



“CAN YOU HELP ME SEE WHAT YOU SAW?”

PROCESS AND GOALS CONFERENCE
METHOD: Guided Practice

Teach a child to develop a poem by showing, not telling.

Research

Observe, interview, and read the child’s writing to understand what the child is trying to do as a poet. In this case, the child is rereading a poem he started yesterday.

I watched Ramon as he got out his poetry folder, looked through it, and selected the piece he had started yesterday. Ramon is full of ideas, and his folder is stuffed with the beginnings of poems. I was pleased to see that he was returning to yesterday’s draft to do more work on it. I approached and watched him rereading the poem to himself.

Name what the child has already done as a writer, and remind him to do this often in the future.

After a moment, I said, “Ramon, that is so cool how you chose a poem to work on today and started rereading it right away. You sure know how to get yourself ready to work!”

Probe to learn more about the child’s intentions.

“What do you think your writing work for today will be?”

“Oh, I just like this poem I did yesterday. It’s all done. I like it! I’m gonna do another poem today, about. . . .”

“Ramon, I’m going to stop you for a second—keep that new thought for later; I bet it’s a great one—but right now I want to look some more with you at the poem you started yesterday.”

Matter-of-factly, I said, “You know, poets stay with their poems for a long time to make sure they are exactly how they want them to be. Especially if the poems grow out of ideas that you really, really care about. I know you care about this one!” Ramon looked at me with obvious annoyance, like a little



Remember that research begins when we sit alongside a child and watch what he or she does. It’s helpful to train yourself to notice what a child does that merits celebration because our human instinct is often to search for flaws.

While I was listening to Ramon’s explanation, I knew I wanted to help him stay with the draft he was working on. I didn’t want him to launch into one of his wildly imaginative descriptions of what he could do next. Instead, I wanted him to return to the draft he’d selected and to make it better.

racehorse bursting to get out of the stall. I wanted to get him into this work as quickly as possible. “Ramon, can you read me your poem from yesterday?”

He tucked his head and read aloud [Fig. 14].

Name what the child has done as a writer, and remind him to do this often in future writing.

“Ramon, wow! I love this Small Moment you have captured in your poem! You are thinking like a poet! I can really see the boy sprinkling bits of bread to the birds—you did a great job right there showing, not telling, like poets do.”

“Yep,” said Ramon, sure of his poetry prowess.

Decide/Teach

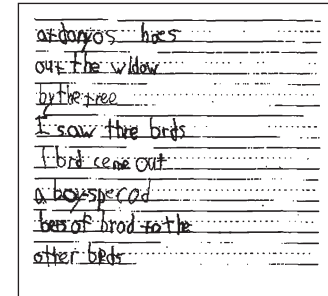
Weigh whether you want to accept or alter the child’s current process. In this case, decide to teach the child to make this poem even better by using “show, not tell” in more parts of the poem. Teach by showing the child an example of his own work and then by providing him with guided practice in “showing, not telling.”

“One thing I’m thinking, though, is that you could do even more of the great work you’ve already done on this poem so that we readers can see even more of what you saw out the window at Daniel’s house. Because you were thinking about showing and not telling right here,” I pointed to the bread-sprinkling line, “I can imagine the boy sprinkling the bread, but not much else. You know, poets often go back to poems they have already started to make sure that they are doing their best to show, not tell, *all* about their idea.”

Help the writer get started doing what you hope he will soon do. In this case, help the child imagine himself in the context of his poem to recall details that show instead of tell.

“I want you to try that right now—imagine that moment again—what exactly did you see out the window? What did the birds do when they got the bread? How many birds were there? See *everything* that you saw out the window!” Ramon willingly closed his eyes. I could see them moving around under the lids, as if he was really looking.

So often children think poetry must be about rainbows and love. It is refreshing to see this child try to capture a glimpse of a boy feeding birds in his poem.



At Daniel’s house
out the window
by the tree
I saw three birds.
A boy sprinkled
bits of bread to the
other birds.

Fig. 14 Ramon

Sometimes our instinct is to notice what a child has done well and then teach something different. Another option is to extend what the child has done well, encouraging the child to do that often.

Instead of just telling Ramon to show, not tell, I try to give him the strategies he needs to pull this off. I don’t, of course, know how others go about showing rather than telling, so what I do is to name the strategies I use and help Ramon try them.

Interject lean, efficient prompts to scaffold the child’s work in a step-by-step fashion.

He smiled suddenly, and I said, “Okay, Ramon, what did you see? What else can you put into your poem so that you are showing, not telling, what happened out the window?”

“Well, it was so funny. When the boy sprinkled the bread, the birds were sort of like they were laughing!”

“What do you mean they were laughing? Say more. . . .”

“Well, it was like their heads were just jumping up and down, and then one guy put his head down on his chest, like this. . . .”

Ramon demonstrated, tucking his small chin down onto his chest, keeping his brown eyes focused on me.

Let the intervals between your prompts become longer as the child becomes accustomed to the process and is able to continue with less support.

“Wow, Ramon, that is amazing. I can see so much more of what you saw out the window. You have got to put that into your poem! How will you add your new thinking?”

“I think I can just put it down at the bottom here,” he points to some empty space at the bottom of his first draft, “about how the birds were laughing.”

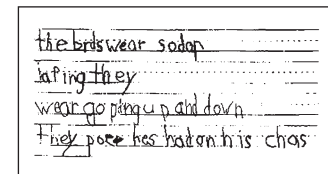
Link

Name what the child has done as a writer, and remind him to do this often in future writing. Set him up to continue working.

“Great, Ramon. Get started. Remember that you can do this always; you can go back to a poem that you already started to make sure you did everything you could do to show, not tell, about your idea. I’m going to come check on you in a few minutes, okay?”

When I returned close to the end of the workshop, Ramon had added to his writing [Fig. 15].

Again I need to take Ramon back to the beginning and help him get started.



the birds were sort of laughing they were jumping up and down they put his head on his chest

Fig. 15 Ramon