

**Chicago Foundation for Education
Teachers Network Leadership Institute**

**Action Research Report:
Negotiating Literature
Discussions in Fifth Grade**



**Claudia Rivas
June 26, 2006**

Question and Subquestions

What happens in my classroom when my fifth graders and I create literature discussion guidelines together? I focused on the following subquestions during my project:

- What should my role be in helping students create and carry out discussion guidelines?
- Which lessons do I need to teach in order for my students to engage in meaningful literature discussions?
- How does student reflection and evaluation affect the conversations?
- Which strategies help reluctant or nonparticipatory students take part in the discussions?
- What is the correlation in reading comprehension as observed in whole-class discussions and as measured by standardized tests?

Rationale

Last year (2004 – 2005) was my first year teaching fifth grade. It was an overwhelming, exciting, draining, and fast-paced year. Since I had previously taught second grade, I had to learn how to teach everything at this new level, including reading. So along with jumping in for a wild year, I jumped into taking a yearlong course offered by the Rochelle Lee Fund called Reading for Deeper Meaning (RDM). Other fifth grade teachers and I learned how to facilitate discussions of novels by improving our questioning techniques. The course emphasized teachers using a framing question (defined as a main, interpretive question) and a related cluster of questions to get the students to explore *why* certain events and changes occur in a novel. Based on what I learned through my participation in RDM, I was able to facilitate conversations grounded in the text so that my students talked to one another, not just to me. During these conversations my students sat in a rectangle formation (to facilitate eye contact), took turns listening to and speaking with each other without raising their hands (this took some time), and delved into higher-level conversations about books.

At the end of the school year I was proud of the work my students and I did, but upon reflecting on the RDM experience I identified two areas that didn't feel ideal. The most obvious was the extent of teacher control and influence on the direction of the discussion at the sake of the students' control. In the RDM model only the teacher prepares the questions that are used in the discussion based on the belief that students are unable to generate good interpretive questions that get to the heart of a novel's themes. I experienced how time-consuming and difficult this

task is, when we (a group of about 20 teachers) struggled for hours to create “good” questions. Last year developed questions prior to the discussions in my classroom, and I felt I had to get my students to discuss my questions so they could understand the book’s multiple layers of meaning. I felt I had to lead them through a path, so that at the end of it they could understand the “grand meaning” of the book better. This did happen with various degrees of success, but perhaps contributed to the second issue that concerned me about RDM discussions - they weren’t fun for some students. I always looked forward to them, but several students expressed quiet disappointment when we had to have the discussions. I realized that the discussions may have been too structured by the teacher’s questions and discussion parameters (we had to stay grounded in the text at all times, and not include personal feelings or connections), and the students’ needs or interests were not being met. As a new participant in an adult book club, I could now empathize with students who needed an outlet for asking *their* questions and expressing *their* feelings about the books.

In my action research project this school year (2005 – 2006) I did use some aspects of the RDM discussion model, and adapted other aspects in order to make the discussions more student-centered. Instead of telling the students my rules and expectations for discussions, I allowed for us to create the discussion guidelines *together*. By the term discussion guidelines I mean both the interactional norms (for example, look at the speaker, don’t play with objects while someone is talking, use an appropriate volume when speaking) and the content expectations (for example, stay on topic, make connections to life and other texts, respond to others’ comments). This project allowed me to step back and analyze the discussion process in a way I was not able to do during my first year teaching fifth grade. This project also gave my students many opportunities to grow as participants in discussions, an important skill for conversing about literature and other topics.

Review of Literature

Why have literature discussions?

“To voice their own ideas, to hear others in ways that push their own thinking, to be sensitive to viewpoints not necessarily their own, to think deeply and communicate clearly” (Langer, 1995, p. 144). Couldn’t these goals be those of any educator in any subject? As a fifth grade teacher of all subjects, including reading, I too have these lofty goals for my students. Judith Langer’s words resonate for me, since I have the opportunity to guide my students in

experiencing the power of literature discussions. Literature discussions can be a vehicle for understanding and/or enriching understanding of text. Up to this point my school hadn't been obsessed with standardized reading scores, but this year my colleagues and I started to feel the pressure to better prepare the students for the big test, the ISAT (Illinois Standards Achievement Test). We were given several "ISAT Curriculum" packets that included strategies for students to be active readers and short stories with multiple choice and extended response questions. The suggested curriculum didn't include literature discussions as a way to promote reading comprehension. Even so, I continued with my plan to have literature discussions as a cornerstone of my reading instruction for two reasons: 1) Discussions can stimulate critical thinking, and 2) Discussions can provide powerful social learning opportunities.

To me critical thinking includes the ability to go beyond the presented facts, to think things over time, and to connect ideas. In my short career as a fifth grade teacher I have worked with just a few students who naturally do this. I'm not sure if this is because of the cognitive stage of most fifth graders, or if most students experience education as something in which they have a passive role and see learning facts, instead of thinking, as the main goal. But by engaging in whole-class literature discussions I wanted to explore *thinking*: how the facts in the text, in combination with the experiences of the discussion participants, and exploration of other ideas is more interesting than memorizing facts or choosing from multiple-choice answers. By having a lot of discussion experiences and explicit instruction, I hoped that more of my fifth graders could get better at thinking things through.

Why is literature such a good subject for the stimulation of critical thinking? The Junior Great Books Program states it simply: "Thinking and reading skills are closely related" (Great Books Foundation [GBF], 1993, p. xx). By participating in discussions, this program believes students will be better able to synthesize and analyze information. The students learn a lot about interpreting literature, but there are also long-term benefits to engaging in discussions in elementary school. Nora Flynn (2004), in her TNLI paper "Student Discussions in the Social Studies Classroom: An Action Research Study" states that engaging in discussions "Is an essential skill in itself; the processes of critically analyzing, considering, and communicating are the basis of human interactions" (p. 3). She teaches high school students, and sees the need for teachers at earlier grades to incorporate discussion-based activities to help student achievement (p. 19). Langer (1995) even argues that students who engage in literature discussion become

better humans, not just better thinkers. She states that the critical thinking empowers students and supports a “sense of humanity, an expectation that through the differences among people and ideas we will learn not only to better understand the world and how it works but also how to become our best selves” (p.144).

Literature discussions also serve as authentic social learning opportunities. My experiences with RDM last year lead me to agree with Daniels and Bizar (2005). “Reading is a social act, and truly engaged readers always want to talk about what they read, and teachers [should] use collaborative classroom structures to support both conversations and comprehension” (p.42). Being a part of a community of readers is one way for students to experience a real-world example of people coming together to share ideas. I’ve experienced reading as both a private and social act. The social perspective is new to me as a learner, since this has been my first year in a book club. At the book club sessions, I’ve experienced the value of hearing companions say something I had never thought about, and changing or expanding my interpretation of a text. Creating a safe community of readers takes effort and time, but I thought it was worth it because I wanted my students to also experience this growth in ideas. Langer (1995) refers to it as envisionment building (envisionments refers to what you understand at a certain point in time). She states, “The comments shared by a classmate have the potential to set a student thinking, exploring, and moving beyond the envisionment that she or he had a moment before” (p. 53). I believed at the outset of this project that engaging in conversations with other students about texts could aid their comprehension better than individually reading short ISAT passages and selecting from multiple-choice answers.

Hybrid model of discussion

One of my subquestions was “What should my role be in helping students create and carry out discussion guidelines?” The first thing I had to do was to set up the parameters for having discussions in my room. I used my experience with RDM, read journal articles and books, and talked to colleagues in order to clarify my vision for parameters to structure the discussions. Students had a big role in developing the interactional and content guidelines, but in my role as limit-setter I had to decide on some of the basics. The table below summarizes some of the differences between two major literature discussion models. RDM is a program for Chicago Public School teachers taught by the Rochelle Lee Fund, a local organization. It shares key features with the Junior Great Books Program (JGB), a nationally established model for

facilitating discussions. For this reason I grouped them together in comparing them to a different established way of having conversations – literature circles. I selected and combined structures from these two models (RDM/JGB and literature circles) to create a hybrid model of discussions that worked for my class and me. The shaded boxes indicate the elements I used to structure my class’s discussions.

	RDM/JGB	Literature circles
Size of discussion group	Whole class	Small groups of 4 – 6 students
Who selects the text?	Teacher	Students select from teacher-chosen set
Who asks questions used in the discussion?	Teacher	Students
What kind of support is valid in responding to questions?	Text-based	Text-based and personal connections
Style/culture of the conversations	Analytical	Open, natural conversations
Who evaluates the discussion?	Teacher	Teacher and students

I chose to engage in whole-class discussions rather than small group discussions because I had more experience with the RDM model than with literature circles. Because we had whole-class discussions I was the one who selected the texts, since I had to make sure we had enough copies of the texts for each student.

To me one of the most unsettling aspects of the RDM model was the level of teacher control, which was mainly due to the teacher having the sole power to ask questions. I wanted to share the responsibility with my students, since it had to be *our* discussion, not just mine. Several educators, such as Routman (2000), Jewell and Pratt (1999), and Metsala and Commeyras (1996) advocate letting students pose questions. I whole-heartedly agree with Routman (2000) when she says, “Asking questions . . . is a hallmark of a well-educated person as well as a necessary skill for being a critical, intellectual thinker in a democratic society” (p. 173). RDM has the teacher create the questions because they believe it’s a challenge for students to do it well. I knew this was a difficult task, but also believed that my inquisitive students would be able to create interpretive questions that pointed to issues that mattered to them. Metsala and

Commeyras (1996) found that questions that mattered to their students were usually the “why” ones (p. 263), which usually lend themselves to multiple interpretations. They believe teachers should value all student questions, since “Students posed questions that addressed what they needed and wanted to understand about literature and life” (p. 263).

Another component I decided to try out this year was allowing students to support their answers with text-based, prior knowledge, and personal connections. RDM validates only text-based support because it wants the conversations to stay grounded, not whisked off in different directions by personal anecdotes. In the RDM model it’s possible that spending the entire time focusing on the text the discussion can help students develop a deep understanding of the themes in a novel. But literature circles, according to Daniels and Bizar (2005), welcome “personal connections and digressions” (p. 131). This is not at the expense of understanding the text, but in support of the human tendency to make connections (text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world). Bringing students’ lives and cultures into the conversation can help students determine and better evaluate multiple meanings. Because I’d experienced the value of personal connections and have read about other educators’ experience with it, I encouraged my class to use the literature circle’s way of responding to questions. Jewell and Pratt (1999) found that primary students were quite adept at using personal connections in conjunction with text-based support to focus on the “personal construction of meaning” instead of on what they thought the teacher wanted them to understand (p. 4). Another researcher, Carico (2001) worked with adolescent girls, and found that encouraging personal connections motivated them to take part in the small group discussions (p. 2) and “reader response, with its emphasis on expression, examination, and connection, is one model we should continue to use” (p. 8).

By having students ask their questions and using both textual and personal support, I’ve made an attempt to have the discussions be more natural and less formal than they were last year. I wanted the style to be more like adult book club conversations – at times personal and relaxed, at other times analytical. Last year I felt like a teacher in Carol Gilles’s (1994) study – I was so intent on getting my students to “get” the deep layers of meaning that I neglected their feelings, thus lending our discussions an air of objective formality. My experience mirrored that of the teacher in Gilles’s study, who realized she was “prodding them to be evaluative and analytical” (p. 4) and had neglected the “aesthetic side of the story” (p.3). Unfortunately, by doing this I think I alienated some students and failed to use the power of human experience to draw in

reluctant readers to our discussions. Judith Langer (1995) believes the objective (the ability to scrutinize something in an analytical, distant way) and subjective (the ability to use our internal selves to understand something) experiences in literature work together; they don't conflict (p.7). By nurturing both types of experiences I thought they could be more meaningful, intense, and enjoyable for more students.

Just like in the literature circle model, I wanted to share the responsibility for evaluation with my students. Last year I was so overwhelmed with facilitating discussions for the first time that I mostly evaluated myself. But this year, because I had more experience managing the discussions and increased familiarity with the texts, I decided to lead the students in evaluating how the discussions developed. Routman (2000) states that involving students in evaluation can lead them to be more accountable for their work (p. 198). One way I did this was by using videotaping as a tool. Although it's not unusual for discussion research projects to use audio or videotaping, I'm not sure how common it is for students to view them. By viewing the videotapes students were able to notice things that they didn't notice in the actual discussion times. According to Routman (2000) videotape is an excellent self-critiquing tool (p. 198).

School and Classroom Context

"This is an amazing place!" I wrote in my journal after my first day of student teaching at my school on March 25, 2002. I was in awe of how some of the buzzwords in my teacher preparation classes were actually being brought to life, for example authentic assessment and cooperative grouping. Now, four years later, I still find myself in awe of the work the teachers and students do at this school. I feel fortunate to work in a school with dedicated teachers, parents, and great students. My school is a public dual-language (English/Spanish) school for preschool through eighth grades in Chicago. Each day, approximately 670 students receive instruction in both languages, regardless of their original language dominance. It is a long and demanding process for the students to gain literacy and fluency skills in both languages. Many Hispanic families are drawn to a school in which their children can keep and develop their heritage language in an English-dominant society. Many non-Hispanic families are drawn to it for the opportunity for their children to become bilingual at an early age. One of the goals of the school is for each student to understand and appreciate his/her own culture, and accept that of others.

At my school we teach units of study that often involve social studies themes at the core.

In first grade students learn about the Native American civilizations of North America, in second grade about the Taínos, in third grade about the Incas, in fourth grade about the Mayas, in fifth grade about the Aztecs, and so on. In addition to focusing on the study of the Americas, many social studies units have a social justice component to them. For example, in third grade students fundraise to buy llamas for families in Peru, in fourth grade students raise money to save a part of the rain forest, and in fifth grade we raise money to help organizations that help immigrants. When students come to me in fifth grade they have already had very rich and powerful experiences with school and tend to be curious and engaged students.

In regard to experiences with reading, by the time students get to fifth grade they are used to choosing their own trade books to read and reading in both languages for homework each night. Each classroom has a classroom library (often supplemented by working with the Rochelle Lee Fund) and the students are encouraged to check these books out. What is new in fifth grade is the required reading of several whole-class novels. In fourth grade students read two informational books as a class, but in fifth grade we tend to focus on fictional whole-class novels. This year we are going to study six whole-class novels, three in each language. When not reading whole-class novels, students are reading self-selected books, magazines, and newspapers.

I started the school year with 22 students, but in November one student transferred, which left me with 21 students. Thirteen are English-dominant, five are Spanish-dominant, and three are equally comfortable with both languages. One of my Spanish-dominant students is new to the country and starting to learn English, which means she didn't participate in the English language discussions. All of my students could participate in Spanish language discussions. The majority of students have a positive outlook towards reading, but they are more heterogeneous when it comes to scoring on standardized testing. The results of the Stanford Learning First assessment given out in October 2005 and January 2006 are given in the following table. The Chicago Public Schools introduced Learning First in the fall 2005. It is a new Reading assessment for students in grades 3 – 8, and it will be administered in the fall, winter, and spring of each year. According to the parent report, the purpose of the Learning First is to “provide teachers and educators with timely and useful information about student performance in Reading”.

	October 2005	January 2006
--	---------------------	---------------------

Score of above 70% on the reading comprehension (1C) standard of the test	10 out of 20 students (50% of students)	7 out of 20 students (35% of students)
Score of 50% to 70% on the reading comprehension (1C) standard of the test	4 out of 20 students (20 % of students)	8 out of 20 students (40 % of students)
Score of below 50% on the reading comprehension (1C) standard of the test	6 out of 20 students (30% of students)	5 out of 20 students (25% of students)

By the time my students get to me in fifth grade they have had many opportunities to talk about books with each other and the teacher. In the primary grades these discussions most often takes the form of the teacher reading aloud to the students, and asking questions during or after the book is finished. As far as I know, for most students fifth grade is when they experience what it's like to form a whole-class circle or rectangle and participate in formal discussions like the ones I've structured for my class.

Tools and Data

Discussion exit slips

One of the first things I had to do was to get the students thinking about different elements of a discussion. Early in the research process I had students complete discussion exit slips. The exit slip had open-ended questions like “What did you notice?”, “What was done well in the discussion?” and “What was not done well or could be improved?” These are the notable results of the first discussion exit slip.

Responses to “What was done well?”	Responses to “What could be improved?”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 8 out of 31 comments were about students paying attention and listening to one another. • 6 out of 31 comments were about students doing a good job ignoring the camera. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 out of 32 comments referred to the need for the speakers to use a louder voice.

Video reflection sheets

After watching the videos (I recorded portions of discussions in November, February, and April) the students filled out video reflection sheets. My students requested that we watch each video twice: the first time they just absorbed it and laughed at themselves being caught on screen; the second time they settled down and answered questions like “What went well?” “What could be better”, “What surprised you?” and responded to a section for other comments.

On the first video reflection sheet in November, the category with the most comments for “What went well?” was that the volume was louder than before. Under “What could be better?” two categories had the most comments. Sixteen out of 42 comments were about how students shouldn’t be playing and 11 out of 42 were about getting better at ignoring the camera. Under “What surprised you?” most comments had to do with the widespread playing around for the camera. The comments I wrote in my video reflection sheet were similar to the class’s comments. I was completely surprised by the amount of goofing off (making faces, having side conversations, playing with hands) that most of the students did when the camera was on them. These are things I had totally missed while the actual discussion was taking place! After watching the video twice, I didn’t mention this inappropriate behavior to the class. Yet, some students said, “Now you know (about the playing around)” and “Are you mad, teacher?” I didn’t respond to these questions, because at this point in the project I wanted to not explicitly go over rules and expectations, and instead wanted to have the students realize standards of discussion behavior for themselves. Instead of being mad, I was very proud of them for how seriously they watched the video the second time around and filled out the video reflection sheet.

On the second video reflection sheet in February, the category with the most comments for “What went well?” was once again that the volume was louder (11 out of 26 comments). I agreed that this was a positive, since during the first discussion we had back in November the lack of appropriate volume was the most immediate area we had to improve upon. In “What could be better?” 9 out of 24 comments referred to the need for everyone to have a chance to participate instead of having a small group of people dominate the conversation. This was a major issue especially after the February discussion, because it was the first time the class had agreed to take turns like adult book clubs and dinner conversations, and not to raise hands.

After watching the April video, I had the students fill out a self-assessment of performance sheet instead of a regular video reflection sheet. I explain why later under the “Self-assessment performance sheet” of this “Tools and Data” section.

Guideline checklist

After the students had had some experience noticing elements in a discussion I felt we needed to create a guideline checklist. I led a brainstorm session in January in which I selected four categories: “Listeners”, “Speakers”, “Taking turns”, and “What we should talk about”. I then presented the categories to my students and had them give me suggestions for our discussion guidelines. I didn’t offer any of my own guidelines or reject any of their suggestions. I did help reword some of their suggestions so they were more clearly understood. The students and I ended up with 15 guidelines, such as “Don’t talk while someone is talking” or “Don’t touch or play with friends or objects”. They mentioned some guidelines that I had not thought about beforehand or had never taught them in minilessons during current event discussions. For example, they included guidelines such as “Speak clearly and slowly”, “Look respectfully at the speaker”, “Don’t laugh unless the speaker says something funny”, and “Everyone participates”.

The students and I used the guideline checklist after each of the next three literature discussions. Each person had to select two items that he/she thought went well and two items that could be better. I used the checklist to have a written reminder for students of what we agreed up to this point and to make it easier for me to tabulate the results. After a discussion I would tabulate which two guidelines from each category were chosen most often by the class. The following table shows the results.

	What went well?	What could be better?
“Charles” on 1/26/06	*Speaks loud enough for all to hear. *We talk about the book or topic at hand.	*Don’t touch or play with friends or objects. *Everyone participates.
“Eleven” on 1/31/06	*Speaks loud enough for all to hear. *We talk about favorite parts, questions, comparisons, and connections.	*Don’t interrupt someone. *Don’t talk while someone is talking.
“Geraldine Moore, the Poet” on 2/10/06	*Speaks loud enough for all to hear. *Everyone follows the way we agreed to take turns.	*Don’t talk or interrupt while someone else is talking. *Don’t touch or play with friends or objects.

Rubrics based on guideline checklist results

I then used the guideline checklist results to create rubrics to assess our progress on the two most selected items in each category. For example, after the discussion of the short story “Charles” I created a rubric using the two guidelines most cited by the class as having gone well: “Speaker speaks loud enough for all to hear” and “We talk about the book or topic at hand”. It also included two guidelines most cited by the class as needing improvement after the “Charles” discussion: “Listeners don’t touch or play with friends” and “Everyone participates”. I decided to only use the two most selected guidelines instead of the entire list of 15 guidelines as a way for students to get better at evaluating the whole-class’s performance by paying attention only to a few manageable criteria. The class evaluated themselves using this type of rubric on two occasions. The rubric was scored on a 1 to 4 scale, as follows:

- 1: A few people followed the guideline - below expectation.
- 2: Some people followed the guideline - almost meets expectation.
- 3: Almost everyone followed the guideline - meets expectation.
- 4: Everyone in the class followed the guideline – above expectation.

The students were used to using this 1 to 4 scoring rubric from other classroom assignments and their report card grades. Below is the average score for each guideline on the rubrics.

	What went well?	What could be better?
After the “Eleven” discussion on 1/31/06	*Speaks loud enough for all to hear. Score: 2.95 *We talk about the book or topic at hand. Score: 3.15	*Don’t touch or play with friends or objects. Score: 2.5 *Everyone participates. Score: 2.3
After the “Geraldine Moore, the Poet” discussion on 2/10/06	*Speaks loud enough for all to hear. Score: 3.5 *Speaker talks about favorite parts, questions, comparisons, and connections. Score: 2.5 *Everyone stays focused by talking about the topic we are supposed to be discussing. Score: 2.6	*Listeners pay attention to the speaker and don’t touch or play with friends or objects. Score: 2.1 *Listeners don’t talk or interrupt while someone else is talking. Score: 1.9 *Everyone participates. Score: 2.3

Videotape analysis

In addition to having the students watch the videotapes with me, I reviewed the videotapes on my own. When I watched each of the videos I paid attention to what went well, and what needed to be better. Reviewing the videotapes helped me reflect on what my role should be and what kinds of minilessons my students needed.

I transcribed the February video (our text was “Geraldine Moore, the Poet”) in order to take a look at the participation levels and code the types of support used by the students (text, personal connections, and background knowledge). I found that 3 students dominated the conversation, they each participated between 13 to 15 times. Nine students said something between 2 to 5 times. One student participated once, and 7 students never spoke to the whole class once during the discussion session. I looked at the different types of support used by the students and saw that the majority of the time was spent using text support. By this I mean referring to specific parts of the text or talking about general events in the story. I counted three instances of students using background knowledge to try to connect ideas to this story. Once a student referred to the author Shel Silverstein, stating that the main character of our story did not intentionally create a poem, unlike Silverstein. Another time a student argued for the main character actually creating a poem, since she knew that a poem “doesn’t have to rhyme or anything” (we had studied freeform poetry earlier in the year). Another student brought in her background knowledge by arguing that although the main character did not intentionally create a poem, she still created one, just like the main character in the Sharon Creech book Love That Dog. Only twice did students use personal connections as a way to make their points. Once a student said that unlike the main character, he would have demanded more money to take care of a neighbor’s dog. Another time the same student who said she knew poems didn’t have to rhyme said “Yeah, mostly all our poems didn’t rhyme. My sister, oh my god, she says that a poem has to rhyme”.

For the last video in April I decided to make a T-chart with the categories “What went well?” and “What could be better?” and also focus in and pay attention to 4 students and notice their contributions to the discussions. I decided to focus in on Flor, Jimmy, Nini, and Crystal. I chose Flor because she is usually a quiet, shy student; the type of student who might be intimidated in a whole-class discussion session. I chose Jimmy because I wanted to know more

about his comprehension level. He has struggled with decoding most of his school career: he was retained in second grade because his reading skills were low, and was diagnosed in March 2006 with a reading learning disability. I chose to follow Nini because she's also a shy and quiet student. She almost never speaks during a whole-class discussion, yet I was intrigued with how much she spoke during a half-class discussion about a current events article. I wanted to investigate why there was such a noticeable difference in her rate of participation. I wanted to know more about Crystal because she appeared to be very aware of the guidelines during a discussion: she'd point out when someone ignored a guideline, yet she wouldn't stop herself from doing inappropriate things.

During this April discussion session Flor and Nini were both attentive and in general had appropriate behaviors. Neither of them participated by saying something to the whole class, except when we did a sweep of the class in which each person had to answer the same question. Crystal, on the other hand, had a mixture of appropriate and inappropriate behaviors. Twice she participated by answering a classmate's question and most of the time showed she was listening by looking at the speaker. However, on several occasions she would do things that were counterproductive to the discussion. For example, at the beginning of the session she was trying to let a classmate know he wasn't supposed to have water bottles out. She made gestures to him and finally said "No water bottles!" before turning back to look at the speaker. Later in the session she was banging on her desk and loudly said "SH!" and "Stop fighting!" to a classmate. On these occasions she was likely trying to help the group by pointing out inappropriate behavior in others, yet her behaviors came across as distracting. At times Crystal also had inappropriate behaviors of her own, for example, playing with a pencil, tapping it on her desk, and talking to a classmate while someone else was talking to the group.

Jimmy participated six times during this discussion session. He answered others' questions in a variety of ways, demonstrating he was carefully responding to his classmates. For example, once he said, "I disagree with Gemini and agree with Angela because Byron was mean to people cause he wants to be in control." At a different time there was an exchange with Yoshi, who asked why Byron (a mean character) rescued his own brother from drowning. Jimmy argued that saving your brother's life had nothing to do with how you normally treat your brother. He then used personal support to compare the situation to his own family. Another time he put himself into a character's situation in trying to answer a classmate's question about why

Byron invented the part about garbage trucks picking up frozen Southern people from the streets. Jimmy demonstrated an understanding of the text and how to participate in a discussion, but I also saw room for improvement in his behavior. At times he had side conversations with the person next to him, put his head on the desk, and played with his hat while other people talked.

Open-ended student reflections

My class and I had a period between mid-February and the end of March when we had fewer discussions than I had foreseen at the outset of the project. This was mainly due to having to devote reading instruction time to preparing for and taking the ISAT test. Once the testing was over at the end of March we were able to resume regular literature discussions. During the first week of April we had a final discussion about a novel I read aloud to them (The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963) and a Spanish novel we were in the midst of reading. Instead of having them fill out a discussion exit slip with my questions or use the guideline checklist, I had them write open-ended reflections on the conversations. I told them they could include any comments about the class or themselves they wanted to share, then we talked about their comments. The reason I had them write open-ended reflections was because I wanted to see what they were thinking, and to have a more open-ended forum for them to tell me about what they felt was important.

After the discussion about the The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963, two findings struck me as typical of their responses. First of all, many (11 out of 16 responses) assigned numerical grades to the discussions. They either gave it an overall grade using the 1-4 scoring rubric we were used to using or they wrote down some of the guidelines and graded each one individually. Second, more than half of the responses commented on their own performance, in addition to or instead of the group performance. Up to this point in the process, we'd been assigning grades and commenting on the group's overall performance. I had decided to do this in order to foster an atmosphere of community and to relieve some of the stress the students might feel at grading their own performance. Yet on this reflection 9 out of 16 respondents commented on an aspect of their *own* participation and performance that they needed to improve upon - comments that I found relevant and agreed with. Examples of these comments are: "I think that I could of avoided playing with my red soda drink", "This was a good discussion, but I think more people should talk more (like me). We need to work on paying attention", and "I think that a lot of people (including me) were playing with things."

Self-assessment performance sheet

In April I realized that even though the students had grown in their ability to know the difference between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, they were much more likely to point them out in other people than to correct their own inappropriate behaviors. After watching the April video of the discussion on the The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963, I had the students complete a self-assessment performance sheet instead of a video reflection sheet. The major difference was that this time they had to assess their own individual performance, instead of the class performance. I had them use the 1 to 4 scoring rubric to assess themselves on all the items on the class's guideline checklist. I also added these two questions, "What part of your performance are you happy about and plan to continue?" and "What part of your performance are you unhappy about and plan to improve?" For "What part of your performance are you happy about and plan to continue?", the category with the most comments was about wanting to continue not interrupting other speakers. As a class we had worked for several sessions on how to carry on a conversation without raising hands and without interrupting each other. Under "What part of your performance are you unhappy about and plan to improve?", 8 out of 14 comments had to do with wanting to improve the amount of participation.

Teacher journal

I also collected data in a teacher journal. In the journal I wrote down my questions, concerns, and comments about how the classroom discussions were proceeding. I also included comments on the process of action research, as well as a record of conversations I've had with colleagues and articles I've read. In the journal I also included in-class notes, including participation data that I took while discussions took place.

Findings

What should my role be in helping students create and carry out discussion guidelines?

Setting up the parameters

As I explained in the Review of Literature section of this paper, one of my first roles was to be a decision maker in order to set up the parameters for the structure of our discussions. I decided to have the following components: 1) The students could ask questions, 2) The students could support their answers with text-based, prior knowledge, and personal connections, and 3) We'd try to have a discussion style that was at times natural and at times analytical. I explain

more about the parameters in the “Conclusion” section.

Creating an awareness in students

Aside from my role of deciding the structure for our discussions, I played the role of someone who builds awareness. By this I mean I helped shape how the students thought about the discussion performances. Now that the school year is ending I’m noticing three different phases in the project.

In the first phase, from approximately November to January, I helped my students become aware that there are various expectations for speakers and listeners in a discussion by having them fill out discussion exit slips and video reflection sheets on which I asked “What went well?” and “What could be better”. Then I’d type up their comments, and share the results with all the students, so they could see what others were thinking. The results of this awareness helped create the guideline checklist, which we started using in January.

The next phase of awareness was having the students pay attention to evaluating the class’s performance using the guideline checklist. This phase lasted from January to February, during which we used the guideline checklist on three occasions. When I looked over the results of the April open-ended student reflection sheet I realized many of the students had internalized the 1-4 scoring rubric we used and assigned a grade to the class’s performance (even though I hadn’t asked them to do this). Eleven out of 16 responses had assigned numerical grades to the discussions. Nine of these gave it an overall grade using the 1-4 scoring rubric and two students wrote down some of the guidelines and graded each one individually. The students who gave overall discussion grades to the class were “2”s and “3”s. A “2” meant *some* people followed the guidelines - the discussion almost met the expectation for our class. A “3” meant *almost everyone* followed the guidelines – the discussion met the expectations.

The last phase I see in levels of awareness is noting and improving *one’s own* behavior during a discussion. Once the students were paying attention to what went well and what could be better, and were capable of assessing the class’s performance using a rubric, I saw that they had to get better at monitoring their own individual behavior. Just like Crystal did on several occasions, I noticed that during some discussions students would point out inappropriate behaviors in others. Crystal had comments like “Everyone’s having side conversations” and “No water bottles!” and “Stop fighting!” Yet she wasn’t always monitoring her own inappropriate actions. This was typical of the discrepancy I observed in several other students between what

they knew about expected behaviors and their actual behaviors. I felt I had to get my students to lessen their focus on how the class did as a whole and start focusing on how to improve one's own behavior. In this final phase of the project I had them fill out self-assessment performance sheets after a discussion and publicly state one thing they wanted to improve in themselves.

Changing my level of direct instruction

Over the course of the project I struggled with how much direct instruction I should provide my students. On the one hand I wanted them to discover and adhere to the effective content and interactional guidelines without too much of my intervention. But on the other hand, as their teacher I had more experience with discussions, as well as the influence to shape the sessions. During the first half of the project from November through February I tried to be as hands-off as possible. During this time I decided not to tell my students what my expectations and guidelines were. When I presented feedback to them about the discussions it was an aggregate of their responses, not just mine. I knew I did have to provide some direct instruction with minilessons on aspects of how effective discussions proceed, but I chose to do this during other times of our day. When we had our weekly current events discussions I'd start off the session with a minilesson to raise their awareness for our literature discussions. In the next session of this paper I list some of the minilessons I taught.

There have been benefits to being as hands-off as I was during this time, but there have also been drawbacks. From the first day, I had to bite my tongue not to point out all the aspects that weren't going well, since there were many. After reflecting on how the discussions were progressing, at the beginning of March I realized I had to be more explicit with my students. I needed to be more direct and "teacherly" in pointing out what was going well and what we needed to start or stop doing. I started to teach more minilessons on content-related guidelines, and at times interrupted the discussions to encourage or discourage certain behaviors. For example, during one discussion in April, I decided to stop the session and say, "I'm noticing too many side conversations right now, let's stop doing that and start giving all our attention to the one person who is talking to the whole group".

Which lessons do I need to teach in order for my students to engage in meaningful literature discussions?

Interactional guidelines

The heart of my project was that I didn't impose my expectations of guidelines for the discussions; I wanted the students to notice them for themselves and gradually help me build the criteria we used to evaluate ourselves. Maloch (1999) found that the transition to more student-centered discussion formats could be “problematic and might require the teacher’s support as student develop new skills related to both the ‘how’ (interactional aspect) and ‘what’ (content-related aspect)” (p. 20). She also found that by making the evaluation criteria clear and explicit, “[it] forwarded students’ discussion expertise” (p. 13).

I don't think that at the outset of the project I understood Maloch's recommendation completely, for this reason I was less direct in my feedback than I was at the end of the project. At the beginning of March I realized that even though my class had improved compared to the beginning of November and they were aware of the desirable interactional behaviors, only some students were following through and actually meeting my expectations for how to behave and interact during a discussion. For example, I'd taught minilessons on speakers using a sufficiently loud volume and listeners looking at the speaker, but still, in April too many students were inaudible and not paying attention to the speaker. I think I relied too much on their ability to notice and correct things for themselves. After going through this project I feel Maloch was correct in starting that students need the teacher's support. I realized I needed to have given more immediate feedback to the class and to individuals – both the positive and negative things I saw.

Below is a list of some minilessons I have taught, sometimes multiple times, to my students. I've also listed minilessons that I will teach later in the year or wish I had done earlier.

Interactional norms I had focused on in minilessons (as of 4/24/06)	Minilessons I still needed to do
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Speak with a loud volume. *Listeners' bodies should face the direction of the speaker. *Speakers' eyes should scan the listeners, not just focus on one person in the room (like the teacher). *Participants should not have objects or playthings out during a discussion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Do not address your comments only to the teacher. (again) *Let others speak – don't overparticipate and dominate the conversations. *Don't correct each other's mistakes in a mean way. *Don't leave your chair while a discussion is going on.

<p>*Participants should not have side conversations while someone is speaking to the group.</p> <p>*What to do when two people speak at the same time.</p>	
--	--

Content-related guidelines

I have found that some students are more adept at carrying on a discussion than others. Not just in terms of their ability to follow the established interactional norms, but also in sharing, listening, and furthering their ideas. Some students have surprised me with their ability to carry on a sophisticated discussion. They listened carefully to the details, used support from the text and other sources, and connected their ideas to their classmates' ideas. I estimated that 1/3 of my students can carry on and deepen a conversation with ease. This led me to believe that I needed to increase the support in this area for the majority of my class; 2/3 of my students needed more explicit lessons and guidance in order to perform well on content-related guidelines.

Content-related norms I had focused on in minilessons (as of 4/24/06)

- *Use text references.
- *Use textual, prior knowledge, and personal connections to support what you say.
- *Understand the difference between factual and interpretive questions.
- *Connect your comments to what other people have said by referring to them (piggy-backing).
- *Use comments like "I agree with _____" or "I disagree with _____".
- *Don't attack a person or his/her ideas, but maintain a calm tone and demeanor to promote respectful discussions.
- *Ask for clarification if you don't understand something, for example "What did you mean by that?"

How does student reflection and evaluation affect the conversations?

In order to evaluate the students, I took observational notes and used rubrics developed in conjunction with the class. The students also evaluated their performance using these same

rubrics. Daniels and Bizar (2005) describe this as a best practice, because “students and teachers become partners in evaluation, instead of the teacher dictating a grade” (p. 247).

After each discussion, the students reflected on how they proceeded by completing discussion exit slips, rubrics, or talking about how we did. I also used videotaping as a tool for evaluation. Three times this year I videotaped a session and had the students watch the videos with me and complete a video reflection sheet. I found that playing back a videotape of our own discussions created a new role for students, because it allowed them to have some distance from the sessions. By this I mean that in addition to being participants, the students had to step away from that role and become evaluators. This meant being honest and noticing the aspects that went well, that we wanted to encourage, and the aspects that could be improved. This included being honest even if it meant not putting oneself or the class in the best light. Viewing videotapes helped me notice new things that I had not even been aware of during the actual discussion session. After we viewed the first videotape, 16 out of 42 comments referred to the need for the students to stop playing (with people, with objects) during a session. Also, 11 out of 42 comments were about how the students should ignore the camera and not wave and make faces at it. Amany summed it up when she wrote this after the first videotape viewing, “I think we shouldn’t play so much and pay attention to the discussion more.” After filling out the second video reflection sheet in February, I agreed with my students that our volume had noticeably improved. Under “What could be better?”, 9 out of 24 comments referred to the need for everyone to have a chance to participate instead of a small group of people dominate the conversation. Timmy was honest when he said, “I did well at paying attention and I can do better at talking more.” Another student said, “At the end we stopped taking turns and some people didn’t say anything.” This showed me that I was not the only one concerned with having more contributions from all members of the class.

This year I was fascinated by being able to share the burden of evaluation with my students. I feel they took it seriously and it created a cooperative atmosphere exemplified by the many “We” statements the students used. After viewing the first videotape Nini stated, “We need to fix our silliness”. She didn’t just mention what she had to do, but what the group had to do in order to significantly improve. After this same session Flor wrote, “I think we should look professional. We have to be serious.” This comment is significant to me because she is a very serious and well-behaved student, but she was concerned about the group as a whole, not just her

performance. After viewing the second videotape Rob said he was surprised by how much the class had improved in using an appropriate volume. He wrote, “We talked louder than the last discussion.” Other comments that showed me I was not the only one concerned with the unfolding of the discussion sessions was when students compared current discussions to previous ones. After viewing the February videotape Jessica wrote, “I think this was the best discussion.” She was one of the students who did not contribute anything to the whole group, yet she was still able to feel herself as part of the group and reflect on the group’s past performances.

Last year I felt like it was entirely my responsibility to evaluate the group’s performance, because I was not transparent in my evaluation expectations. This year has been much different, and I found some of this year’s students took the opportunity to point things out to other students. They “called each other out” when they saw something they felt was drastically inappropriate. At one point during the February discussion I videotaped Crystal said, “This is going horribly”. Towards the end of the discussion she repeated herself, saying, “I have something to say, this is going horribly, everyone’s having side conversations!” I agreed with her that there were inappropriate behaviors, yet at this time in February I didn’t want to interrupt a discussion, since I wanted them to experience the productive and unproductive behaviors. But Crystal couldn’t hold herself back, she was visibly bothered by what some of her classmates were doing. Another student, Amany, also commented directly to a classmate, saying “Jimmy, stop talking, I don’t think you guys should be having side conversations, since most of us agreed to use this method (of taking turns).” I didn’t necessarily agree with the tone Amany used with her classmate, but I infer that the intention behind her comment was she wanted to see her classmate correct an unproductive behavior.

Which strategies help reluctant or nonparticipatory students take part in the discussions?

Last year one of the things I noticed was that not everyone regularly spoke during the discussions. This year I wanted to identify students who were reluctant to speak to the group during the sessions and try strategies to increase the rate of participation. At different points in the year I tried the following strategies:

- Asking students to rate the book in terms of how much they liked it using a 1-4 scale. The purpose for doing this was for all students to state their opinions and generate conversation in talking about the rationale for the particular grade. Instead of

- focusing on the objective side of the story, a student could use his/her subjective experience to say something during a discussion session.
- At some point in the discussion having a “sweep” around the room, in which each student had to answer a question quickly. They were typically yes/no or limited-choice answers. The purpose was again, for all students, even those who had not said a word to the class, to have a chance to speak. This had the potential to generate conversation, because other participants could ask those reluctant participants to explain their answers.
 - Having students write questions and comments on post-it notes while they were reading or rereading a text. The purpose of this was for students to come to class with a ready list of topics they wanted to talk about. If students didn’t have any questions/comments while reading, I had them take a few moments before a discussion and generate some.
 - In my role as a facilitator I would occasionally call on individuals in the group, saying something like, “Timmy, what do you think about what Yoshi said?” or “Jessica, we haven’t heard from you, what are some of your questions about the book?”
 - Informally talking to students in order to ask them about their level of participation. I tried to keep a gentle/non-intimidating tone when asking them about why they hadn’t spoken up and encouraged them to speak up in the next conversations. The kids were always receptive to what I had to say and said they’d try to speak up the next time.

After reviewing the participation rate data I have kept in my teacher journal, I have to say that I’m disappointed with how many of my students never or rarely spoke up during a discussion. In the first part of the project I wanted to capture some baseline participation data, in discussion sessions in which I didn’t use the strategies I’ve already mentioned. In a January discussion about a short story called “Charles”, 6 out of 19 students never spoke up. This is approximately 1/3 of my class. In spite of using the strategies to encourage participation, by the end of my project I still had a substantial number of students who rarely or never spoke voluntarily (without me calling on them or during a sweep). After considering the whole year in terms of level of participation, I see that my students fall into three general categories. Three of my students could sometimes participate a lot, maybe even too much. Another 9 students shared their thoughts and questions occasionally, which was appropriate for the sessions. The rest,

another 9 students, rarely or never spoke up voluntarily during the discussions. To me this indicates that the strategies I used weren't enough; I know that next year I have to be more focused on encouraging these reluctant individuals. I think I have to work more closely with them, and incorporate smaller sized discussions and individual coaching. I explain this a little more in my next steps part of the Conclusion.

What is the correlation in reading comprehension as observed in whole-class discussions and that measured by standardized tests?

I focused on English reading comprehension for this project because the standardized reading tests are in English and the data I used in this project was from working with English texts. All of my students except one can read in this language. When my entire class read Spanish texts I used other teaching techniques instead of discussion, because many more of my students needed basic vocabulary support. My students took three Learning First Reading tests this year (in October, in January, and in May) and the Illinois Standards Achievement Test in March. As of June 5th I only have the results for the October and January Learning First tests, therefore I will use data from these two tests to compare four students' scores to how I interpreted their reading comprehension in whole-class discussions. The four students I describe are the same four students whose participation I reviewed in the "Videotape analysis" subsection of the "Tools and Data" portion of this report. I determined comprehension during discussions by the students' participation and comments.

Standard 1C is "Comprehend a broad range of reading materials" on the Learning First Reading test. This is the standard that I will focus on in this report because it is the most relevant one to my project. The test results for my class were reported to me in three tiers: those who answered 70% or more of the questions correctly, those who answered between 50% and 70% of the questions correctly, and those who had answered less than 50% of the questions correctly.

Crystal

On the October administration Crystal answered 70.6% of these questions (used to measure standard 1C) correctly, and 91.7% of these reading comprehension questions on the test given in January. I can't accept that the test alone measures reading comprehension, for several reasons. One of these reasons is that it is a small sample of passages and questions, which makes it difficult to generalize comprehension to a broad variety of reading materials. Another reason is that it is highly improbable in real life to go from understanding approximately 71% of what you

read to approximately 92% of what you read in 3 months, like Crystal's scores suggest. Regardless of my doubts about the test's validity, I interpret the results to mean that according to this test Crystal has good comprehension skills, because she is in the over 70% category. In classroom discussions I have also observed Crystal to have good comprehension. In the sessions I recorded Crystal didn't generate her own questions, but was often willing to answer those of others', even though she sometimes got frustrated when others didn't get to hear her responses. In spite of occasional disruptive interactional behaviors, she demonstrated time and time again to be able to listen to classmate's questions and respond to them with reasonable interpretations. In Crystal's case I see a positive correlation between her comprehension as measured on a standardized test and as observed during literature discussion participation.

Jimmy

I see a negative correlation between Jimmy's comprehension as measured by the two tools. In classroom discussions Jimmy contributed to the conversations by answering classmate's answers and on occasion asking his own questions. His responses demonstrated an understanding of the factual events in a story as well as an understanding of the characters' motivations. In discussions he at times referred to comments his classmates had made and challenged them with his own interpretation. At times he used textual, personal, and prior knowledge support to justify his ideas. Jimmy is a student who continues to have difficulty decoding certain words, but when he has the opportunity to be read to, or read with a partner, or talk about the texts I see he has good comprehension of them. Yet, on a test like the Learning First he didn't score very well on the comprehension standard. On the October administration Jimmy answered approximately 18% of these questions correctly, and approximately 33% of these reading comprehension questions on the test given in January. According to these numbers he scores in the lowest tier (below 50%) in comprehension.

Nini

The correlation between Nini's reading comprehension as measured on a standardized test and in discussions is harder to determine. On the October administration Nini answered 64.7% of the standard 1C questions correctly, and 66.7% of these reading comprehension questions on the test given in January. Both times she was in the Learning First's middle tier, which I interpret to mean according to this test she had average comprehension skills. It would be helpful to see a breakdown of the types of questions Nini had trouble with, but the test results are not given this

way. In class literature discussions Nini almost never participated to ask a question or respond to a classmate's question. When we did a sweep of the room she would answer, but never did she offer her thoughts independently. This is why it's difficult for me to know what she was understanding based solely on discussion participation, and therefore there is no positive nor negative correlation in what I was attempting to measure. I've talked to Nini about her participation in class, and know that at times she felt too intimidated to talk to the whole group when others were talking at once and she didn't want others to talk louder than her. Since February my class agreed to have discussions without anyone raising their hands, but one of the drawbacks of this system is that quiet, less aggressive students like Nini sometimes get overshadowed by louder voices. In order to assess her reading comprehension in class I've relied on other assessments such as individual reading conferences with her, small group work, and read-aloud interactions.

Flor

Flor's case is very similar to Nini's in that she did not participate enough during the literature discussion sessions for me to find a correlation to her standardized test comprehension score. On the October administration of the test Flor answered 76.5% of the 1C questions correctly, and 25% of the 1C questions in January. This means that on the Learning First assessment she went from being in the top tier (above 70%) to the lowest tier (below 50%). This reminds me that the score a particular student receives on a test can vary, depending on a number of factors. The test is supposed to show progress over time in one skill, but in Flor's case it shows that she answered fewer questions correctly during the second administration. I don't think I can take the scores on this type of reading assessment as an accurate measure of what Flor understands. Does she understand approximately 77% of what she reads, or 25% of it? I interpret these results to mean that she answered 77% and 25% of the questions correctly, not understands what she reads 77% and 25% of the time. She is not consistent in answering questions about reading passages, which could be caused by a multitude of factors. These could include not feeling well for the second administration, not understanding key vocabulary, the passages or the questions could have been more convoluted the second time, or perhaps she was less motivated to carefully check her responses. I don't know what caused Flor's scores to drop so drastically, but I do know that if I want to measure her reading comprehension I have to rely on other assessments, for example individual reading conferences, small group reading sessions, and written responses to literature.

As a result of what I've noticed about four of my student's comprehension in the Learning First reading assessment and during literature discussions I've come to believe that I can't rely *exclusively* on standardized test scores *nor* discussion sessions. When it comes to reading comprehension numbers don't tell the whole story, in this situation the standardized test scores and the participation levels. In Crystal's case there was a positive correlation between the reading assessment and the discussion contributions, in Jimmy's case there was a negative correlation (demonstrated better understanding in discussions), and in Nini's and Flor's cases there was no correlation (yet still demonstrated better understanding in standardized testing compared to almost zero contributions in discussions). Does failure to participate in literature discussions mean a student has low comprehension of a story? It depends on the student; sometimes they are not participating because they don't understand parts of the story and sometimes they are not participating due to other reasons. I believe that in many cases, even when a student does not contribute to the class he or she is benefiting from listening to others' ideas.

Instead of trying to pinpoint a student's comprehension ability with one type of activity or assessment, I found that I have to use a variety of tools in order to create a picture of what a student is comprehending as he or she reads. These tools can include literature discussions, written responses to literature, participation during read-alouds, individual reading conferences, guided reading groups and informal observations of the interactions in reading partnerships.

Conclusions

Hybrid model decisions

When I did the literature review in the fall, before my class started having regular literature discussions, I was hopeful my choices for a hybrid model (taking aspects of RDM and literature circles) would work for me and my class. I didn't make it the focus of my research to see how students asking questions, having both textual and personal support, and nurturing objective and subjective experiences affected the discussions. Yet, based on my reflections in my journal and discussion experiences I am confident that the parameters I used to structure the discussions worked in my classroom.

It's been a positive experience for me share control of asking questions with my students. I have found they've asked relevant questions that I would have asked anyway, for example, when Gemini asked "So does Geraldine want to be a poet or doesn't she?" during our discussion

of “Geraldine Moore, the Poet”. Or when Jimmy A. asked “Is Byron good or bad?” during our discussion of The Watsons Go to Birmingham, 1963. I felt less stressed prior to a discussion, knowing that even without a list of my questions my students and I would find a lot to talk about. Of course, there were times when the students took the conversations in a direction I didn’t find overly important to understanding the story, but I accepted it as issues that matter in a fifth-grader’s mind. For example, during the “Geraldine Moore, the Poet” the students stayed grounded in the story and talked for about a minute about whether it was fair for Geraldine to take care of a neighbor’s dog twice a week for a dollar. During this year’s research project I didn’t analyze the types of questions my students asked (because I focused on other aspects), but I know that the students’ questions were a mixture of factual and interpretive ones. I feel they were almost always relevant and focused on understanding parts of the stories.

Allowing my fifth graders to integrate text-based, prior knowledge, and personal connections has also been a good choice for my class. On two of the three occasions in which the students selected two guidelines that we did especially well during a discussion they chose guidelines that referred to our ability to stay on task (like “We talk about the book or topic at hand” and “We talk about favorite parts, questions, comparisons, and connections”). In the “Videotape analysis” subsection in the “Tools and Data” part of this report I describe how the class mainly used text-based support, but also occasionally brought in prior knowledge and personal connections to make their points during the discussion of a short story. I consider this discussion typical of our discussions in terms of the type of support they used. Therefore, by opening up what we could talk about enriched, rather than detracted from, our conversations.

By nurturing both objective and subjective types of experiences during the discussions I believe this year’s discussions have been more enjoyable for more of my students, and I can’t see myself going back to the old way I led discussion sessions last year.

The trade-off

This year has taught me something about the trade-off in negotiating part of my instruction. Instead of setting out the guidelines I thought were important at the first discussion session, I’ve tried to let my students gradually gain awareness and responsibility. The majority of the time it has been frustrating to me, because as a teacher I’m used to naming and correcting inappropriate behavior immediately. I didn’t actually start explicitly sharing my thoughts about the progress in the discussion until approximately March. Would my students have grown as

participants in discussions if I had been more “teacherly” and direct, instead of letting them gradually realize things for themselves? I’m not sure, but I’ve learned that it is necessary to allow a lot of time if students are to have more control in terms of deciding the guidelines and evaluation. As teachers one of the biggest challenges we have is having enough time to fit in all the things we need to teach. Yet, if I want my students to learn and internalize things at their own pace then I have to be comfortable with the process possibly taking longer than I’d like.

Successes

After reflecting on my students’ progress this year I feel there have been some successes. Some students take literature discussions seriously and as a class have a lot to say in the discussions. My fifth graders have an interesting dynamic in terms of maturity and immaturity. They can be mature and independent in their thinking, yet they can also be extremely playful and young and act “inappropriately”. I have seen this dynamic play out in the discussions, and have realized that I have high expectations in terms of the level of maturity and accountability I ask of my students. Overall, though, the students have met my expectation in terms of taking literature discussions seriously. Yes, often they still play with water bottles and have other distracting and inconsiderate behaviors, but the level with which they can handle the content during a serious literature discussions is impressive. A few months ago one of my friends was with me while I was reviewing the February videotape of a discussion session. He was astounded by the amount of conversation my fifth graders were able to carry on. They can answer my questions, and carry on a conversation by asking their own questions and sharing their own comments about the texts. This class has never been accused of holding back (in fact, quite the opposite), and I’m thrilled to have harnessed some of their conversation ability to explore our thinking about books.

Next steps

I know I’ve grown as a result of undertaking this year-long project, and see myself improving upon what I’ve done this year. For my next steps, I envision:

- Starting the discussions earlier in the year, and using this teaching technique more often with other subjects. There are so many different levels to having literature discussions with fifth graders, and I’d like to explore more of them. Next year I’d like to devote more time to analyzing the types of comments students have during a literature discussion, as well as the types of questions they have. I’d like for us to see models of both student and adult discussions. I think I’ll be able to go further in exploring

discussions, and be better prepared for the ISAT preparation interruption.

- Using a variety of discussion sizes. Whole-class discussions can be great, but next year I'd like to explore smaller-sized discussions. This year there were a couple of times when we had half-class discussions, and I saw how in this setting more students could share their contributions. I'd also like to mix in small group discussions, in order for students to have more independence and share their contributions in a less-intimidating setting.
- Having individual discussion conferences like I do with reading and writing workshops. Yes, this could be time-consuming, but I see the benefits of having students have individual sessions with me to discuss their progress and brainstorm solutions to roadblocks/difficulties they have as participants in discussions. Conferences have an atmosphere of intimacy and cooperation that I'd like to explore, in order to see how they impact my students progress in this area.

Policy Recommendations

Based on my yearlong project, I have four policy recommendations. The first is that teachers have more opportunities to have professional development focused on facilitating literature discussions. Like with any other instructional model, teachers benefit from good professional development that is *flexible* and supportive of the teachers' needs. My first experience with facilitating discussions was RDM. Because of that program I gained a foundation, a framework with which to start evaluating discussions. Of course, I've made adaptations in order to have literature discussions that work for me and my class, but this has only been possible as a result of having the RDM foundation. Participating in RDM was a voluntary decision; I decided to commit to out-of-school time sessions. I think it would greatly benefit other teachers to have a chance to learn about facilitating discussion; whether it be at school-wide professional development sessions or sessions outside of regular school hours.

Limiting class size is essential in order for teachers to provide more individualized assessment and instruction in literature discussions. My school limits size to 24 students, and this year my class had 21 students, which is smaller than normal. Having 21 students made it possible to have productive whole-class discussion sessions. The more students there are in a room, the more difficult it is to have active participation and negotiate the guidelines. With my

small class I was more effective in assessing and supporting the students than I would have been with a larger class.

I also recommend that students have the opportunity to demonstrate reading comprehension in a variety of ways. I found that neither standardized test scores nor participation in literature discussions gives a complete, accurate picture of what a student understands. Teachers and school district policy makers have to understand that teachers need to use a variety of assessments to determine what a student comprehends and how best to help the student comprehend more of what he or she reads. I think it's not helpful to rely so heavily on standardized test scores to determine at what level a particular student comprehends what he or she reads.

My last recommendation has to do with providing all teachers access to an excellent self-evaluative tool: video recording equipment. I have benefited from having easy access to video recording equipment at my school. Videotaping discussion sessions has greatly helped my class. Students have had a different perspective to evaluate the class's and their own performance in the discussions. It's also helped me reflect upon and analyze my teaching practices. Many times after teaching a lesson or a unit I've wished I could press the rewind button and do something differently. With a videotape, teachers can literally press the rewind button, see things in a multitude of ways, reflect upon them, then improve instruction in the future.

References

- Carico, K.M. (2001). Negotiating meaning in classroom literature discussions. *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 44, 510 – 518.
- Daniels, H., & Bizar, M. (2005). *Teaching the Best Practice Way: Methods that Matter, K-12*. Portland, Maine: Stenhouse Publishers.
- Flynn, N.K. (2004). Student Discussions in the Social Studies Classroom: An Action Research Study. Teachers Network Leadership Institute.
- Giles, C. (1994). Discussing our questions and questioning our discussions: Growing into literature study. *Language Arts*, 7, 400 – 508.
- Jewell, T.A., & Pratt, D. (1999). Literature discussions in the primary grades: Children's thoughtful discourse about books and what teachers can do to make it happen. *Reading Teacher*, 52, 842 – 850.
- Langer, J.A. (1995). *Envisioning Literature: Literary Understanding and Literature Instruction*. New York: Teachers College.
- Maloch, B. (1999). Shifting to Student-Centered, Collaborative Classrooms: Implementing Student-Led Discussion Groups. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April, 1999.
- Metsala, J.L., & Comeyras, M. (1996). Literature discussions based on student-posed questions. *Reading Teacher*, 50, 262 – 265.
- Routman, R. (2000). *Conversations: Strategies for Teaching, Learning, and Evaluating*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- The Great Books Foundation (1993). *Junior Great Books, Teacher's Edition, Series 5*. Chicago: The Great Books Foundation.