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# Making Meaning with Friends: Exploring the Function, Direction and Tone of Small Group Discussions of Literature in Elementary School Classrooms

Katie Peterson  
*St. Edwards University*, [k8epeterson@gmail.com](mailto:k8epeterson@gmail.com)

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## **Making Meaning with Friends: Exploring the Function, Direction and Tone of Small Group Discussions of Literature in Elementary Classrooms**

**Katie Peterson, St. Edwards University**

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### **Abstract**

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The merits of decentralized small groups has been questioned in literature and by practicing teachers; thus this study shows the academic and identity work children do as they attempt to make meaning in these spaces. This study explores the affordances and drawbacks of decentralized small group discussion contexts in a multiage (3rd/4th) grade classroom. Practical and theoretical implications from the data suggest that decentralized small groups are valuable in a variety of ways, but children need to be guided in developing effective interactional styles. Data were analyzed using a combination of constant comparative methods and a micro analysis of talk drawing on traditions of sociolinguistics.

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## **Making Meaning with Friends: Exploring the Function, Direction and Tone of Small Group Discussions of Literature in Elementary Classrooms**

For decades, researchers have argued that comprehension is an active and constructive process. Viewing literature discussions through this lens positions discussion contexts as spaces where students have opportunities to develop comprehension strategies and engage in rich conversations that can help them extend and refine previously held ideas (Aukerman, 2012; Johnston, 2012; Morrow & Smith, 1990). Research has also shown that discussing literature helps readers develop new perspectives about social situations (Franquiz & Martinez- Roldan, 2010), as well as providing spaces where children might learn how to engage critically with peers in ways that facilitate cooperative reasoning around central themes embedded in texts (Almasi, 1995). More recently, scholars have suggested that collaborative discussion contexts also make it possible for children to take on different identity roles as they engage with texts (Moje & Luke, 2009). Despite these claims the tone, direction, structure, and function of talk in classroom spaces continues to be debated, leaving question about which discussion formats are productive in facilitating and making room for critical, collaborative discussions. Further, there are multiple instances of published studies demonstrating conflicting reports about the advantages of particular discussion contexts in contrast to others. One example of such contestation is the function and purpose of small group discussions of literature in relation configurations that facilitate development of content knowledge, deep thinking about texts (Almasi, 1995; Raphael & McMahon, 1994; Short, 1992), and opportunities to explore varied perspectives and interpretations (Clark, Anderson, Kou, Kim, Archodidou, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2003).

Literature on small group discussion contexts is divided into two sub-categories: those where the teacher is present (centralized groups), and those where the teacher is not present (decentralized groups). Proponents of the teacher-led small groups argue the importance of the teacher in assisting children in meaning making (Evans, 1997; Lewis, 1997; 2001). They contend that when left outside the presence of the teacher children only reach surface

level understandings of texts. Further, proponents of centralized small groups suggest without the presence of the teacher students are subject to negative social positioning that can lead to detrimental psychological and emotional outcomes (Lewis, 1997). Others claim the presence of the teacher diminishes the willingness of children to negotiate meaning in unbounded ways; thus, limiting the potential for deeply personal responses to texts (Almasi, 1995; Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 1995; Martinez-Roldan & Lopez-Robertson, 2001). Scholars arguing from this position maintains that authentic opportunities to discuss texts with peers in classrooms closely mirrors collaborative reasoning that occurs when adults participate in group work settings, thereby providing spaces where children might develop and acquire this set of necessary social skills.

The overwhelming presence of these contrasting reports call for more research describing the organization of particular discussion contexts in order to clarify the functions of these spaces so as to inform classroom practice. Hence, the purpose of this study is to report on implications related to comprehension and social positioning in decentralized small groups. The report below highlights both merits and drawbacks of this context by answering the following research questions:

- What happens when children discuss literature in decentralized small group settings?
- What are the social, emotional, and academic implications of discussing literature in decentralized small groups?

### **The Merits and Drawbacks of Decentralized Small Group Discussions**

As stated above, the merits of decentralized small group discussions have been called into question as research has shown this context to be a space where comprehension breaks down and where negative social positioning occurs. However, many researchers have argued that decentralized small group discussions of literature are useful in helping children develop and sustain collaborative relationships in which they use language to make meaning and work toward a common goal uninhibited by the goals and direction of a teacher (Almasi, 1995; Short, 1992). In addition, decentralized small groups are said to increase engagement and motivation to participate in discussions (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Others have extended this notion by demonstrating the ways

in which decentralized discussions create spaces for students to participate differently, giving access to alternative discourse styles and patterns. This feature of decentralized small groups provides the opportunity for students to try on a variety of identity roles; thus, expanding their repertoire for social engagement around literature while at the same time providing opportunities to construct meaning around text with peers (Almasi, O'Flahavan, and Ayar, 2001). That is, when children have opportunities to actively engage with one another around text, they are likely to simultaneously develop comprehension strategies and social skills associated with approaches to discussion, meaning making, and problem solving.

Berne and Clark (2006) demonstrated the ways in which in peer led discussions facilitate the development of reading strategies that lead to more complete comprehension of stories. They specifically presented data that showed the ways ninth graders came to more in depth understandings of texts after engaging in collaborative meaning making. The data from this study shows how students in decentralized small groups drew on specific strategies including contextualizing relevant information, asking questions, engaging in retrospection, inserting themselves into the text, stating confusion, and drawing intertextual connections, all behaviors that are known to facilitate deeper, more complete comprehension of texts. In later writings, these authors also demonstrated approaches teachers might take in introducing formats for productive discussions, including showing adult discussion groups as a way of modeling conversational techniques for students (Berne & Clark, 2008).

Proponents of decentralized small groups also argued that without the presence of the teacher to mediate arguments or to interpret responses, children are forced to dialogically engage with one another and with the literature (Almasi, 1995; Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Ayar, 2001). This dialogic engagement allows readers to take their understanding a step beyond basic levels of comprehension that texts might act as ways to metaphorically experience life through the introspection and description of characters, providing insight into how to navigate both familiar and unfamiliar social situations (Galda & Beach, 2001; Franquiz & Martinez- Roldan, 2010; Baergen, 2013).

In fact, providing students with opportunities to grapple with unfamiliar content or ideas promotes the most engaged and prolific

conversations in relation both to literary content. Researchers have argued the point at which such cognitive conflict occurs is where the most cognitive gains in both academic and social realms are made (Almasi, 1995). Others have noted when students are allowed to engage in cognitive conflicts without a teacher to mediate and direct the conversation, they learn how to work towards collaborative reasoning that has potential to help children develop skills in presenting principled arguments that support their own thinking as well as providing opportunities for them to revise misconceptions (Clark et al., 2003). In comparing conversations between teacher guided and peer led discussions of literature, Almasi demonstrated that in teacher-guided groups cognitive conflicts were marked by students' incorrect responses to teacher questions, whereas in peer-guided small groups, children arrived at the conflict by taking up acts of reflection and dialogic conversations. She went on to suggest that teacher-led discussions most often resulted in simple understandings of texts theorizing that because children had the freedom to make personal connections and to play with ideas in peer-led groups, they were more likely to understand and interpret thematic undertones.

Other studies have indicated that students are more willing to take academic risks in terms of asking questions and providing supported thinking when the teacher is not present. For instance, Martinez-Roldan and Lopez-Robertson (2000) highlighted how discussions literature led by bilingual fourth-graders outside of the presence of the teacher promoted risk taking and language play that facilitated deeper understandings of texts. They specifically noted students were more willing to draw on linguistic resources and cultural familiarity with peers than they were with the teacher. They went on to suggest that when children have opportunities to discuss texts in small groups, they feel less pressure to conform to what they believe the teacher wants and are more willing to share deeply personal connections. The implications of this work shows that the increased level of comfort outside the presence of the teacher may be a result of cultural expectations among group members, especially with those who possess different linguistic resources.

The most prominent and long lasting critique of decentralized small groups revolves around the idea that in the absence of the teacher, children come to more surface level understandings of texts. Logically, this argument suggests that the presence of the teacher is essential in helping children to develop meaning-making skills associated with cognitive development and

comprehension strategies (Eeds & Peterson, 1991), and that when teachers are not present a potentially heightened possibility that comprehension will break down exists (Evans, 1997). Other critics of decentralized small groups argue small groups can be a space where social positioning might result in limited engagement and thus limits levels of cognitive development (Lewis, 1997; O’Flahavan, 1989; Pressley, Beard El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, 2002). For example, in her study of small group interaction, Lewis (1997) noted that when left to discuss literature in small groups without the teacher, fifth and sixth grade students worked to gain and maintain power over one another rather than engaging in active discussion of texts. The struggle for power affected how well conversations and interpretations functioned for the group, thus limiting the democratic possibilities available and silencing some voices. Lewis (1997) argued that the absence of the teacher created a dynamic in which some children stepped in to assume a leadership role, and one in which the self-appointed leaders determined the topics of discussion rather than leaving the decision making to the group. Some researchers have argued that the potential for one member of a group to dominate conversations to fit his or her own personal agenda defeats the purpose of designing spaces in which children can engage in conversations.

The presence of these conflicting perspectives makes the in-depth study of decentralized small group discussions relevant and timely. With more research about this specific context, teachers might better be able to utilize decentralized small group discussions as a tool for accomplishing specific goals in the classroom. Hence, I have organized my findings around the criticisms of decentralized small groups. The following sections describe the methods and findings from a study of small group, decentralized discussions of literature.

## **Methods**

### **Participants and Context**

This study took place at Meadowbrook Elementary (all names are pseudonyms), a school located in an urban district of a large city in the Southwestern United States. Meadowbrook is situated in an established middle and working class neighborhood in the geographic center of an urban, southwestern city. At the time of data collection, the school had 459 total students with varied ethnic and economic backgrounds. Data were collected in Ms. Sadowsky and Mrs. Mackendale’s multiage (3<sup>rd</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> grade) classroom, which

comprised 34 students (all agreed to participate in the study) ranging from 8 to 11 years old. Some of the students had been in Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky's classroom for three years because the teachers looped up with their students. The classroom included 23 boys and 11 girls-- one African American, 17 Latino/a, and 16 white students. The class was considered economically and academically representative of school-wide demographics.

### **Research Design**

This study was designed as an embedded case study of multiple contexts in which literature was discussed within a multiage classroom. This structure is useful because it allows for an in-depth look at specific contexts where reading takes place in one classroom. Embedded case studies allow researchers to gather and report on the nuances present in specific contexts by documenting engagement patterns of individual participants. For the purposes of this investigation, I focus only on the data collected during the small group settings; however, to understand the results of the study it is necessary to explain the organization of the entire language arts block.

### **Setting**

This study occurred in a (3<sup>rd</sup>/ 4<sup>th</sup> grade) multiage classroom. A total of thirty-seven students participated along with two classroom teachers, Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky. The teachers arranged their language arts block so that students had opportunities to participate in whole group read-aloud contexts as well as small groups. In the whole class read-aloud settings, the teachers opened spaces for children to interact with one another, the text, and themselves. The teachers responded to students in ways they expected to be similar to students' participation in the small group contexts. To prepare students to participate in the small group contexts, the teacher modeled how to engage in book discussions. Both teachers sat in front of the class and interacted around a shared text to show students how to be good listeners and how to respond authentically to one another's questions and ideas. Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky argued this organization of their language arts block was modeled after the Gradual Release of Responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983) through which students learn to interact through guided participation. Eventually, this structure results in students acquiring necessary skills for participation so that teachers may relinquish control over the tone and



direction of conversations.

During the five months data were collected, I visited the classroom three times per week during the language arts block. Data were collected on five functioning groups across two book club sessions. This included 75 total video and audio recordings of the book clubs among 20 total participants. Students participated in two book clubs over the course of data collection. In the first book club, all students in the class discussed the same text set. These texts included a series of scary stories meant to be motivational and timely because Halloween was approaching. The teachers used this book club as an opportunity for the children to practice small group participation. The second book club occurred shortly after the first and was organized so students were able to read leveled texts that were selected based on their individual interests and preferences. To make this happen, Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky, gave students a list of texts on their “reading level” and let them select which they’d most like to read. The group composition changed across book club iterations. Appendix A contains a full list of the book club members, the texts they read, and short description of each text.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were collected by gathering and expanding detailed field notes, recording discussions (audio and video) of literature to capture as much classroom interaction as possible, selecting student artifacts generated as part of the small group experience, and conducting focused student and teacher interviews.

Data analysis occurred in three distinct phases; all were inductive and interpretive, drawing on traditions of constant comparative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) and qualitative discourse analysis (Erickson, 1995), with focus on positioning theory (Goffman, 2001) and sociolinguistics (Cameron, 2001). In the first phase, I used the constant-comparative method to help me derive new meanings from the categorical aggregation of similar instances among a data set (Stake, 1995). The process called me to use open coding to narrow and focus attention on the most meaningful units in relation to answering the research questions. These codes helped to shape my thinking so that meaning could be drawn from a particular data set.

This process allowed for the identification of episodes where

collaborative discussions occurred as well as served as a way to identify when students discussed themes related to different types of interactions within the small group setting. I specifically looked for instances when students worked to comprehend story elements or were using specific language to position themselves or others socially. I drew on these categories as a starting point that allowed me to further explain and analyze episodes by writing detailed theoretical and analytic notes about what happened as students discussed texts, specifically noting how language was used to engage others in conversations and the ways in which they made meaning in relation to the text. The final phase of analysis involved a microanalysis of talk to better understand how individual students constructed meaning with and around texts. To do this, I drew on traditional interactive sociolinguistics (Cameron, 2001; Goffman, 2001; Gumpertz, 1982; Schiffrin, 1994).

This last phase of analysis was recursive in that I refined codes in light of research and theory, which at times led me to reanalyze the data. As I looked at the examples I developed hypotheses, questions, and began to develop descriptions about each episode. I worked to refine codes until I was satisfied that the codes captured the recurring patterns across the entire data set. Finally, I returned to the transcripts to identify the ways in which individual contributions were taken up or rejected among other discussants, and came to understand how children interacted with one another in decentralized small groups. I understood the most prolific and engaged discussions arose as students asked and answered authentic questions and also realized that as students engaged in discussion some comprehension was lost. Eventually, I was able to categorize students' talk around the following themes: a) Stepping into the story world, b) Building solidarity, c) Asking comprehension questions, and d) Opportunities to gain social status. In the next sections, I provide descriptive examples and excerpts from discussions to illustrate these themes.

### **Findings**

Findings from this study highlight what happens when intermediate students (3<sup>rd</sup>/4<sup>th</sup> graders) are afforded opportunities to engage in decentralized small group discussions of literature. In what follows, I provide detailed examples and analysis that highlight the above criticisms of decentralized small groups. Specifically, the data here highlight themes related to the children's comprehension of texts (Themes a and b), as well as episodes in which social

positioning occurred outside the presence of the teacher (Themes c and d). I conclude with a discussion that argues for the use of decentralized small groups to accomplish particular curricular and developmental goals related to the contextual acquisition of reading skills and behaviors.

### **Comprehension**

Researchers and theorists have long argued that when allowed to pursue topics of interest, students will exhibit focused and prolonged engagement when given opportunities to have open discussions about content (Dewey, 1935; Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; 2004). The small groups in Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky's classroom offered spaces for children to ask questions related to topics of interest that often resulted in extended explorations of topics that were of deep interest to them. These conversations were relevant and valuable in helping the students connect to the texts in personal ways; however, at times the discussion seemed to steer far away from the core of the text resulting in tangential understandings. Often these conversations illustrated students' comprehension of the complexities of the stories, and allowed them to have vicarious experiences through the characters that had the potential to help them think differently about their own lived realities. Two categories related to comprehension emerged through the course of data analysis a), basic comprehension questions and b) comprehension questions that invited students into the story. In what follows, I explore each of these themes by providing supporting examples.

#### **Basic Comprehension Questions**

There were several instances in the book clubs where students discussed topics in order to clarify breakdowns in their own comprehension. The presence of their metacognitive processing is exponentially important in demonstrating awareness about the process of comprehension generally. For instance, in the following excerpt, Audrey asked her group about the significance of the Star of David as they discussed a scene from *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989). In this case, the group had read a passage in which Annemarie, the main character, contemplated wearing a Jewish symbol that would identify her to Nazi troops that were hunting for people to take to concentration camps.

**Audrey:** What is the Star of David?

**Liam:** The Star of David is...

**Audrey:** Wait – he’s Jewish, he can tell us.

**Ryan:** Liam, hand me the pencil.

**Liam:** Does it look like this? Like a triangle? (drawing a Star of David)

**Ryan:** Like a triangle and another triangle. It’s like this.

**Liam:** It’s like a Jewish symbol.

**Ryan:** (drawing) It’s one triangle and then another. It has six points.

(*Number the Stars* Transcript, November 7, 2012).

Here, Audrey’s question was meant to help clarify something for which she had little background knowledge so that she could come to a more complete understanding of the story itself. In this instance, her group members were able to provide relevant information about the Star of David; thus, providing a necessary scaffold to Audrey’s comprehension. This put the other students (Ryan and Liam) in positions of power that held the potential to validate their attempts at meaning making in the group.

However, there were times when the questions were not reconciled because students lacked relevant background knowledge related to the themes and settings in the story. For instance, in the following example, Adam’s second book club had just read a section in *Souder* (Armstrong, 1969) that depicts the boy’s father being chained up as he is taken to jail for allegedly stealing a ham. Adam expresses confusion, which sparks a debate among the group.

**Adam:** I’m trying to figure out why they chained up the dad, ‘cause I think that they’re a black family, because look, in that picture they are black.

**Selina:** They are slaves, Adam (sounding irritated).

**Adam:** No, they aren’t.

**Selina:** Yes, they are. They work for a white man.

**Adam:** No, they don’t.

**Selina:** Yes, Adam, they do.

**Javier:** (mocking Selina) Yes, Adam.

**Maria:** Do you think this was in the old times?

**Selina:** Yes, it is in the old times.

**Adam:** It's probably in the 30s. The 1930s. (*Sounder* Transcript, November 12, 2012).

When Adam's initial question was met with an explanation he did not see as plausible, he immediately countered but did not provide a counter-explanation. When Maria asked a question, Adam's answer seemed to support his claim the characters in the book cannot be slaves because it is occurring in the 1930s, after slavery was abolished. Later in the book club, when the group again argued about the time period in which the story was set, Adam did provide more information, arguing that because automatic cars were operational, the story must be set in the 1930s, thus the characters could not be slaves. This excerpt shows how at times a teacher's presence would have been helpful in contextualizing and problematizing the information related to the question would have added depth to the conversation.

### **Stepping into the Story World**

There were also times when students asked comprehension questions that required them to step into the story world to sort out their understandings of the dynamic situations presented in texts. It was most common for students to position themselves in the pages of the text itself when considering critical questions about the lives and fates of the characters. Often, these questions were "edgy" in that they were discussions that likely would have been censored in the larger group setting. For instance, the excerpt below came from a discussion between 4 students, Liam, Audrey, Ryan, and Carter as they discussed *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) a piece of historical fiction describing the experiences of a 10 year-old girl, Annemarie as her family acted as part of the Danish resistance during World War II. Liam was known in the class as an expert on World War II as he carried around large texts about the topic, sharing information from them whenever he was able; he was an active and enthusiastic participant in this book club experience. His participation in what follows, however, demonstrates that his role extended much further beyond a person who could recite facts. In this example, Liam prompted the group to consider the perspective of the Nazi

soldiers, who were generally regarded as the enemy by the group. Further, the author depicted Nazi soldiers as individuals who had no choice in deciding how they proceeded, but as people who followed orders directly. Liam's prompt cast the other group members into the lives of the soldiers, adding complexity to their characters, thus adding a layer of moral and ethical complexity to the situation.

**Liam:** If you were the soldiers, would you search Ann Marie's (sic) house?

**Audrey:** No because I would have no, absolutely no idea what to look for.

**Ryan:** I'd check because I was ordered.

**Audrey:** And besides, anyway, it just looked like there was nobody there.

**Liam:** What would you [do] if you found them?

**Ryan:** If I were a soldier?

**Liam:** Yeah. Would you kill them?

**Ryan:** I'd take them to a concentration camp? Just take them to a concentration camp. (*Number the Stars* Transcript, November 6, 2012).

Liam initiated this conversation with a broad but complicated question, asking students to place themselves directly into an unwritten moral and ethical dilemma in the text. This question dually prompted students to personify the experiences of the book's adversaries, a position not often considered in either whole group or small group settings. Likely, Liam's background knowledge of the events of World War II resulted in focused attention on these pivotal characters who held the potential to change the course of the story entirely. This probe asked students to step in and change the story in ways that might have held implications for the historical outcomes of the events of World War II. Further, the way Liam asked the other students to consider the perspective of much hated characters objectively demonstrates the complexity involved in reconciling the implications texts might have on students' lives or conceptions of the human condition. Interestingly, Ryan responded by offering answers closely guided by the characterization of the Nazi soldiers as mindless followers

of the Nazi mission, despite his identity as a Jewish student. In contrast, Audrey argued that searching the home was an illogical choice because she would not know what to look for, rather than considering the moral and ethical implications related to the need to search in the first place. Ryan's response allowed Liam to continue to dig into the moral and ethical dilemmas associated with being a soldier: killing people because of their religious affiliations and obeying orders as a member of the military. Ryan distanced himself from the question by clarifying that he had answered from the perspective of a soldier, not from his own moral and ethical position. This example demonstrates the small group context in this classroom provided space where students could ask provocative questions that were related to possible counter-narratives rather than explicit plots. It also enabled other students to place themselves in the circumstances of characters, including those who were not main characters or heroes, thus leading to students' more complete and complex understandings of the social situations portrayed in the story world. These instances added complexity to the story discussions by asking students to analyze nuanced features of the text from multiple viewpoints, which may have been limited in the whole group setting.

The following example is similar in that a critical argument aimed at answering an individual question resulted in students stepping into the roles of characters to explain their projected solutions to textual problems. This often resulted in students drawing the story out of the textual world into their own, demonstrating awareness that the story world and reality are not hermeneutically sealed (Sipe, 2008). This impulse to logically deconstruct scenarios that did not make sense highlights the willingness of the students to consider the implications stories had for their own lives. For instance, in the following excerpt Mia blurred the lines between the story world and her own when her group discussed a story in which a ghost was particularly fond of tormenting small children. Jason asked the group to consider what they might do if they were confronted by a ghost described in the text as a character who liked to torment children, to which Mia posed an answer that drew equally on her understanding of the story and reality.

**Jason:** If you were one of the kids would you fight back?

**Alex:** Yeah, I'd probably rebel against him.

**Jason:** I'd yell, DIEEEEE...

**Mia:** What would he do to you? Stab you with his hook? He would go to children abuse (Child Protective Service).

**Alex:** Well, I know I would kind of... (*By Hook or By Crook* Transcript, October 25, 2012).

The posing of this question seemed to provide Mia the opportunity to draw the story into present day, rejecting the part that did not make sense in her world (adults are not legally allowed to torment children). Instead, she constructed a counter-narrative, creatively altering the story in a way that intertwined the story world and her own. In her account, Mia drew more heavily on her understanding that adults do not want to be reported to Child Protective Services rather than considering the adult in this narrative is both deceased and seems to care little about the implications his tormenting has on others. Being asked to consider how she might respond through the eyes of a character provided an opportunity for Mia to consider the ramifications events in the story had for her life.

In many instances, questions led to extended conversations that stretched beyond the intention of the asker, and even sometimes beyond the text. Because of the smaller number of people involved, students had more opportunities to fully explain and explore possible answers to questions and queries. Thus, in small group settings, it was more common to find instances in which students fully explored logical arguments. For instance, in the following excerpt, Audrey initiated a conversation that evolved into a problem solving session among the group. The reading for this meeting was a short ghost story called *Winterton's Spirit*. In this tale, two friends, Winterton and Hassan, make a promise that whoever dies first will attempt to return with a report from the "other side." Winterton, becomes ill and is believed to be dead. On the eve of the announcement of Winterton's death, his spirit visits Hassan to warn him that he, Winterton, is not actually dead, but is about to be buried alive. Hassan races to the morgue, but by the time he arrives Winterton's body has inexplicably disappeared. The reader is left wondering if Winterton has risen from the dead or if he recovered and escaped the fate of being buried alive. All throughout this episode, the group refers to Winterton as Winterthorn.



**Audrey:** ...And if he was dead, do you think Winterthorn thought he was found? To bury the thingy or somebody took him.

**Carter:** Well, it would take someone a life saber equivalent because remember it was locked, steel apparently looking at the pictures it was steel metal and brick or steel and something, steel and brick and there was only one tiny window up there that could be opened from the inside, in fact it's really thin, and only Winterthorn could fit though there considering how thin he is.

**Jason:** I think it was.

**Carter:** I don't even know why Winterthorn if he was alive he'd want to stay. Say like he was going out to eat, he could wait until someone opened the door, and then maybe while the caretaker is looking at the other bodies, he could sneak out the door.

**Audrey:** What happens in a lot of those stories is people rise from the dead. Most ghost stories people rise up from the ground, but this one is an exception because apparently he can't get up from the ground once he's there, I guess he couldn't but usually in ghost stories people rise up from the ground.

**Carter:** I guess that's a little bit of reality to it. I find it finally, a story where a ghost is not trying to haunt people or something like that. Finally a story...

**Audrey:** I know...there have been so many ghost stories, now a creepy story. (*Winterton's Spirit* Transcript, October 25, 2012).

In this example, Carter answered Audrey's question by providing logical argument posing two possibilities, either Winterton escaped on his own or supernatural forces were at play. As he continued to talk (interrupting Jason), he further provided evidence supporting his theory that Winterton could have escaped alive (stating "he could sneak out the door"). When Audrey rejoined the conversation, she connected to Carter's idea suggesting that in the genre of ghost stories, people usually rise from the ground, but in this story that wasn't the case, making this story not a typical ghost story but a "creepy story" instead. Carter confirmed her idea by suggesting "that's a little bit of reality to it," making clear this story was more closely related to real life than

others ghost stories they had encountered. Here, the students used dialogic approaches to collaboratively problem solve in ways that enhanced their understanding of this text. Further, they drew on combinations of knowledge of literary genre and real life understandings of scientific concepts in order to arrive at conclusions about the story. The small group setting provided a context in which students could answer questions in ways that satisfied their own curiosity rather than attempting to garner approval from the teacher. While a teacher's presence may have facilitated more traditional, surface-level understandings of the text, the children would likely not have had as many opportunities to grapple with and connect the story to their lives, making the reading experience less relevant and engaging.

### **Social Positioning**

The decentralized small groups were also a place where particular types of social positioning occurred. Researchers have long argued that without the presence of the teacher, students will position one another in negative ways (e.g. Lewis, 1997). Indeed, data here demonstrates how the children negotiated power relationships within the small groups. However, the data also demonstrates the ways in which children used the small groups as spaces to agentively build identities around topics of interest and expertise as well as to build solidarity around interpretations of texts and intertextual connections between their lived experiences and the narratives they read. Examples of all three themes are explored in depth below.

### **Building Solidarity**

Opportunities to discuss themes and topics of interest and to ask authentic, unfiltered questions seemed to make space for children to draw alignment with one another even in moments when they disagreed on final conclusions. It was common to see groups of students building solidarity around ideas that connected to humanistic themes in texts. Perhaps the most salient example of this occurred in relation to a student named Adam who was a very infrequent participant in whole class settings. However, the small group context seemed to be a place where Adam felt secure in expressing his emotions more explicitly. Often, his contributions during the book clubs were obvious connections to texts in which he stated or described thoughts and feelings. Specifically, it was common for Adam to pose and explore existential

questions about life and death and also discuss fears related to the experiences of the characters in the texts. He openly discussed his worries, fears, and anxieties related to characters' situations which ultimately led to uncovering some of his own. For instance, the following excerpt came from a small group discussion about a short story titled *Winterton's Spirit*. As Adam's group discussed this tale, several of them began sharing their own scary stories.

**Adam:** Once I was sitting in the living room and there was a window in the bathroom, it was really foggy and you couldn't really actually see through it, but I saw this white thing.

**Gavin:** At night sometimes I get like uh-oh, uh-oh, uh-oh, I'm going to die tonight.

**Adam:** I do, too.

**Noah:** I feel like when I'm like under my blanket, I feel like I don't know.

**Adam:** Sometimes I feel like someone is going to be underneath my bed, so always look out so that I can see whatever is coming.

**Noah:** And I have a bunk bed, so I never put my legs over the side because I'm afraid someone will grab me and like ahhhhh.

**Gavin:** Sometimes I get so creeped out that I put the blanket over my head and go ...

**Adam:** I know.

**Gavin:** I make a shield at the edge of my bed like I make my pillow a big shield and I just put one on the other side and I block all the light and also sometimes I feel like...

**Noah:** Someone's watching you... ahhhhhh...

**Gavin:** No, um I was I was...

**Adam:** I'm afraid someone is going to come into my backyard at night and start...

**Jessica:** Gavin, what's your next question?

**Noah:** Can I just say one more thing? Well, sometimes I like to, well

maybe two, sometimes, I think something's running by my window like...

**Adam:** Me, too.

**Noah:** Like a werewolf or something that's running right by my window.

**Adam:** And if I get out someone will have a knife and slice my face.  
(*Winterton's Spirit* Transcript, October 25, 2012)

Here, Adam and the two other boys in the group engaged in a pattern of talk in which it was acceptable for them to share fears. By the end of this week-long book club, Adam and the other boys readily admitted that they were “freaked out,” “scared,” and suggested they were “going to be scared when everything goes dark tonight” (*Winterton's Spirit* Transcript, October, 25, 2012). While the discussion here seems to veer away from actual analysis of the text, these meetings gave the boys (and Jessica to some extent) an opportunity to admit there were things that scared them, allowing them to bond over common fears. Rosenblatt (1938, 1995) argues that opportunities to discuss texts allow readers to create self-definitions that are in contrast to “others.” However, this data demonstrates that in addition to gaining opposite or contrastive opinions or ideas, the literature discussion context also provided a space where children might build solidarity and connect to one another in personal and academic ways.

Another way students built solidarity around topics and themes occurred as they supported stances they took related to critical social issues. In these instances, opportunities for students to draw on personal background knowledge and beliefs to take a stance created spaces where individual perspectives were considered and understood. For example, in the following excerpt, Carter and Audrey engaged in a critical discussion about the righteousness of war in a discussion about a text describing the Mexican War for Independence. Carter, who had just lost his grandfather to cancer, supported his claim that war is unjust by drawing on his personal beliefs about the value of life and his religious orientations.

**Audrey:** ....but the people who attacked they don't really care about that. They don't care about people's lives.

**Carter:** That means they can just murder them without even caring, that's just bad, that's just bad. I mean I know you get orders to kill people in war and stuff like that (long pause), but you don't get a second chance (sounding choked up). I don't believe in Heaven. I don't know if you do, or not, but I don't believe in heaven, and if there is only one life to live, and you better use that life for... we... uh... better use that life for...uh (looking down).

Here, Carter used an identity claim about his religious beliefs (“I don't believe in heaven”) as a way to support his argument that killing in the name of war was “bad.” After he shared his position, Audrey fell silent momentarily considering Carter's perspectives. His response added more gravity and urgency to his position, resulting in his group members considering the implications of war generally.

### **Self-Authoring**

The small group setting opened up spaces where children had opportunities to claim identities as particular kinds of readers, thinkers, and collaborators. Claiming identity within literacy contexts functions as a way to position oneself in relation to others and to gain status among group members. This kind of interaction has been described as self-authoring because students are provided with opportunities to “author” themselves as particular types of respondents who hold important knowledge about specific subjects. Public authoring acts as a way to claim identity status among group members (Holland, Lachiocotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). The small groups offered opportunities for kids to self-author as experts who held interesting knowledge about discrete topics. As in the whole group, students in small groups contributed to conversations by offering relevant explanations that helped clarify ambiguous scenes in the story. In many instances, students called on other group members who they believed to be experts on a topic. For instance, Ryan (from the above examples) was recognized as having pertinent information about being Jewish; thus, he was called upon to answer all questions about Jewish traditions in his book club as well as in the large group. Generally, this type of explanation was a one or two turn event and was qualified with some sort of life experience that cast the speaker as an expert. For instance, in the following example, Carter had just defined the

word “epidemic” for the group.

**Audrey:** I thought it was cool to know the definition because I had no idea what it meant either.

**Carter:** How I even knew that I heard that word a lot around my mom when she worked in the fire ant lab. She’s trying to breed fire ants, to see how much to see what we can use that doesn’t hurt the environment to kill them. She’s like breeding them to kill them. She used to work there before she had us, the kids, me and my sister, and I heard that word a lot, epidemic, epidemic, hm hm, I wonder how much it would take them of this blah blah blah for them to become epidemic. (*Winterton’s Spirit* Transcript, October 25, 2012).

Here, Carter qualified himself as an expert by demonstrating that the place from where his knowledge came was a reputable source (his mother’s use of the word). As in the whole group, this approach to response appeared to be a bid for a particular position within the group, while also providing information that helped Audrey come to a more complete understanding of the story. In this instance, Carter acted as a more knowledgeable other in a way that helped facilitate a more complete comprehension of the text.

### **Self-Appointed Moderator**

The examples above demonstrate the power and worth of purposeful, agentic social positioning in the small group. However, there were other times the absence of the teacher led to opportunities for some students to dominate the tone and direction of the conversation. In almost every book club, there was a self-appointed (unofficial) student who took charge of maintaining procedures. This student regulated other students’ behavior in ways that kept the group on task and helped move conversation along. Often, the self appointed student drew on techniques that echoed those used by Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky in whole group sessions to engage students in conversations, such as restating one another’s contributions. These students maintained power in the group by raising their voices and threatening to call the teachers over to the group (Field Notes, November 16, 2012). All of the self-appointed moderators were girls, and most of them were fourth graders who had been in Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky’s class for more than one year. When considering the progression of talk in the small group setting,

the contributions of the self-appointed moderators were important because, at times, they changed the direction or tone of the conversation.

In most cases, the self-appointed moderators kept conversation moving along and regulated turn-taking. For instance, it was very common to hear these students saying things like “Now it’s your turn (Kelly),” “Whose turn is it? (Selina),” “Okay, we should keep going,” (Audrey), or “Please participate in the activity (Mia).” Many researchers have argued that having a teacher present in discussions of literature is important for providing scaffolds necessary for conversation maintenance and for modeling participation styles (Maloch, 2005; Panteleo, 2007; Eeds & Peterson, 1991). It is possible the girls in this study recognized the need for a person who was in charge of ensuring the progress of the conversation. However, they assumed the role in ways that allowed them the responsibility of determining topics of discussion rather than facilitating open dialogue. This dynamic seems to defeat the purpose of designing spaces in which children might collaboratively discuss literature.

There were also times when the self-appointed moderators attempted to provide curricular scaffolds for students in their group whom they might have felt struggled. For example, in the excerpt below, Kelly recognized that Carla struggled with reading. When Carla mispronounced the word *baffled* as *barfed*, Kelly joined the conversation to correct her.

**Carla:** (reading a selection from the text)... it was *barfed*.

**Kelly:** The family was *barfed* (laughs). Hey, Carla, I just wanted to say, I just have a little wish for you. Really think about what you’re reading so that you understand what you’re saying-- what’s coming out of your mouth-- so that your whole group can understand you. Just take your time, okay?

**Carla:** It I think it means, annoyed. Like I’m so annoyed of the tapping sound.

**Kelly:** Yeah, but what if they were scared?

**Carla:** Okay, so I didn’t know the definition.

**Kelly:** Oh, it’s okay, want me to tell you what it means?

**Carla:** Yeah.

**Kelly:** *Baffled* means like afraid, but like such a surprise. Like “Oh, oh God.” (gasps) – yeah like kind of like that [Liam starts acting out baffled, too] (*Picky Aunt Pratt* Transcript, October 23, 2012).

Here, Kelly took her role as regulator beyond the typical moderator position. Like Jessica in the example above, Kelly mimicked strategies she’d heard Mrs. Mackendale and Ms. Sadowsky use when trying to support students who struggled with comprehension. In fact, early in the semester when the class discussed picture books as a whole group, Mrs. Mackendale suggested that “Good readers think about what they’re reading as they read...” (Field Notes, August 28, 2012). By giving Carla advice about how to read, Kelly positioned herself as an authority, able to provide advice to readers who she deemed as less successful. Here, Kelly seems to recognize the role of the teacher as someone who helps students develop skills necessary for comprehending literature (Panteleo, 2007). However, her approach appears to demoralize Carla’s attempt at meaning making, which seems counter to the class orientation towards collaborative meaning-making. Further, social positioning in small groups has the potential to result in limited engagement, and thus limited cognitive development (Lewis, 1997; O’Flahavan, 1989; Pressley, Beard El-Dinary, Gaskins, Schuder, Bergman, Almasi, & Brown, 1992).

At times, the self-appointed moderator changed the tone and direction of conversations in ways that limited or cut off the potential for open-ended discussions (Erickson, 1995; Lewis, 1997). For instance, in the following example, Adam, Gavin, Noah, and Jessica were discussing a scary story about a resentful ghost who haunted the house he once occupied. The boys in the group began to explore connections that seemed tangential to Jessica (e.g. telling ghost stories; discussing fears about ghosts), and she attempted to redirect the conversation so that it refocused on the text more specifically.

**Jessica:** Okay, lets stay on topic, let’s stay on topic.

**Adam:** We are but, we are but, we are. (*Winterton’s Spirit* Transcript, October 25, 2012).

Here, Jessica pointedly redirected the conversation by telling the boys to “get back on topic.” She included herself in the group by saying “Let’s,” though she had not been a part of the proceeding conversation. However, for



Adam, the recognition that a group of students echoed his fears and anxieties seemed to be therapeutic, so much so that when Jessica redirected the group to “stay on task” or to “stay on topic,” Adam argued, “We ARE, we’re talking about the story” (*Winterton’s Spirit* Transcript, October 25, 2012). Further, he seemed to recognize the talk of the group as being on topic, but could not explicitly state why. Neither student could verbalize the idea that talking about connections related to texts was a form of “on topic” conversation. The need to follow the rules seems to have been more important to Jessica, and because she had claimed the title of self designated leader, she was able to change the direction of the conversation. In the process, she silenced some voices and limited the potential for students to authentically share their interpretations of the story.

### **Discussion**

Findings from this study add to and build on previous research about small group discussions of literature and the affordances of peer-led discussions. Previous research has demonstrated the ways in which peer led discussions give children opportunities to engage in discussions that lead to more complete comprehension of plots (Berne & Clark, 2005; 2006; 2008). The data above further illustrates the longest and most connected episodes of talk were generated when individual students asked questions related to understanding literary elements (e.g., character motivation, moral and ethical dilemmas facing characters). In addition, the students in this study showed how attempting to come to complete understandings of texts resulted in students working on making principled arguments related to their perspectives. This feature of students talk resulted in more complex interpretations that helped students connect character dilemmas to real life experiences. For instance, when discussing a scary story that centered on the disappearance a presumed corpse, Audrey asked the group to consider whether the character believed the body had been stolen or had really risen from the dead. This question resulted in seven turns at talk connected to Audrey’s initial question, all focused on trying to propose possible explanations as to why the body might be missing. Thus, the students demonstrated maturity in engaging in conversations by drawing on intertextual connections and using the social features of arguments, including providing reasoned supported for claims. As they attempted to clarify and

build cases for their contributions to these collaborative meaning-making sessions, Audrey thickened the understanding when she added, “What happens in a lot of stories when people rise from the dead [is]...” Even in instances when the talk seemed misdirected and tangential, threads of demonstrated some level of comprehension and efforts towards making meaning. For instance, Liam asked his *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 1989) group, “What would you do if you were a Nazi Soldier?” providing evidence of his understanding of the potential of unrevealed internal character conflict (*Number the Stars* Transcript, November 5, 2012).

Many have suggested that allowing students opportunities to engage in reasoned arguments allows for intellectual and cognitive reasoning skills to develop (Clark et al., 2003; Kuhn, 1992; Reznitskaya, Kuo, Clark, Miller, Jadallah, Anderson, & Nguyen-Jahiel, 2009; Rogoff, 1995). However, as Almasi (1995) demonstrated, the presence of a teacher in these arguments can limit the tone and direction of the discussions. Thus, it seems important to allow space for children to work through difficult comprehension-based tasks as a means to help facilitate the acquisition of social features of arguments so these skills can be practiced and potentially internalized.

In addition to learning about skills related to argumentation, the opportunity to attend to topics of interest seemed to help students build solidarity over shared interpretations and similar emotional reactions seemed valuable for students. Researchers have long argued that texts offer opportunities for introspective analysis (e.g., Galda, 1998). The small group discussion seemed to extend this potential as students were able to elaborate on shared emotional reactions, which created spaces to bond over shared fears, concerns, joys, and judgments. This seemed particularly important for Adam, a student who struggled with anxiety because it gave him a safe space to explore his fears and anxieties in a cathartic way. However, at times these conversations were far removed from the deep themes embedded within the texts which they were supposed to be discussing.

Although there seemed to be value in allowing students to wrestle with topics and themes in complex texts, there were times when comprehension broke down because a teacher was not present to answer questions or facilitate discussion on complex topics. Often this occurred when students and texts were overmatched in relation to thematic complexity or difficult vocabulary.

There were instances when entire groups expressed confusion about certain events and plot sequences, and these were not resolved because there was nobody in the group who had the depth of knowledge to help them deconstruct the meaning. For instance, the group that discussed *Souder* (Anderson, 1967) argued extensively about the setting of the story, trying to decide if the characters were slaves. This argument demonstrated the ways in which the group attempted to work collaboratively through a misconception in ways that promoted extensive explanation and the use of textual proof to justify claims as described above. However, their focused attention on the race of the characters took away from potential discussions that could have evolved into a discussion about injustices based on racial segregation and oppressions. A teacher's presence in this space may have facilitated such a discussion.

Similarly, there were times in the small group setting when students responded in ways that led to the degradation of conversational integrity. For instance, Liam suggested that he might “go up and kiss” the Nazi soldier who was hunting Annemarie in *Number the Stars* (Lowry, 2011), members of the group began laughing and suggesting other outlandish solutions. Eventually this conversation resulted in Liam reenacting a war scene in which he engaged in a fistfight with a soldier, who eventually shot him (Liam's character). In fact, in a final interview, Carter indicated that he saw book clubs as “just a bunch of friends goofing off” and suggested that some of the themes and scenarios present in the text were “...just too sad, so we had to be silly” (Small Group Interview, November 17, 2012). Thus, the students seemed to need guided support to deal with heavy topics that they did not have the emotional tools to help them understand or deal with their connections and feelings. While the enactment was tangentially related to the text, it precluded the group from talking about the human themes (morality, fear, integrity) embedded in the chapters the group was to be discussing. Thus, these spaces outside of the presence of the teacher were productive in that students were allowed to try out and try on different approaches to conversations that led to more in depth and personal understandings of texts. These findings echo the assertions of several developmental learning theories that suggest that a teacher's presence is necessary in facilitating the acquisition of skills necessary to accomplish tasks that present cognitive challenges to

learners (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978). The teacher's presence may not need to be a permanent fixture in the group, however the children in this study may have benefited from more direct teacher facilitation as related to text comprehension and acquisition of skilled argumentation with difficult texts. Pearson and Gallagher (1983) argued for a gradual release of responsibility model in which discussions would be heavily reliant on teacher support until students could function without the guidance of the teacher. Berne and Clark (2008) detail a protocol for teaching discussion techniques, arguing that students need to be explicitly taught how to engage in thoughtful discussion before they are expected to do it outside the presence of the teacher. However, this protocol cannot account for moments like those described by Carter when students might need a more knowledgeable other to guide them through emotional turmoil or complex plotlines.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Opportunities to grapple with concepts and ideas that were personally interesting to them afforded students the opportunity to build beneficial relationships with other students, position themselves positively by claiming expertise on particular subjects, and practice collaborative problem solving and reasoning with their peers. Educators have long suggested the need for more robust models of discussion in classrooms, arguing that recitation style lessons inhibit children's ability to develop critical thinking and reasoning skills in schools (Rogoff, 1995). Further, the availability of only one right answer prevents children from considering alternative perspectives or to develop skills involved in constructing and defending logical arguments. Rogoff (1995) among others (Clark et al., 2003; Kuhn, 1992; Reznitskaya & Anderson, 2006) suggested that allowing students opportunities to engage in reasoned arguments allows for intellectual and cognitive reasoning skills to develop. Further, Almasi (1995) argued that such cognitive conflicts act as a way for students to develop skills in argumentation as well as facilitate conceptual change and development.

The benefits of decentralized small groups seem to outweigh the tensions related to comprehension described above; however, there does seem to be a need for students to have debriefing sessions in which a teacher might facilitate discussions that might lead to more in depth understandings of texts and literary elements. Further, text selection and content seems to be an

important factor in determining what kinds of conversations children are willing to engage in outside the presence of the teacher. Careful attention should be paid not only to the book level in terms of words composition and vocabulary, but also to the topics and scenarios to which children will be exposed while reading. In order for decentralized small groups to be productive spaces, teachers must provide interesting, relevant and appropriate texts, and arm students with necessary conversational tools so that conversations might be engaged and productive.

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### **About the Author**

Katie Peterson is an Assistant Professor at St. Edwards University. She conferred her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with a focus on Language and Literacy at the University of Texas at Austin in 2014. Her current research interests include critical identity construction, classroom talk, and teacher education.

