

# The Impacts of Individual Reading Conferences on Student Growth and Reading Confidence

*Courtney Russo*

*AD Henderson University School/FAU High School*

## Abstract

Anyone who has a first grader, or any first-grade teacher for that matter, understands how critical the subject of reading is within this grade level. The purpose of this study was to examine just how individual student conferencing during independent reading time has an effect on first grade readers' academic successes and learning confidence. Individual student conferencing is when a teacher meets with individual students to discuss their current reading ability and to assist the student in coming up with ways to improve their reading skills. Conferencing also gives the teacher the ability to assess the student to view their strengths and weaknesses while working with them at their level. A collection of both qualitative and quantitative data was accumulated in this study to determine student growth as well as changes in confidence. Findings showed that student growth increased; however, confidence either decreased or remained the same. I found that even though confidence either showed no change or decreased, the student's motivation to read was there.

**Keywords:** reading, individual reading, conferencing, first grade, reading motivation

## Background

As an educator, I am always looking to examine my teaching practices and to improve in ways that I can most effectively help my students. There is nothing more rewarding than watching students grow and change as the school year progresses. After a year of fully implementing the Reader's Workshop curriculum in my classroom, I wanted to explore in greater detail the benefits that the curriculum yielded with my students. The Reader's Workshop model consists of a brief mini-lesson, independent reading time, partner reading time, and a whole class share time. The bulk of the teaching occurs during the students' independent reading time. During the independent reading time, individual student conferences and small strategy groups take place. During the individual reading conferences, students are using what they have learned from various mini-lessons to comprehend and decode texts. The educator then listens to the student read and provides immediate feedback in their struggling areas.

It seemed that students really enjoyed the curriculum in the previous school year as they appeared to be so confident in themselves as readers. I was awe-struck by the amount of growth that the students had shown. I thought to myself, "Maybe it's just this group of kids," but the same experience continued into this year. The students appeared excited about reading, and they seemed to be progressing nicely. With these observations from my classroom in mind, I decided to explore the following: What is the impact of individual reading conferences during Reader's Workshop on student growth and confidence with on-level first-grade students?

## Literature Review

In most present-day classrooms, the student makeup of the classrooms is typically diverse. Because classrooms vary in terms of student backgrounds and academic abilities, students have a variety of needs within these classrooms that need to be met. As mentioned by Mounla, Bahous, & Nabhani (2011), differentiation in classrooms is key to meeting the needs of all learners. In addition to meeting these differentiated needs, students need to have the confidence to be able to overcome challenges to be successful learners. One way to differentiate classroom instruction is through one-to-one conferencing. This is where the teacher meets with individual students as they are working at their own individual levels to provide instruction for the students' needs at that moment in time. Aside from meeting the needs of students and differentiating instruction, how students feel about themselves when they are learning is also important. It is important to examine how students feel about themselves based on what they learn. The following is a literature review on the impacts of one-to-one student conferencing in the area of reading and how these conferences can impact student confidence.

### ***Benefits of Conferencing for the Learner***

One-to-one reading conferences affect student growth in multiple areas. Through one-to-one reading conferences, students are building relationships with their teacher just from conferencing with a book through the conversations they have with each other. These conversations also allow the student to think about the text they are reading in a variety of ways. The teacher is then able to have a conversation with a purpose with the student. Additionally, the teacher can develop the student's current skills and strategies while also assisting them in thinking deeply about their text (Pletcher & Christensen, 2017). Because students work at different reading levels, it is critical that reading instruction be differentiated to assist the students in improving their overall reading and comprehension skills. In turn, reading becomes more seamless for the students when they know their work is being recognized (Mounla, Bahous, & Nabhani, 2011). When students are working at their own levels, it is through these reading conferences that they are able to improve their reading comprehension skills at their own pace. This also ensures that all students are achieving growth in the classroom.

### ***Effective Use of Conferencing by the Teacher***

The goal of each reading conference is to extend student knowledge on ideas or strategies they already have while also presenting them with something new. Therefore, the teacher builds on strengths and addresses needs (Pletcher & Christensen, 2017). In order for conferencing to be effective for the student, it is important that the teacher gears the one-to-one reading conference around something new that meets the student's needs and/or extends the student's knowledge on a reading strategy or skill that the student is doing successfully. Teaching the student a skill that they need will allow them to strengthen their skills. Additionally, building upon the skills that the student is exhibiting will further their students' reading successes. In a study conducted by Pletcher & Christensen (2017), two teachers implemented conferences, and the authors discovered that record keeping on the educator's part was critical. The two educators they researched in the study, Fina and Sam, kept track of their teaching that took place in these conferences with students. In order for conferences to be effective, teachers should create some type of conferencing record. This would assist the teacher not only in keeping track of the students that they have met with, but it will help guide their future conferences with their students so that they can continue to move their students forward and not focus on the same portion of the reading process each time they meet with the students. Pletcher and Christensen (2017) also believe that teachers should record their reading conferences occasionally to note the focus of the conferences that they are having with the students and be aware of which areas are heavily focused on and which are lightly focused on. This will assist teachers in tracking how long they are having the

conferences, how many teaching points are being given, and provide a means of streamlining conferences. Teachers can use recordings to exhibit best teaching practices.

### ***Student Reading Confidence***

In a study by McGeown, Johnston, Walker, Howatson, Stockburn, and Dufton (2015), the authors researched the relationship between young children's enjoyment of learning to read, reading attitudes, confidence and attainment. They found that a child's willingness and attitude toward reading stems from their ability to read words. An additional finding in this study suggested that girls reported a more positive attitude in regard to reading. Based on these findings, the research shows that students' abilities to read words determines their confidence in reading and enjoyment of reading, and that girls show a more positive attitude toward reading than boys. In other research, Coddington and Guthrie (2009) found that girls' perceptions of their abilities are not as highly associated with achievement outcomes as boys' or teachers' perceptions. This means that girls do not solely base their reading ability or confidence on their own academic abilities. The information from these two studies suggests that gender bias can play a role in student reading confidence based on their academic achievement. It has also been stated that "methods of reading instruction need to foster affective aspects of reading, in addition to developing cognitive skills to best support young children's reading development" (McGeown et al., 2015, p. 389). This means that if students are effectively taught the necessary reading skills that they need, then they are more likely to be confident in their reading abilities both now and in the future. There are many ways that one-to-one conferencing can positively affect the learner. For instance, a purposeful conversation with a child in regard to reading can help with their reading skills, development, and positive interactions with texts. Through these conferences, students are also working at their levels with their instruction differentiated so that they are always able to grow at an individualized pace. Educators also play a role in carrying out successful conferences. In order for the one-to-one conferences to be successful, educators should present students with skills that they are lacking while building on the foundational skills that the students already have. Lastly, when students receive the reading support that they need, they will be more successful readers in the future. It also seems that girls may be more confident than boys, but I believe that more research could be done to confirm this claim.

### **Study Context**

The students involved in the study were first-grade on-level students from a university laboratory school. At the time of the study, a total of 1,135 students attended the school. The racial backgrounds of the students included: 42.7% White, 26.1% Hispanic, 15% African American, 10.5% Asian, 5.1% two or more races, 0.4% American Indian, and 0.2% Pacific Islander. In my classroom, I had 19 students. Nine students were female and 10 were male. Three of my students were English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) students, and three of my students were Exceptional Student Education (ESE) students who received speech and occupational therapy. Six out of my 19 students had birthdays in the summer. At the time of the study, eight out of my 19 students were currently not on grade level or were above grade level. The only students who participated in the study were those who began the school year on level. I spent the majority of the school day with the students and taught them all of the major content areas: reading, writing, math, science, and social studies.

### ***Researcher Teaching Philosophy***

My primary goal as an educator is to push my students to reach their fullest potential. I also want to make learning enjoyable for the students and to make them active participants in their own learning. I also find it important for the students to be able to have a choice in how they learn the skills that they are responsible for showing. As their reading teacher, I often assist my students in

choosing books that are on their reading levels while also giving them the choice of where that story will take them by giving them the ability to choose what they want to read. I firmly believe that choice and guidance show the students that you support their opinions as individuals, while also showing them that you are their biggest cheerleader in the classroom. Because I am a believer in giving students choice, the seating in my classroom is far from traditional to aid in student learning and allow them to decide where they are most comfortably able to learn. This type of seating is referred to as flexible seating. I have a variety of seating throughout my classroom. There are different types of chairs and table sizes throughout the classroom. At the beginning of the year, the students try all of the seating arrangements within the classroom to decide which learning space suits their ability to learn.

It is also my goal in the classroom as the teacher to make the classroom that my students are a part of feel like a second home. I strive to make the environment both warm and highly structured. My class begins every morning with a morning meeting in a circle on our big gray carpet. During this morning meeting, we discuss numerous topics depending on what my students need at the time. Sometimes our morning meeting conversations are academic while other days they are on classroom expectations or student interests. Morning meeting gives the students a time to be personal with each other and really hear and listen to their classmates on an individual level. I also use this time to discuss with my students any changes that may occur throughout the day from our normal routine to keep our daily structure. Additionally, if my students are not acting in a way that is up to my expectations, we utilize this time to discuss classroom expectations to keep the classroom flow going.

Morning meeting is not the only time that I instill this type of environment for my students. My student's social and emotional abilities are just as important to me as their academic goals. My students are accountable for their actions all day long. When a student is acting out, we have a conversation together to regroup and fix the problem. I am all about teaching my students how to be problem solvers. Furthermore, at least once a day, we do a short meditation together to calm our minds and bodies. I am also sure to give my students brain breaks throughout the day. This is accomplished through a 15-minute snack time or guided movements to keep their minds and bodies active.

## Methods

### ***Procedures***

This section presents the methods used to examine the impacts of reading on student growth and confidence. The timeline in Figure 1 shows the schedule of when the quantitative and qualitative data were collected during this six-week study. In the first week of data collection, student reading levels were accounted for using the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Records along with the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment. The next two weeks of data collection consisted of observations in regard to confidence and student growth noted in a teacher-researcher journal along with a teacher-made reading confidence survey given as an exit ticket after conferencing. During the mid-cycle data collection, the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Record was administered to each of the students in the study again along with the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment to quantitatively view any changes in students from the start of the cycle. The next two weeks of teacher's observations were recorded, and weekly teacher-created exit tickets on reading confidence were given again. In the last week of data collection which concluded the cycle, the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Records along with the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment were given one last time to the students.

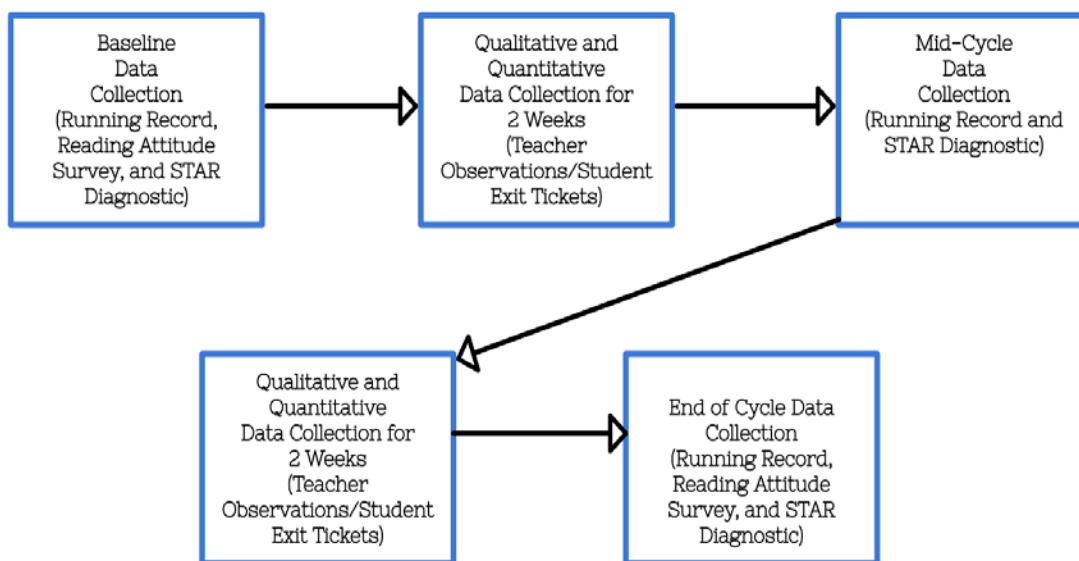


Figure 1. A flow map showing the timeline of data collection

## Findings

### ***Individual Conferencing Affects Student Growth***

The two tools used to track student growth throughout the cycle were the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment and the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Records. These tools were chosen for data collection because they were currently being used to track student data in the student's classroom. Figure 2 shows the tracking of student growth according to the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment. The scores provided show the students' grade equivalent scoring including the baseline, mid-cycle, and end of cycle data. Each student made a minimum of a year's growth from the beginning to the end of the six-week cycle according to this diagnostic tool. Seventy-five percent of the students showed growth after just three weeks during the mid-cycle data collection. According to the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Records, all students increased their reading level by at least one level from the beginning to the middle of the cycle. From the beginning to the end of the cycle, all of the students increased their reading level by a minimum of three reading levels. Seventy-five percent of the students increased their reading level by five levels from the beginning to the end of the cycle. All of the data collected on student growth were quantitative data.

## Student Growth

Grade Equivalent According to STAR Reading

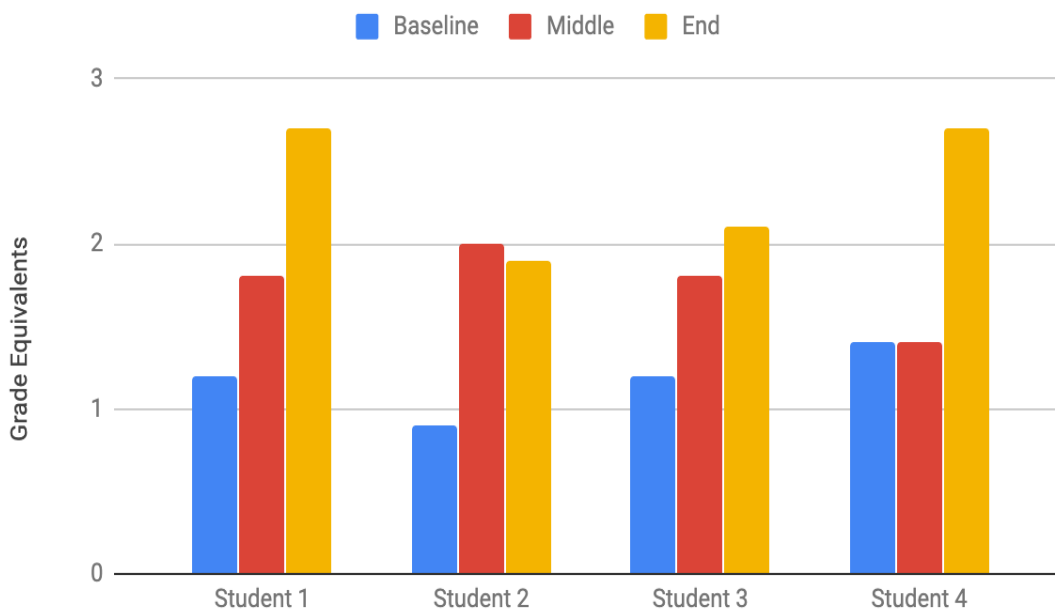


Figure 2. Tracking of student growth according to the STAR Diagnostic Reading Assessment

### **Individual Conferencing and Student Confidence**

Figure 3 shows how individual student reading conferences affect student confidence according to the full-scale percentile rank scores from the Garfield Reading Survey. Half of the students showed an increase in student confidence while the other half showed a decrease in confidence. In addition to the Garfield Reading Survey, weekly reading confidence surveys were given to students as exit tickets at the end of conferencing. The students were asked how they felt about their reading at home, their reading at school, and themselves as a reader, as well as how their friends viewed them as a reader. According to the teacher-made survey, Student 1 went from feeling like a not great reader in week 1 to stating in weeks 2 and 3 that she was a great reader. Student 2 went from feeling like an OK reader in Week 1 to feeling like a great reader in weeks 2 and 3. According to the survey, Student 3 and Student 4 felt like OK readers every week. The following quotes and behaviors were recorded in my teacher journal throughout the cycle. Student 1 stated in week 3 of data collection, “This book is too easy for me now.” In week 4 of data collection, the mother of student 3 stated, “My daughter doesn’t like me to help her read hard words, she chooses to solve the hard words herself.” Student 1 asked in week 5, “When can I get harder books for my book baggy?” The students appeared to be more engaged in their books as we progressed through the cycle. I found myself correcting fewer off-task behaviors, especially with student 2 who had the lowest confidence. Student 3 and Student 4 tended to put pressure on themselves to make sure their work was perfect across subject areas.

## Student Confidence

Full Scale Percentile Rank According to The Garfield Reading Survey

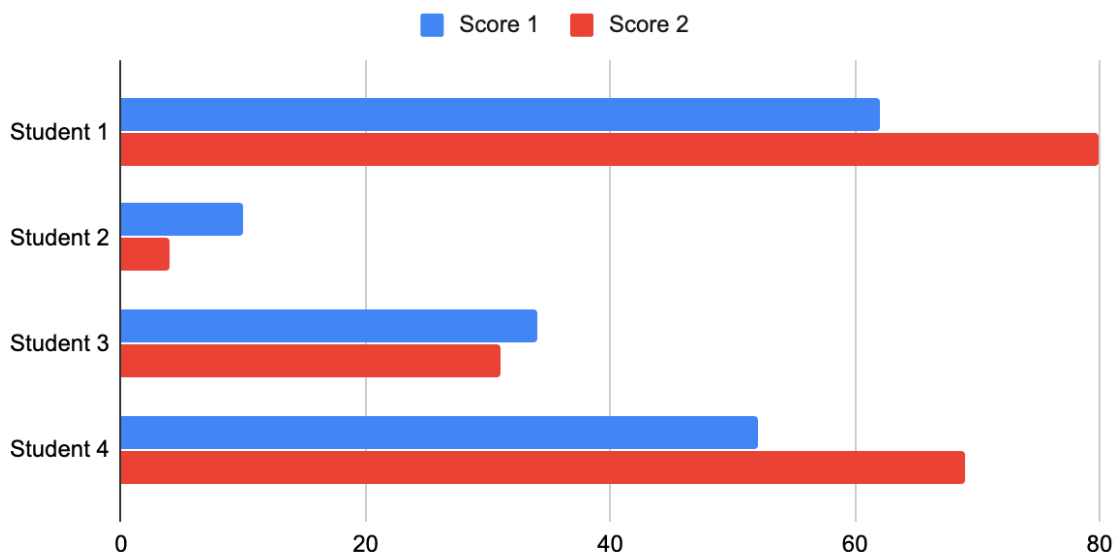


Figure 3. Shows how individual student reading conferences affect student confidence

## Implications

Based on the data, it was found in this study that reading conferences do have an effect on student growth as all students involved the study made consistent growth. However, only 50% of the students yielded a positive change in confidence. More data are needed to support whether or not student confidence is affected by individual reading conferences. Student motivation was also observed to be positive; however, student surveys need to be given in conjunction with teacher observations and journaling to show that this is a valid finding. To ensure consistency, student growth should continue to be examined regularly. Other consistently taught reading components also should be researched to see if they aid in student growth.

Additionally, three more implications were found. The first implication is that individual conferences affected student growth in a positive manner. By meeting with the students in this study weekly, I found their growth to be pretty significant. The students increased reading levels by a minimum of three levels according to the Fountas and Pinnell Reading Running Records. Their grade equivalent scores on the STAR Reading Diagnostic Assessment grew a minimum of a school year. The second implication was in relation to student confidence. Half of the students in the study gained confidence while the other half had a slight decrease in confidence. Confidence levels should be further examined to identify patterns as well as the reasoning for changes in confidence. It is also important to examine why confidence increased for some while it decreased for others. This is something that I plan to research in the future. It is important that all of my students have confidence in their learning. I would more than likely examine this avenue with my class as a whole. Additionally, a third finding implied from this study based on observations is that student motivation was consistent among those in the study. The students' reading stamina appeared to be longer and the students were reading more difficult texts without complaint as their levels increased. The students were actually asking for more difficult books. With these findings in mind, it would be important to investigate student reading motivation further, perhaps through a survey. Students should also continue to be given a choice in what they

are reading. It seems that because they enjoyed what they were reading and because it was content that they chose, the students were motivated to read the text. Because I find student motivation to be a critical factor in learning, it would also be important to figure out whether students are intrinsically or extrinsically motivated.

## **Limitations**

During this study, I included four students out of the 19 students in my first-grade class which limits the amount of data collected. The study was also conducted at only a single school and could yield other results and findings if performed across multiple schools and/or districts. Additionally, the research began in October toward the beginning of the school year. Findings may vary across grade levels or at different times of the year.



## References

Corresponding Author: Courtney Russo

Author Contact Information: cbarney2@fau.edu

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