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The purpose of this article is to describe an action research study on the discourse patterns that seemed to best promote "developed" discussions of literature with fifth-grade struggling readers in an urban school. Developed discussions are those in which a substantial topic is maintained and the teacher-student talk included interpretations of the text and responses supported by textual, personal, and/or prior knowledge. Findings illustrated that developed discussions occurred in relation to the teacher's specific prompts and responses, the literature selected, and her focus on individual students.

"I wish I could jump into the book."

DeQuan about *The Friendship* by Mildred D. Taylor (3/28/05)

The purpose of this article is to describe an action research study conducted by Kristen with support and collaboration by two of her professors and mentors Ellen and Elizabeth, the second and third authors. The study goal was to describe Kristen's teacher discourse patterns that seemed to best promote "developed" discussions with fifth-grade struggling readers in an urban school serving a diverse student population, all of whom were students of poverty. In this article, "developed" discussions are defined as those in which a substantial topic is maintained, rather than talk around the book which is fleeting or unconnected to the topic. Often, this meant that teacher-student talk went beyond literal questions and answers to include interpretations of the text and responses supported by textual, personal, and/or prior knowledge. This kind of discussion emerged as related to her specific prompts and responses, the literature selected, and Kristen's focus on individual students. In order for Kristen to enable her students to participate in these developed discussions and for her to truly understand what promoted them, she decided to study her own teaching.

Action Research Within Sociocultural Framework

The goal of sociocultural research is to understand the relationships among human action and the social and cultural contexts in which the action occurs (Smagorinsky, 2001; Wertsch, 1998). Urban schools afford a ripe opportunity for research based upon this framework because studies in classrooms often focus on the relationship between teacher's actions and talk and her students' responses. In particular, action research parallels sociocultural research in that they both examine the relationship between the cultural context and the participants' actions and responses (Edwards, 2000). Indeed, this article helps to "illuminate a view of action research as culturally embedded knowledge construction" (Edwards, 2000, p. 197).

This kind of research challenges the notion of value-free or neutral research, a perspective that differs significantly from those counted as legitimate in the NICHD (2000) report of the National Reading Panel (Morrell, 2005). Those "legitimate" forms of research have been criticized as "disengaged, apolitical, culture-free social science" (Edwards, 2000, p. 196) that do little to explore true relationships among action and context. Moreover, they do little to instigate badly needed change in classrooms. Action research is exactly the opposite. In particular, urban action research is characterized by a focus on social justice, access, self-expression, self-determination, and/or inequitable conditions (Morrell, 2005). Often this sort of research is collaborative with other institutions and has a goal of empowerment for participants. This study, conducted by Kristen, the urban teacher who wanted to understand the relative effectiveness of her own teaching, is informed by both sociocultural theory and action research as defined by Morrell (2005).

Research on Literature Discussion

Literature discussion groups, groups of three to six students discussing their interpretations of a commonly read text, can provide authentic opportunities for the construction of new understandings about texts and the world (Almasi, 1995; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Eeds & Wells, 1989; Maloch, 2002; McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006). Research has also shown that high-level reading comprehension strategies can be practiced and refined during literature discussions. These comprehension strategies include verifying recall answers, supporting inference, evaluating text, and sharing personal stories (Eeds & Wells, 1989). Literature discussions can also include actively identifying and correcting inconsistencies in comprehension; asking questions (Almasi, 1995); making connections; supporting/verifying/rejecting predictions; interpreting character motives, actions, and text events (Almasi, McKeown, & Beck, 1996); and connecting text to author's craft, self, and history (Moller & Allen, 2000).

Further, researchers have shown successful literacy learning can occur when teachers' and students' knowledge, beliefs, and values are honored (Fairbanks, 1998), and when good questioning and teacher

support rule (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Wells, 1999). This kind of educational talk has been referred to as instructional conversation (Goldenberg, 1993; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993), dialogic inquiry (Wells, 1999), or as dialoguing to learn (Barnes, 1992). Highly academic dialogue occurring around books has been referred to as literature circles (Gambrell & Almasi, 1996) or grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989). All of these models focus on moving beyond traditional classroom discourse (Cazden, 1988) in which the teacher does most of the talking, is the only one to respond to students, and does all of the questioning.

Yet, with the exception of a few studies (e.g. McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006), there is a lack of information for teachers on appropriate responses for individual children—responses that help students move beyond single phrase responses toward more developed responses. In this study, the teacher/researcher is the discussion guide. At the time of the study, Kristen had facilitated literature discussions for fewer than two years and was still learning how to conduct these discussions effectively. Kristen and her students recognized these developed discussions when they happened—they were natural, engaging, and meaningful. They were the kinds of conversations often shared outside of school. But, what was actually happening between Kristen and her students during literature discussions? Kristen wanted to know to what extent her guidance techniques supported responses that helped to maintain the length and depth of the discussion. Were some patterns of talk more effective in supporting developed responses with the struggling readers? In what ways can these students be more empowered by participation in these discussions? These questions guided this study.

Method

Participants and Classroom Context

The study took place at Clarkman Elementary School (a pseudonym), an inner city, K-5 public elementary school in a mid-western city with 85 percent of the population participating in the free or reduced lunch program, 50 percent African American, and 13 percent in the English as a Second Language Program. Clarkman Elementary offers

community services such as adult education classes, English classes, Family Resource Center, Head Start, after-school academic and recreational programs, and holiday events.

At the time of the study, Kristen (K1 in the transcripts) had been teaching at Clarkman for five years. She is Caucasian, from a middle class background, and a native of the city. She was in her second year of incorporating literature discussions into her reading workshop. Kristen's workshop occurred each morning beginning with 30 minutes of word work from a published series in which students practiced sorting words, using context clues, figuring out analogies, and studying vocabulary. This was followed by a teacher read aloud. Then, Kristen began meeting with reading groups, also called "literature discussion groups"; the primary goal of these groups was to read and discuss, in depth, whole, novel-length books. She met with two groups daily.

When students were not in a literature group, they selected work from among four literacy centers. Generally, two centers focused on response to literature through the use of reading strategies taught previously. A third center focused on science or social studies with varied activities such as a trivia game concerning content knowledge. The other center was always Self-Selected Reading (SSR) and was the only one "required." That is, students had to spend at least 20 minutes a day reading.

To select the books for literature groups, Kristen collected a group of texts from which the students would select one through a group vote. She browsed her classroom library, the school's library, and the school's new bookroom which supplied many books in multiple copies. Kristen believed that students' confidence was built by reading a book by the same author, in the same series, or similar in content or style as the one the group just completed. Thus, she sought books in this category. She also included books that other groups had read and enjoyed. Kristen also included new books she thought were appropriate for reading level or content, careful to match the topic of the book with the backgrounds and interests of the students. For instance, race was a factor in the decision. Kristen always included books with the racial or ethnic background as some of the children (with African American, Latino, and Arab as the

largest groups). But just as often, the personal connections the students could make with the characters in the book were important, despite the race of the students. Of course, one limitation was that the school had to have six copies of the book.

The literature discussion groups met for 20 minutes for one or two days a week, and students were to come to the group prepared to discuss the assigned reading. In the first literature session when reading a new book, a group of 4-6 students (usually, but not always on a similar reading level) decided on a book from a selection of 3-5 books, and they decided how much to read for the next session. During the following sessions, the students began by summarizing their reading. They then shared questions, interpretations, and connections to the text. Kristen acted as a guide for the sessions.

One literature discussion group of five fifth grade students who struggled with reading comprehension participated in the study. It consisted of five African-American students, three girls and two boys. Descriptions of each of the students provide background necessary for understanding these learners as they participated in these literature discussions.

The children. Kanya (K2 in transcripts) was usually dressed in the Clarkman uniform, complete with pressed plaid jumper, blue sweater with the school emblem, and her red tie perfectly centered. Kanya was a responsible student, collecting her brother and aunt from their special needs classrooms to be picked up by their grandfather. Her grandfather could do an impression of Kanya when she was confused—eyes narrowed, nose scrunched, and head tilted. Kanya was affectionately referred to as "Old Lady" or "Grandma," which she found funny.

Kanya's best friend, Shondra (S), had towered over her teachers by at least a couple of inches since third grade. Shondra was both a proper student and a rebel. During class, Shondra often quietly offered answers or whispered for help. However, sometimes she was reprimanded in the cafeteria for talking loudly or dancing provocatively. Kristen didn't believe the rumors of the talking and dancing until she witnessed it.

Jeremy (J) lived with his grandparents since his mother's death during his third grade year. In a conference, Jeremy's grandmother believed that he wanted to hug other students because he missed his mother. At home, he often played indoors by himself, and at school he signed up for many extra curricular activities. Although Jeremy did not play on the basketball team, his grandmother and he attended every Clarkman basketball game. The team presented him with a "Best Fan" award at their banquet ceremony.

DeQuan (D) became the first and only boy on the Clarkman Dance Team. Occasionally DeQuan was reprimanded for dancing in the cafeteria with Shondra. DeQuan and Tanisha (below) claimed to be best friends forever. DeQuan knew all the latest student gossip and some of the teachers' gossip too. The year after the study, DeQuan called Kristen at school about making honor roll and told her which students were misbehaving in middle school.

Tanisha (T) often wore one shirttail sticking out of her worn gray uniform pants and her thin, short hair struggled to stay in its clip. She fully participated in class discussions, often without raising her hand. She preferred to complete her written work as quickly as possible. Tanisha lived with her mother in the housing projects behind Clarkman Elementary. Like Kanya, her face was very expressive. Happiness brought a beautiful bright smile and a deep laugh, while disappointment shown through a crooked frown and downcast eyes. Tanisha was very pleased the day she announced that her mother has finally been hired as a nursing assistant at the local university hospital.

Procedures

Data sources for this study included tape recordings of discussions and Kristen's researcher reflections during three "book cycles." These three book cycles included a total of eight 20-minute literature discussions. The first book cycle, *Junebug* (Mead, 1995), was introduced by Kristen for the similarity she thought the book had were this group of students. This book cycle consisted of three literature discussions within a three week period. The second book cycle, *The Friendship* (Taylor, 1987), consisted of two literature discussions within one week, and it

was selected because students had read other books by Taylor. The last book cycle, *The Diary of Chickabiddy Baby* (Kallok, 1999), consisted of three literature discussions within a three week period and was selected by the students who seemed to openly love its candor and humor.

Each of the eight literature discussion sessions was recorded on audiotape and transcribed and served as the primary data source. The second data source consisted of a set of eight research journal entries that Kristen used to reflect on her own practice and students' responses to the practice. In these written responses, Kristen also documented the relative effectiveness of her research method for learning about her own discourse patterns.

Analysis

All audiotapes were transcribed and coded and pattern coded (Miles & Huberman, 2000) based on assumptions of sociocultural discourse analysis (Bloome, Carter, Christian, Otto, & Shuart-Farsi, 2005) as well as constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 2000). First, Kristen coded for patterns of *teacher* talk—patterns that included ways of initiating the conversations, teacher prompts, teachers' questions, and teachers' responses to students' responses. Then, *students'* responses were coded. After culling "other" codes (described below) for separate analysis, the primary student response codes included:

- how the students verified information or responses by referring to the text;
- how students made personal and real-world connections; and
- how students questioned, challenged, and interpreted the text.

These codes were shared with Ellen and Elizabeth, mentors for Kristen's study, and these mentors gave her suggestions for how to re-think some codes. Ellen also gave Kristen additional literature to read so as to see how her data fit into the growing body of literature on conducting literature discussions. In the end, all codes were adapted from Almasi (1995), Eeds & Wells (1989), Maloch (2002), and McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore (2006). Other codes emerged that seemed important for understanding what contributed to developed discussions, and these were

coded under *"other"* such as a student inviting another student to respond or a student asking a question.

Finally, Kristen looked across her coding scheme and examples. She noticed that some of her discussions appeared more "developed" than others; that is, some discussions stayed on topic long enough for meaning to be constructed by members of the group. Thus, Kristen examined her prompts and responses to students within these "developed" discussions. To do this, the types and amounts of teacher prompts addressed to each student were calculated and charted by particular student. Then, she "constantly compared" (Miles & Huberman, 2000) her patterns of talk that coincided with developed discussions with her patterns of talk that coincided with less-developed (or abandoned) discussions. Two initial findings became clear simultaneously: first, some discussions were more developed than others (hence, her definition of developed discussions), and second, and most important, particular prompts and questions specific to individual students were a contributing factor.

To more deeply understand this contributing factor, Kristen categorized her own and students' responses in the more developed responses. In doing so, additional findings became apparent. First, it appears that the choice of literature mattered in how involved students were in discussions. And, as stated, certain teacher prompts and responses more clearly coincided with developed discussions than others. Finally, it became apparent that Kristen's responses were *student-specific*. That is, she purposely gave certain prompts and responses to specific children based on their individual sociocultural backgrounds and school lives.

Findings

> *I really felt as though I was corralling the students' thoughts. I would highlight important ideas, probe for more information, challenge DeQuan's response, and bring it to a theme. ... Tanisha surprised me with her first comment being about the main idea and giving detail to support it. Talking to Tanisha is so different than talking to Jeremy, who has difficulty communicating his*

> *ideas... There was a lively discussion surrounding using first names for adults and how that relates to Tom Bee... The students had a lot to say about this short story.* (Kristen's reflection journal, 3/28/05)

This excerpt from Kristen's reflection journal highlights the findings of this study. The primary goal in conducting this study was to see the patterns of talk that characterized "developed" conversations—or those that seemed to maintain a focus on substantial topics. And, while a pattern of prompts and responses emerged as important for helping students participate in developed conversations, it also became important to tailor these teaching strategies for the individual student—his or her personalities, academic talents and struggles, and background knowledge; this was critical for helping the individuals participate in high-level discussions.

Teacher Prompts and Responses in Developed Discussions

When examining developed discussions, it became clear that Kristen's role as questioner, scaffolder, and contributor was critical. The discussions in which substantial topics were maintained were also those in which Kristen:

1. asked open-ended questions, especially "why?";
2. acknowledged students' responses or extending their responses by re-phrasing, asking others whether they agree, etc;
3. asking for evidence (text or personal) to support answers; and
4. inviting participation, either in general or to specific students.

In the first book cycle studied, the students read *Junebug* (Mead, 1995) a coming of age story. The main character, Junebug, is apprehensive about his tenth birthday because the gangs around his housing project will begin to ask him to run errands. Junebug lives with his hardworking Momma, his irresponsible Aunt Jolita, and his six-year-old sister Tasha. Darnell, a teenager, looks after Junebug like an older brother.

In the following transcript excerpt, DeQuan (D) asked a question about Aunt Jolita's motives. Although Jolita is part of the family, she neglects watching the children and hangs out with dangerous people. The students dislike this character. Despite this character's negative image, DeQuan asks the group a question about Jolita's motives for her behavior.

D: I had a question...Why...why...ok, why was Jolita...why was Jolita dis...disrespecting her momma...her auntie?

K1: That's a good question.

T: I think that she would disrespect her because she's like, Jolita don't do nothing. If Jolita do something, she might get more respect. So that's why her mom disrespects her, I mean her auntie disrespects her because she don't ever do nothing. Then one day, she told Junebug and them to go outside and they didn't even want to. She made them and Junebug was like 'ain't this our apartment, me and Tasha?' And she told them to get out of their own apartment.

K1: Tanisha just mentioned a lot of reasons how Jolita disrespects momma, but your question was why. Right? Why do you think? Can Kanya (K) or Jeremy answer this? Why is Jolita evil, mean?

T: She might be mean cause she...

K2: She's probably jealous because mama probably pays more attention to those children. Aunt Jolita's an adult though?

Many: Yeah.

K2: Well, most adults can at least...If you don't have a job, ok, I understand. You could stay home and stuff. Cause she don't have no job and she don't go looking for job. Except Mama said she don't have no job and that's when she gets mad.

What I think is Jolita is probably mad because Mama takes care of her children then doesn't pay attention to Jolita. Jolita is an adult.

T: I also think that she's jealous because like when Junebug and them is like, she's not really close to Junebug and them. If she was a little bit closer to Junebug, she might get more respect. If her auntie tell her to do something, she won't do it. And if their Momma found out that she didn't help them in the library, she'd get kicked out also.

K1: Why is Jolita not close to Junebug, Tasha, or her mom?

K2: Stuck up on boys. Not boys, but men (Literature discussion, 3/16/05).

In this instance, DeQuan asked a question about a protagonist's motive. When Tanisha answered by confusing the characters, Kristen responds by clarifying the question. This open-ended question served as an acknowledgement of DeQuan's contribution. Once the question was clarified, the students supported responses with both textual evidence and personal knowledge.

In another section of the same *Junebug* discussion, the students were concerned about the safety of the main character. Aunt Jolita brought the gang leader, Radar Man, up to their apartment. Then Radar Man pushed Momma down the stairs. After the ambulance took Momma to the hospital, Junebug and Tasha are left alone. There are many dangers in Junebug's housing project and he must make safe decisions in order to survive. Kristen asked, "What should he [Junebug] do right now?" The question was not preplanned. Junebug's preservation and his navigation of choices seemed like a natural movement in the discussion.

K1: What should he [Junebug] do right now?

T: Just sit there and think about what he should do.

K2: I would go to the old lady's house.

S: Go to somebody's house.

T: I think he should go over Darnell's house and tell his mama what's going on. Cause Darnell mama didn't know what was going on with Darnell.

K1: Why is Darnell's mom a good choice?

T: Cause she used to babysit Junebug when he was a baby and Tasha. She's somebody that you can trust. Then after he told his mama then he should have gone and told Darnell but don't tell nobody where Darnell is. But he should of told Darnell that that man was looking for him and he's dangerous.

K1: Does anybody else want to add on to that? Or have a comment about Tanisha's answer?

J: I do. I have something to add on to it. I would be go looking for Aunt Jolita.

S: I wouldn't because it might be dangerous.

T: I wouldn't go looking for her. She done made a mistake. A real big mistake and I wouldn't go looking for her. When something serious happens like that you just can't sit down and talk to nobody without getting angry with them.

K1: Do you agree with that?

J: I would go hunt her down.

K1: Now that you've listened to them, would you still choose to do that?

J: I wouldn't but I'd just go tell somebody (Literature discussion, 3/16/05).

There was deep emotion and a sense of urgency in the students' responses. During this discussion, Junebug's safety mattered to the students. The students used both textual evidence and personal knowledge to navigate Junebug's options. Kristen's prompts included asking for textual evidence, inviting participation, and twice requesting elaboration from Jeremy. In the course of this short excerpt, Tanisha slightly altered her viewpoint on Junebug's options, an indication of the construction of new understanding. She supported her response with textual and personal knowledge.

While it appeared that Kristen's prompts and responses to students contributed to the sustained discussion, it was also apparent that the choice of literature made a difference to students' emotional involvement. In the next excerpt, the students' connections to Junebug's neighborhood and their own neighborhoods are clear. By the end of *Junebug*, the family had moved out of the housing projects to a "quiet" neighborhood. Momma took a nursing home supervisor job that offered the family an apartment. Aunt Jolita is left behind.

In the following discussion, Tanisha suggested that Junebug would meet "good" children in the "quiet" neighborhood, and Kristen challenged her.

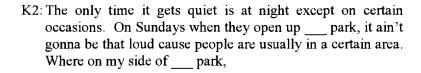K1: How did you make that connection?

T: Because if it's quiet and stuff, sometimes like when it's quiet in our apartment, it stays that way. Like sometimes...

K2: In _____ (a local park), the only time it really gets loud.

T: At night...

K2: No, it don't get loud at night.

T: I'm talking about quiet.

K2: The only time it gets quiet is at night except on certain occasions. On Sundays when they open up ___ park, it ain't gonna be that loud cause people are usually in a certain area. Where on my side of ___ park,

J: (Inaudible comment)

K2: Yep, right there in the middle where the park is. Um, I can just walk over there. It ain't really a lot because some people are maybe having their own thing and they don't pay no attention. They quiet.

K1: Is that good noise or bad noise in ___ park or is it both?

K2: Good. It depends because one night on the news, they had where someone had shot someone and they died.

T: Some dude shot this 18 year old.

K2: He was 18 or 19. He died. My auntie, ___, she was riding through there and seen the whole thing. But she turned him in but before she was turning him in, he had came there and just already put it up and said I killed him.

K1: Yeah, I remember us talking about that (Literature discussion, 3/23/05).

In the natural flow of the conversation, Kanya's description of her neighborhood and a defining incident was a more immediate need than Kristen's comparison question. Knowing when to allow the students to take the lead took Kristen some time. She was not always successful. The power of the connection between the literature and the lives of the students at times took precedent over the relative importance of Kristen's questions and prompts.

Teacher Talk in a Less-Developed Discussion

In less developed discussions, Kristen not only used fewer open-ended questions and acknowledgements of students' contributions, she also at times simply missed good opportunities to scaffold through questions, or she took the easy way out and simply defined concepts or answered questions for students. In these discussions, it is clear that students' construction of new understanding depends on the patience and insight of the teacher.

The following excerpt comes from the second book club cycle in which the group read *The Friendship* (Taylor, 1987). This story illustrates racial relationships in a rural, segregated Mississippi town around the 1930s. Mr. Tom Bee, a black man, had saved the life of and raised John Wallace, an abandoned white child. John grew to have his own family and run the town store. Although Tom Bee was black, John went against the common prejudice and told Tom to always call him by his first name.

In this excerpt about *The Friendship*, Tanisha was confused about why black people couldn't use white people's first names in conversation. During the course of the discussion, the students also debated the etiquette of children using first names. The students were constructing knowledge about using first names and about respect, yet the students were having difficulty relating this to racial prejudice.

> T: I was talking about like, you know, you can't call a white person by their first name but if a white person call a black person by their first name it won't be a problem. I don't understand. I don't understand that.
>
> K2: I think it's because it'll probably be rude.
>
> D: Why would it be rude?
>
> T: Cause they're not their master and they're not slaves.

K2: Right now in life you aren't allowed to call adults by their first name.

T, S, & D: Yes you are.

K2: If you're a child, you can't. That's rude.

T: If you're a child...We call Ms. _____ "Ms Cheryl."

S: And we call Ms. _____ "Ms. Mary."

K2: OK

T: Don't nobody going around, calling no older person, "Hi Cheryl" unless they're grown.

K1: So you are saying that to use a last name is a sign of respect. How does this relate to black people not being able to use a first name, they had to use the last name and Mr. or Ms.?

T: The two people that was arguing, they both are grown, so I don't see how they couldn't call by them by their first names.

K1: Isn't that interesting, they are both are grown...

T: He said don't you call me by my Christian name or something.

K2: Don't call me by my Christian name.

K1: This is a very important part of this prejudice (Literature discussion, 3/28/05).

Here Kristen felt impatient. The children were focused on age, not race. While it is possible that the students' reluctance to take on the issue of historical racism was due to the teacher's race (Caucasian), Kristen believed this not to be the case. She wished she had scaffolded students'

responses through questioning and prompting instead of simply telling them the theme. Learning when to back off, as in the previous example with *Junebug*, and when to scaffold for deeper understanding, as in this case of *The Friendship* takes careful examination of teacher talk and subsequent student responses.

Focusing on the Individual: Appropriate Prompts and Responses for Each Student

Kristen held the belief that each student has individual strengths and that each was different in how they contributed to discussions. Yet, she soon discovered that these differences greatly influenced her own prompts and responses for each student. In her research journal, Kristen wrote how Shondra appeared unsure of herself in academic settings; that Tanisha enjoyed reading and recalled details and shared interesting connections; that Kanya struggled as a reader but had strong personal opinions about the characters and their actions; that Jeremy was a reluctant reader, easily distracted, and had difficulty expressing his thoughts, although he became emotionally involved in books; and that DeQuan enjoyed reading with a teacher or another student but not alone.

In one of the discussions of *The Friendship*, Kristen prompted and responded to Shondra. The group had been discussing how segregation and racial prejudice affect a relationship. After the students had expressed their disgust with the violence, segregation, and racism found in the story, Kristen asked Shondra a question about a white character who shoots a black man. This question was preplanned and mirrored DeQuan's earlier question about Aunt Jolita from *Junebug*.

> K1: (to Shondra) When Mr. Tom Bee still wants his tobacco and these guys are yelling at Mr. Wallace, what did you think Mr. Wallace was going to do at that point?
>
> S: I thought that he was just going to ignore him. Just let it go because he's probably used to it.
>
> K1: I thought the same thing. What made you think he was just going to ignore him?

S: Because he didn't say nothing to him like the other people say like shut up or something like that. He didn't say nothing, he just asked for his tobacco, (inaudible).

K1: And Mr. Wallace was still being kind to him, too.

T: Because he saved his life.

K1: So why do we think he picked up the shotgun and shot Tom Bee?

T: Because he told him he's gonna have to stop disrespecting him and calling him by his first name.

S: He said he was losing popularity (Literature discussion, 3/31/05).

After Kristen had asked Shondra an open-ended question, she responded with a reasonable but unsupported answer. Kristen then guided her with an acknowledgment and prompted for textual evidence. Shondra's next response provided a textual interpretation that supported her previous response. As she finished her comment, her voice trailed off into a whisper. Kristen then responded to Shondra's whispered response with an acknowledgment. It was clear that Shondra needed more encouragement and scaffolding than some of the other students, and could reach a fuller comprehension of the text when Kristen provided these for her.

Kristen's focus on the individual extended to every student in the group. For example, Jeremy had difficulty communicating his ideas, which were often personal connections, and thus Kristen questioned his responses often for clarification and relationship to the text. Kristen knew she had to make multiple invitations to get DeQuan to contribute. Indeed, each of these students received different prompts or responses based on how Kristen perceived their needs.

While focusing on how she individually responded to students, Kristen also examined the number of invitations per student. While

DeQuan, Jeremy and Shondra received more invitations to participate than Tanisha and Kanya, all four students except DeQuan were acknowledged in their responses multiple times during the study. Kristen acknowledged DeQuan, a reluctant speaker, only twice! Clearly, while Kristen tailored prompts and responses for each student, she was not always effective or equitable. As suggested earlier, an acute awareness of each student's learning differences seems necessary in promoting the most developed discussions.

Discussion

This action research study illustrates the legitimacy of examining classroom practices through a sociocultural lens. Indeed, it is only through such lenses that this kind of data can be mined. While other researchers have described the many ways teachers prompt and respond and the many ways students contribute, some of these discourse patterns appear connected to how well developed a discussion is. Research on classroom discussions illustrate the many scaffolding techniques that support developed discussions. Talk that includes more elaborate than one-word responses (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001; Tharp & Gallimore, 1993), different types of questions (Almasi, 1995; Eeds & Wells, 1989), students making textual connections to their lives (Almasi et al., 1996; Fairbanks, 1998), and teachers asking for textual evidence to support answers (Almasi et al.; Maloch, 2002) are hallmarks of good literature discussions. These prompts by the teacher can affect how well developed a discussion becomes.

However, appropriate prompts and questions are not enough. This study also suggests that the literature selected for student reading is profoundly important for sustaining well developed discussions, a topic not widely addressed in studies. When students and their teacher read about subjects in which students have direct experience and/or carry sophisticated concepts, the talk can be richer and the discussion sustained. Even Kristen's struggling readers participated more in the discussion when the topics were, in Kristen's word, "deep." Thus teachers need to avoid "dummying down" material when their students do not read well. That students do not read well doesn't indicate that they do not think well. Research on traditional instruction (Allington &

Walmsely, 1995) has shown that the less skilled readers only get more "skills" rather than the meaningful instruction. In fact, these may be exactly the students who need high-level conversation so that they can learn needed vocabulary and become more involved with books.

Most significant perhaps is that knowing students well is required for teachers to respond appropriately to individuals. That is, the teacher questions, prompts and responses during discussion should be student specific and based on thorough knowledge of personalities, abilities, and experiences of the students themselves. Students are individuals and should be treated as such, in literature discussions. An equitable approach is to treat students based on their individual needs, one characteristic of a positive classroom community (Almasi et al., 1996; McIntyre et al., 2006). Thus, it seems that understanding students well and building classroom community are necessary in promoting developed discussions around literature. Times when the literature discussions were less developed and less equitable were also revealed to Kristen through her action lens, an unexpected finding due to the opportunity to audiotape and reflect on her teaching.

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