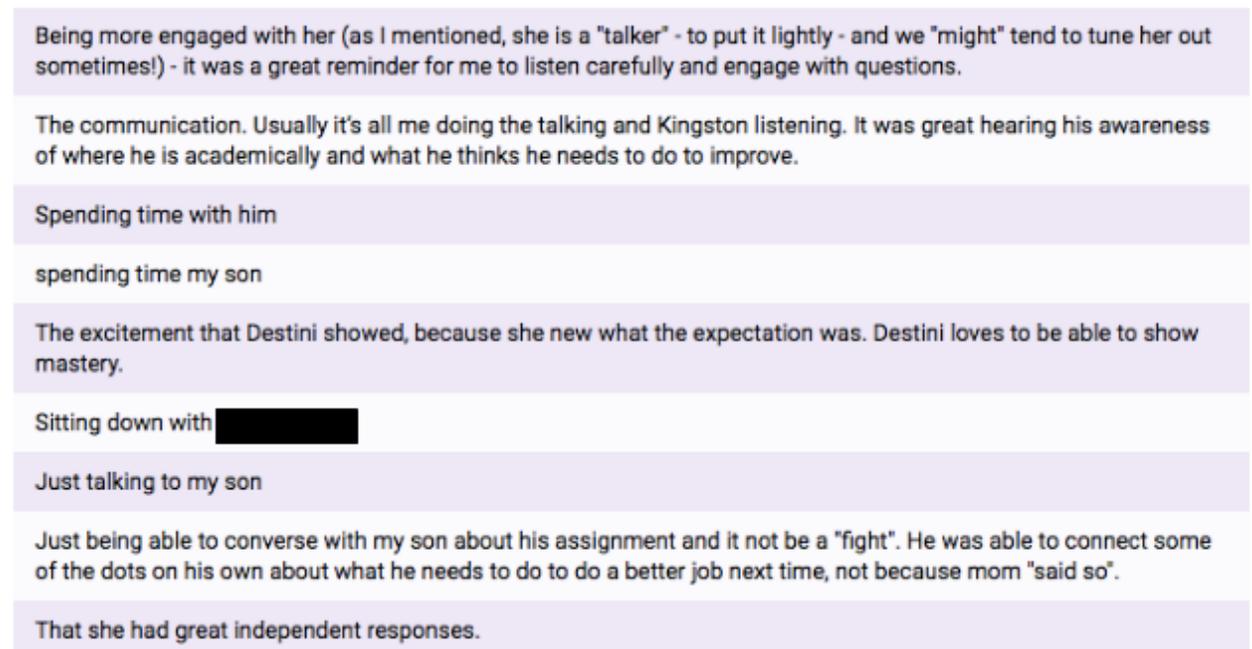


Figure 9. Parent responses question #4

Conclusions and Implications for Future Practice

This inquiry allowed me to explore the impact of facilitating an environment that was student-centered and fostered high student reflection. Over the course of the year, I continued to collect data from the conferences, student and parent surveys, as well as the literature. Many parents already had daily conversations with their children about what they did or learned each day in school. The purpose of these conferences was for parents to have intentional discussions led by their students about specific learning goals, how they felt about their progress towards achieving those learning goals, and reflect on their areas of strength as well as areas of growth. My intention through this inquiry was to create an environment that taught students to look past the grades and reflect on the actual learning they gained throughout my class. From Tuinstra and Hiatt-Michael (2004), I also got the idea of possibly categorizing data for future conferences into several categories of research questions. This method allowed me to look at my thinking process as well as the data collected as a whole instead of in small chunks. These categories include:

- Structural changes from conference to conference
- Academic changes I noticed
- Observable classroom behavior changes
- Students' affective domain
- Parent participation
- Development of student-led conferences

As I continued to learn about how best to support my students in effectively communicating their expectations, and taking leadership roles in communicating their reflection, strengths, and areas of work, I realized there was still more work to do as I continue on this journey of encouraging self-reflection in my students. First, I need to implement more simulations for students to practice the process of leading their conferences during class time before they conduct their conferences at home with their parents. This practice was very influential in helping the students effectively

communicate their learning and individual expectations. I believe the next step of this process was to have more frequent opportunities for my students to analyze their learning goals and draw connections to what they learned in class to real-world situations. Finally, as our school continues our journey to implementing open communication between all our stakeholders, we also continue to create opportunities for students to take the lead in conferences about their learning, assessment, and achievements. Through my work, I was able to share my ideas of student reflection with other teachers and demonstrated new ways that could be used to facilitate this crucial aspect of student learning.

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Corresponding Author: Carla-Ann Brown

Author Contact Information: cbrown@pky.ufl.edu

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Appendix A

Student-Led Conference Reflection Sheets #1, #2, and #3

Student-led conference: student reflection #__1__

Name:

Work to reflect on:

1. **Primary and Secondary document analysis:** I got a
What I learned about primary and secondary sources was

|

2. **The Effect of fire short response:** I got a
What I learned about how changes in the environment impacted human decisions and lives was

Strengths of the assignments (What you think you did well) *Be as specific as possible.*

Areas of growth (What you think you need to work on) *Be as specific as possible.*

Goal(s) to work on for the next short response.

What will you do in order to achieve this goal?

My parents/guardians can help me achieve this goal by...

The Influence of Student-Led Conferences

Student led conference: student reflection # __2__

Name:

Work to reflect on:

- **Unit 2 as a whole:** Essential Questions: How does Geography impact people's lives? And Why do people move?

We covered many topics on aspects of Geography and its impact on human migration, including: The California Gold Rush, The Nile River, The Great Migration and the Harlem Renaissance, the Agricultural Revolution and the Effect of Natural disasters on Human lives.

Of the many topics from unit 2, which one interested you the most? Explain why. Give evidence using examples or assignment from class.

The culmination of unit 2 was the Human Migration Immigrant Experience project. If you were at presentation night, describe your experience of presenting all that you learned about human migration. Specifically the experience of sharing the journey of the immigrant you interviewed. (If you could not attend presentation night, talk about your experience presenting in class).

- What was your favorite part of the entire project?

- What will you remember most about presenting what you learned?

- If the person you interviewed was there, what was it like sharing your project with them? If they were not there, what was it like sharing it with all the parents?

We just started unit 3: What should/does government do? And, what is power who should have it? Share what you think about each of these questions:

- **What should/does government do? Explain why you think so. Give examples.**

- **What is power? Who should have it? Explain why you think so. Give examples.**

What topic/part of history do you want to learn about or learn more about in this class? Be specific and explain.

Student led conference: student reflection #__3__

Name:

Work to reflect on:

- **Semester 1 as a whole:** *Before you begin your conference, please review your grades from semester 1 world cultures class.*

Step 1: Reflect on 2018, then Answer the following questions:

1. What are you most proud of from semester 1 of World Cultures? Explain why.

I am most proud of

2. What inspired you about semester 1 in World Cultures? Support with examples and evidence.

I am inspired by

3. What behaviors do you want to continue in the new year in World Cultures? Be specific with examples.

I want to continue

Step 2: Think about your reflections on 2018, then answer the following questions for 2019:

1. What do I need to work on for the New Year in World Cultures?

I need to work on

2. What is in my way from achieving my best in World Cultures? Be specific with examples and evidence.

In my way is

3. What behaviors need to go in World Cultures for the new year? Be specific with examples and explain why.

What needs to go is

Appendix B

Parent Reflection Survey

Parent reflection of Student-Led conference #1



Form description

Do you feel your conference was a success? Why or Why not? *

Long answer text

What have you learned about your child during the conference? *

Long answer text

In which areas would you like to see improvement for your child? *

Long answer text

What was your favorite part of the conference? *