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Please enjoy this complimentary excerpt from *Removing Labels, Grades K-12*, by Dominique Smith, Douglas Fisher, and Nancy Frey. Technique 6 explains the what, why, and how of using impromptu conferences to address conflicts.

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TECHNIQUE 6

Impromptu Conferences

What: While affective statements can address many of the ordinary conflicts that may arise, some conflicts require a higher degree of attention. For instance, there may be a disagreement between two students that needs to be resolved quickly. Impromptu conferences are part of a continuum of restorative practices (Costello et al., 2009). The discussion is bracketed by questions that are intended to help people express their feelings and come to agreements. Impromptu conferences are brief and are focused on returning students to the learning environment. Because these take place when the problem occurred, they should not be utilized when feelings are running high. A student who is clearly angry or bereft is not yet in an emotional space to engage. That said, impromptu conferences are useful for preventing a situation from escalating into a full-blown confrontation.

Why: Conflict is “an external stressor that requires internal resiliency and a sense of empowerment to manage it effectively” (Pines et al., 2014, p. 85). When students are experiencing conflict, they may shut down altogether, accept undeserving amounts of blame, or refuse to take ownership for their own

actions. Each of these has negative implications for the student's social and emotional growth and their well-being in the classroom. Communication and self-advocacy skills underpin impromptu conferences. Some students have more difficulty in voicing their perspectives in ways that are productive.

In order to develop resiliency and manage conflict, students need to take part in the resolution of problems, not merely rely on adults to solve them. The overreliance on adults reinforces a “tattletale” method among younger students, who feel compelled to report to the teacher and then await the dispensation of justice. All of this, of course, is quite exhausting to the teacher, who is often left to resolve the small conflicts that arise.

Conflicts between students of all ages occur in the classroom, on the playground, in the hallway, and before and after school. Unfortunately, a teacher unprepared to deal with these disputes is placed in the unenviable position of trying to figure out what happened. Rather than playing judge and jury in a disagreement, it is preferable to teach conflict-resolution skills using a restorative practices approach. To do so, students need the support of caring adults to teach them the skills they need to resolve these problems. A solution is to create a forum for resolving disputes through impromptu conferences.

How: The management of impromptu conferences differs based on the developmental level of the students. However, a consistent practice is in the use of restorative questions to facilitate the discussion. First, engage with the students involved by telling them, “We need to talk about what just happened. I’m going to ask you some questions so that each of you have a chance to talk about what occurred from your perspective.” You can then move each of them through a series of restorative questions:

- *To the person who has done harm:* What were you thinking about at the time, and what did you hope would happen?
- *To the person who was harmed:* What did you think when this happened? What do you think now?
- *To the person who has done harm:* Who was affected by your actions? How were they affected?

- *To the person who was harmed:* What do you need to make this right between both of you?
- *To the person who has done harm:* Is there anything you want to add? What do you need to make this right between both of you?
- *To each student:* Is this fair? Do you agree or disagree? What would be a better solution?
- *To each student:* How can we make sure this doesn't happen again? What help do you need from me?
- Repeat the agreement and write it down so that you can follow up with the students about their progress. Make sure to tell the students what they have accomplished by talking out their disagreement.

These guided impromptu conferences are always about building the capacity of young people to be able to resolve conflicts in ways that are constructive and productive. Nancy used a peace table when she was an elementary teacher to encourage her students' use of their conflict-resolution skills. The peace table is a forum for settling quarrels and provides a healthy outlet for students to state their position and listen to others. She kept a stack of forms to use for preparing for the discussion (see Figure 1.6), as well as two feather pens for students to write their thoughts and come to an agreement. You will want to mediate these conferences until you are comfortable with the students' skill at handling them on their own. When sitting in on a peace table conversation, avoid actively participating and offer guidance only on the process, not solely on the outcome.

Figure 1.6 Form for Peace Table

Before Your Meeting at the Peace Table

What is your name? _____

What is the name of the other person? _____

What do you believe the disagreement is about? _____

Write an "I" statement that explains the way *you* feel:

When you _____,

I felt _____.

I would like _____.

Write an "I" statement you believe the *other person* might say:

When you _____,

I felt _____.

I would like _____.

During Your Meeting at the Peace Table

1. Use an "I" statement to explain how you're feeling. ("When you _____, I felt _____. I would like for you to _____.")
2. Listen to what the other person has to say.
3. Discuss the problem calmly until you arrive at a solution both of you can agree on.

If you cannot agree, ask the teacher for a meeting.

After Your Meeting at the Peace Table

What did both of you agree to do?