

What the Students Will Say While the Teacher is Away: An Investigation Into Student-Led and Teacher-Led Discussion Within Guided Reading Groups

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ABSTRACT

This article describes a qualitative study of discussion patterns within guided reading groups in a struggling metropolitan school. The study involves analysis of reader response to literature through discussion within teacher-led and student-led contexts. Transcripts of discussions surrounding texts, teacher interviews, and student surveys were collected. In responding to texts, students used reporting of information straight from text, connections, elaborations, evaluations, clarifications, and word play. Findings indicate that students reading on-level independently use more-diverse reader response strategies than do their below-level peers. In a teacher's presence, however, all students showed use of diverse reader response strategies in discussion as a result of teacher scaffolding. In addition, open-ended questions led to more-intricate responses within student-led discussions than did closed-ended questions. Results indicate that there are advantages to both teacher-led and student-led discussion within classrooms, and both can be incorporated within the school day. Examples of response strategies are given and future steps for research are shared.

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Discussion within a classroom can take on many forms. It is teacher led or student led; topic driven or led by participants' streams of consciousness. Discussion gives us a space for the manipulation of thoughts; formulation of new understandings and confrontation with conflicting ideas. In this article, I will share interactions among students in the presence and absence of their teacher within reading groups in a third-grade classroom. I will describe notable differences in discussions within the two contexts and ways a teacher can encourage effective and productive discussions in the classroom even in times of disruption. Students described here come from both the working class and families living below the poverty level in a metropolitan area of the southeastern United States.

In the participating school and in the majority of schools in this district, a scripted literacy program is used to teach within guided reading groups. Within the structure of such programs, teacher talk dominates and student-centered discussion is rare or nonexistent. Also, in many schools, interruptions to instruction occur frequently during guided reading groups as a result of students' needs, phone calls from school officials, intercom announcements, visitors, or classroom emergencies.

In this article, I will demonstrate that while interruptions are destined to occur in the real world of elementary schools, young students can hold engaging and in-depth discussions of literature on their own (even within the context of scripted literacy programs). I will also show that there are specific teacher-supplied prompts that lead to more thoughtful responses than others. Transcripts of discussions that occurred during guided reading groups will be supplied and analyzed for types of responses and questions used.

A DEFINITION OF GUIDED READING GROUPS

The school described in this paper uses a five-block model of reading instruction. One of the blocks is guided reading, which this school district says should involve small groups, be assessment driven, and should speed the development of readers. In these groups, the teacher is supposed to monitor, support, and coach on the side (Jefferson County Public Schools, 2004). In addition, guided reading groups should include "children who use similar reading processes and are able to read similar levels of text with support" (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996, p. 2).

Within these groups, teachers introduce and encourage the use of various reading strategies, leading children toward independent use of those strategies. Each child's reading skills are assessed at different points in the school year, and students are placed within guided reading groups based on their reading abilities. When in these groups, children read books that are on their instructional levels. They read the whole text in the group and receive scaffolded instruction

from a teacher. Teachers give introductions to the books in order to help students in their use of reading strategies to understand the text. The placement of children in groups is fluid. When a child's ability improves or stagnates, he will be moved or placed in a reading group that will match that student's instructional needs. A powerful way for students and teachers to develop understandings of the texts within these groups is through discussion about literature.

THE VALUE OF DISCUSSION

Many researchers have supported the value of and need for discussion in the classroom. Discussion can lead to the construction of new understandings through “the improvement of knowledge, understanding, and/or judgment” (Bridges, 1988, p.14). Sometimes a student's ideas about a text are challenged by conflicting viewpoints or information. In such instances ideas may be altered, transformed, or influenced as a result of the interaction. Such episodes have been described as instances of intellectual unrest (Cambourne, 2002) or sociocognitive conflict (Almasi, 1995; Almasi & Gambrell, 1994), and can manifest in conflicts with self, others, or with text. When they occur in disagreements with discussion group members (Bond, 2001) they can lead to the sharing of background knowledge and opinions. Discussion participants can draw on background knowledge for assistance (Cambourne) in conflict resolution and creation of a more comprehensive and cohesive interpretation of text. Such discussion around a text can lead participants to collaboratively formed interpretations of that text (Almasi; Almasi, McKeown, & Beck, 1996) — creating something completely novel through their “distributed cognition” (Almasi, et al, 2004).

Responding to literature through discussion is a way for students to develop ownership of a task and a text. Research (Almasi, et al., 2004) suggests a positive relationship between the amount of time students spend participating in peer discussion and how much they value reading. Having discussions and conflicts about a piece of literature can help us to better understand ourselves as well (Ballenger, 1999; Cazden, 1988). Personal connections can be made to a text, which help readers in understanding their own worlds and the world outside of their spheres (Sipe, 1999; Spiegel, 1998).

Higher-level thinking is encouraged in the process of responding to literature, and in so doing students are likely to gain an appreciation for different perspectives (Spiegel, 1998). Readers can accept, embrace, or resist a text; they can make connections to their own lives and to the world around them (Sipe, 1999). Through dialogic responses, students exhibit ownership and higher-level understandings. Teachers enable cognitive growth and promote student feelings of knowledge ownership through use and encouragement of discussion in the classroom. Within such discussion, children can respond to text in a variety of

ways. In this paper, I look at students' use of connections, elaborations, evaluations, clarifications, and reporting when responding to literature.

Connections can involve a student in acknowledging a relationship between the text and something else. These are the most-basic of links between text and the self, text and another text or artifact, or text and the world (Keene & Zimmerman, 1997). In making connections, students can view new ideas in terms of set beliefs (Langer, 1994; Wilhelm, 1997). In addition, connections include comparisons and contrasts. Connections often lead readers to (a) look at new ideas in terms of their already set beliefs or (b) use new ideas to reconsider those set beliefs (Langer, 1997).

If a child reads Gail Gibbons' book, *Weather Words and What They Mean* (1992), and says that the book reminds her of a storm that happened at her house over the weekend, she is making a connection. This demonstrates a basic link between something in the book and that child's life.

Elaborations would take that a step further. When a student is able to make an initial connection and then broaden that connection through understandings of the text or lived experiences, she makes what I call here an elaboration. These can be based on connections or they can be ideas that the student comes up with in order to fill gaps in a story (Wilhelm, 1997). In these instances a reader furthers ideas from the text through her own knowledge and ideas, rethinking story elements into the grand scheme of the story or in terms of a real-life situation (Langer, 1994; Wilhelm). Children may evoke this type of response by placing themselves in the story through a desire to be a part of the plot (Wollman-Bonilla & Werchadlo, 1999). A reader may serve as the agent of characters in what Sipe (1998, p. 377; 2002, p. 476) calls "performative responses" in which students act out some rendition of the text. Examples of this might involve changes in voicing to match a character's traits, reenacting parts of the story or imagined next steps, or entering into the story in such a way that emotions are expressed through screaming, laughter, or crying (Wilhelm).

An elaboration can involve the reader in a "What if...?" journey, in which the reader's imagination tries to make up alternative endings or avenues for the characters of a story. If a student was reading *Weather Words and What They Mean* and responded to it by creating a "what if" statement or filling in a gap, that would be an elaboration. For example a student might say, "What if it starts storming like that and you forgot to bring an umbrella?" That takes the story a step further, as the child plans or imagines a scenario based upon the book.

Evaluations involve a student making some sort of judgment about the text, themselves as a reader, characters, another student's interpretation, etc. If a child was also reading Gibbons' book and saw a picture that he couldn't believe, he might say, "That can't really happen!" This shows a child evaluat-

ing the reality of the book's contents. Evaluations question the validity of ideas from the author, the reader, or from within the text itself (Wilhelm, 1997). When evaluating, a reader appraises, argues, defends, or supports an aspect of the reading experience. Sometimes students evaluate a character or story element through evaluation of a picture. In other instances, students evaluate what they consider violations to reality (Galda & Beach, 2001).

Another type of response that a child might make to a text is *clarification*. Clarifications occur when readers take opportunities during discussion to think aloud, talk through, or express themselves in order to better understand what they are reading. This may manifest in students' own revisions of interpretations (Wilhelm, 1997) of text. In clarifying, a student tries to figure something out within the book or an idea sparked by the book. A student might ask a question of other participants in a group to come to new understandings: "Do you think these kinds of storms happen here?" This is a simple question seeking clarification on the topic introduced by Gibbons.

Finally, a *report* is a response that requires someone to tell exactly what comes from the text. It is what I consider the most basic response to literature a child can make. A report from Gibbons' book might involve a student telling others what they've read. While this is an important skill, it does not require the level of sophisticated analysis that the other previously mentioned response strategies use.

Each of the described responses to literature is an important way for readers to grapple with new information found in text. These strategies and responses do not happen without experience within discussion. Students need to be involved in dialogue about text in order to play with new ideas and to come to new understandings.

ENCOURAGING DISCUSSION

Teachers can encourage involvement in literature through the use of open-ended questions, which often lead to discussion of the text. Studies have shown that students are more likely to be engaged during discussion when they have opportunities to (a) respond to one another's interpretations, (b) challenge the author's style, (c) share opinions about text, and (d) question the meaning of a text (Almasi et al., 1996). These types of opportunities exist more within classrooms that foster acceptance of differences, in which students know that their responses are built upon rather than evaluated or dismissed (Almasi, 1995) by teachers. Teachers can help to create such classrooms by promoting "collaborative work and the sharing of ideas" (McIntyre, Kyle, & Moore, 2006, p. 60).

Many variables effect students' dialogic responses to literature. Galda and Beach (2001) found that differences in response to literature are often paired with sociocultural differences such as ethnicity, language differences, and differ-

ences in cultural norms. Additional variables may include the cultural context of the class, qualities of the individual reader, characteristics of a text or of the teacher or classroom (Sipe, 2002). For example, teachers who encourage collaboration will support students in sharing more than teachers who frown upon such practices. Some texts lend themselves to interpretation more than others, while some that are chosen may not be appropriate for the skill level of students. In addition, a diverse group of students could energetically discuss issues of race, fairness, and justice OR they could ignore such issues and miss golden opportunities for rich discussion filled with cognitive conflicts and new understandings. These opportunities could occur within teacher-led and student-led discussions.

TYPES OF DISCUSSIONS

Research supports the value of both teacher-led discussions, sometimes called book clubs (Raphael & McMahon, 1994), grand conversations (Eeds & Wells, 1989), or instructional conversations (Goldenberg, 1993; McIntyre et al., 2006; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) as well as the value of student-led discussions about literature often called literature circles (Almasi, 1995; Almasi & Gambrell, 1994; Almasi, et al., 1996; Daniels, 2002; Gambrell & Almasi, 1996; Knoeller, 1994; Leal, 1993). In both formats, dialogue can be used to push understandings further than basic comprehension.

Some advantages to students discussing a text in the presence of a teacher include scaffolding from the more-experienced teacher, guidance into themes that may not have been covered without the teacher, and the prospect of staying on topic. Teachers can also bring conversation back to a text when they see that a topic is not relevant (Ballenger, 1999) and can scaffold students' understandings and discussion strategies. However, a danger in teacher-led discussions is that students may develop a view of the teacher as the "interpretive authority" (Almasi, 1995, p. 334). This could lead to less experimentation and less thoughtful discussion on the part of the student and more reliance on the teacher for what is seen as the correct interpretation of a text. In addition, if students feel that their opinions or answers are being judged by a teacher, they can quickly become disengaged in a discussion. In order to prevent this, teachers must encourage a free exchange of ideas (Almasi et al., 1996) within a classroom culture of acceptance.

A teacher prompt can lend structure to an activity within a teacher-led group or a loosely defined student-led group. The way a teacher structures an activity through physical and verbal cues affects student discourse (Knoeller, 1994). Nystrand describes such dialogic instruction as "eliciting, sustaining, and extending student-initiated contributions" (as cited in Abt-Perkins & Gomez, 1993, p. 11). This instructional device is the challenge of effective teacher-led discussion.

The term *instructional conversation* describes a version of student and teacher dialogue within small groups involving both a clear academic goal, a predominance of student rather than teacher talk (Goldenberg, 1993), and sophisticated topics (McIntyre & Hulan, 2008). Within instructional conversations, the teacher listens carefully to students' responses to insure understanding; assists students throughout the discussion through questioning, restating, encouraging, and other devices; scaffolds understandings while guiding discussion to include students' views; and guides students toward a product that exhibits understanding (Dalton, 1998, p.26). While discussions in this format can be very effective, other forms of discussion are also useful.

A student-led discussion has the potential to offer students a safe place and a sense of freedom (Vygotsky, 1978) for many students to work with new ideas. In these settings, students lead the agenda (Almasi, 1995). They can shift and shape their viewpoints, working with ideas without the fear of judgment by a teacher (Almasi et al., 1996; Leal, 1993). They also have more opportunities to talk (Knoeller, 1994). Because answers do not need to be polished in such a setting, what Leal calls "exploratory talk" (p. 117), occurs. This involves the exploration of viewpoints and can lead to or coincide with cognitive conflicts within a group of peers. Such conflicts may lead to deeper understandings of an issue and increased individual growth and development (Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000; Leal).

Almasi and Gambrell (1994) found in their observations of teacher- and student-led discussions that student discourse in peer-led discussions was significantly more complex than in the teacher-led discussions. When teachers were present, responses tended to serve as artifacts for assessment. Also, conflicts with text were resolved through teacher interjections, leading to a view that the teacher was the source of all answers — as opposed to being one of many such sources. In student-led discussions, rather, understandings were created collaboratively, and students resolved conflicts through interaction and dialogue. In a longitudinal study of students in kindergarten through third grade, Almasi and colleagues (2004) found that students who were involved in peer discussion valued reading more, were more accepting of other students, had discussions which were more focused on text, offered more linguistically complex responses, and used more egalitarian patterns of discourse than control group peers who did not take part in peer discussions. Thus, in some ways, student-led discussion must be included in the larger goal of creating conversation around text in elementary classrooms.

Indeed, in a study of fourth-grade students, researchers found that students in peer-led discussions were more prolific in identifying and resolving episodes of conflict within literature than those in teacher-led discussions. However, students in teacher-led groups were better at identifying the person or character experiencing the conflict in a text (Almasi, 1995; Almasi & Gambrell, 1994). This result indicates that both student-led and teacher-led discussions are valu-

able pedagogical practices. Both teacher- and student-led discussions offer value to the readers and participants, and both can be supported within the same classroom. They need not be mutually exclusive. In addition, it is critical that teachers prepare students to engage in purposeful discussions through modeling and explicit instruction of such concepts as linking topics and managing the group process (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001).

In the investigation described in this article, I looked carefully at times during guided reading when the teacher left the group because in the real world, interruptions and emergencies are inevitable during what many call uninterrupted guided reading. I sought to discover how students use this time to further their own discussions and if teachers can guide such conversations even in the heat of the moment (a child is bleeding, the principal is on the phone, etc.). I also looked at differences in response strategies used by students of different reading proficiency levels.

When a teacher leaves a guided reading group, she can leave students to discuss any topic of their choosing, she can leave students with a concrete closed-ended question to answer, or she can leave students with open-ended tasks for completion in her absence. My goal was to find out how students in one third-grade classroom responded to the absence of the teacher during guided reading groups:

1. Do students continue to discuss the text? If so, what types of prompts lead to this end and which do not?
2. What types of discussions occur while the teacher is gone and while the teacher is present?
3. What types of responses occur in the different ability groups in the absence and presence of the teacher?

METHODS

In this qualitative observational study I observed three reading groups in a third-grade classroom. One was on grade level, another was 1 year below grade level, and the third was 2 years below grade level. I took field notes, recorded and transcribed discussion during guided reading groups, collected student surveys, and took notes on the teacher's responses to questions that I had concerning her reading instruction and groups. Transcripts of guided reading groups were coded for prominent themes using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2002)

Participants

This observational study took place in one third-grade classroom of 24 children in an elementary school in a metropolitan southeastern city during the spring of 2007. The population of the school was 400 students, with 84% of students

receiving free or reduced-price lunch. The teacher of this particular classroom was in her second year of teaching and had been selected to participate in the study by the principal of the school due to her confidence and the decision that she was someone who wouldn't be rattled by my presence. She is Caucasian and in her mid-20s.

Her classroom was very structured, and expectations of students were high. The classroom was always full of energy and the noises of learning, with an active group of students and supplemental teachers to aide in instruction of small groups. This class included 12 girls and 11 boys and was an "inclusion classroom," meaning that students with various disabilities were members of the class and received services within the classroom. There was a high transience rate within the school, and state-mandated test scores had been below expectations for several years. The school did not make annual yearly progress (AYP), an accountability measure of the No Child Left Behind Act, during the year preceding the study.

This school is in a district that mandates the use of a prescriptive reading series, the Rigby Literacy K–3 series, in the majority of its elementary schools. In using this, teachers can follow scripted lessons during guided reading groups. The scripts include instructions for steps such as (a) setting the scene, (b) reading the text, (c) returning to the text, and (d) responding to the text. The teacher in this classroom followed the pattern of lessons for the books but did not always follow the script verbatim. In this series, books are leveled by difficulty and are crafted to focus on specific strategy use. Some of these books resemble authentic literature with specially selected verbiage for literacy development at various stages. Guided reading groups were formed based on reading ability, and students read books that were appropriately leveled for their stage of literacy development.

Within this third-grade classroom, three reading groups were observed for 10 weeks: the Book Blasters, the Word Wizards, and the Paperback Posse. Based on the Developmental Reading Assessment (Beaver, 2001), Word Wizards read 2 years below third-grade level, Book Blasters read 1 year below third-grade level, and Paperback Posse read on grade level. An additional group reading on kindergarten level was pulled from the classroom for intense reading instruction with an ECE (exceptional child education, often referred to as special education) teacher, and did not receive specific reading instruction from the classroom teacher.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred on several levels to obtain a full and rich picture of the guided reading experiences in the classroom. During guided reading groups, I took field notes (Patton, 2002) while simultaneously audio recording the sessions. Field notes described the classroom and the small guided reading groups. In addition to field notes, the audio recordings were transcribed. These

recordings captured most conversation of speakers within the reading groups. Field notes and transcripts were viewed together to more accurately reflect the context and occurrences in the classroom. Data were collected during guided reading groups for a period of 8 weeks, culminating in a total of ten 1.5-hour observations.

Student Surveys

In addition to the observations, field notes, and audio recordings, I surveyed students to assess their interests and ideas about how schools and teachers could help them become better readers and writers. I administered this to determine whether students craved discussion with their peers or any other activities to encourage literacy development. The survey questions were read aloud by a paraprofessional who was often in the classroom. Responses were used in concert with other data sources to triangulate an understanding of this classroom and the students.

Teacher Perspective

Following completion of all observations, I held an informal discussion with the participating teacher. I addressed three main topics: (a) questions or discrepancies I had from the data, (b) questions concerning Rigby Literacy K–3, and (c) questions concerning implementation of reading groups, questioning styles, etc. These responses provided a more-complete picture of the classroom, student responses to text, and interactions within the guided reading group.

I was able to enrich my view of the classroom by triangulating the data of compiled observational records from field notes and transcriptions with student surveys and a teacher interview. The compilation of systematic observations, field notes, and audio recordings served as etic sources of data, reflecting the perspective of the researcher. In order to balance this, the student surveys and conversation with the teacher were included as emic data sources, or sources reflecting the perspective of those being observed (Patton, 2002).

DATA ANALYSIS

After reading through transcripts several times, initial codes were assigned using the constant comparative method (Patton, 2002; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The initial transcript analysis was intended to help me identify types of student and teacher talk. This initial coding involved the following patterns: (a) teacher-generated student responses, (b) interruptions to reading group, (c) teacher setting a goal for reading, (d) teacher interruptions to student remarks, (e) student-generated responses limited to one turn, and (f) student discussions which involved more than one dialogic turn by students only.

After reading through the transcripts several times, the response patterns of (a) reports, (b) connections, (c) elaborations, (d) evaluations, (e) clarifica-

tions, (f) procedural and (g) word work were assigned to each unit of analysis. Procedural and word work were rarely exhibited, and so were not included in the larger analysis. Definitions and examples of each of the other response types are given in Table 1 on the following pages.

Analysis was based upon the smallest meaningful units of response and coded according to type of response used. Multiple codes were initially allowed, and were later culled to fit the most-appropriate code for each student statement. The boundaries set for each unit of analysis were based on changes in speaker, stance, type of response given, or interpretive point. For example, in the following statement a child's response is broken down into two units of analysis based upon two distinct response types.

Student 10: [I'd like that to happen] [because if they came after me I'd just step on them]. Student makes movement as if stepping on something.

(Field notes, 3-7)

The first unit [I'd like that to happen] was coded as an evaluation of the story world. The second unit [because if they came after me I'd just step on them] was coded as an elaboration on the text through acting something out.

I coded the total of 653 responses or units. Twenty percent of those units were also coded by a trained assistant to attain reliability and to strengthen the validity or trustworthiness of the results. Interrater reliability was 94% on codes of student responses, where 94% of our codes on report, connections, elaborations, evaluations, and clarifications matched. After analysis of codes, I added "Clarification through discussion of Word Play" to describe times when students were observed playing with or phonetically deciphering words in a story through discussion. In one instance, for example, the teacher showed a child an author's name on the cover of a book that closely resembled the child's first name. He said, "That's weird," and then he and two other boys spent several minutes discussing how they would need to change the author's name to get the student's name. They were very excited at the discovery and were actively engaged in their own spelling/phonics exploration. (Field notes, 3-28).

Student Surveys

Items included in the student surveys are shared in Table 2. Frequency data are included in the table as well. Students put checks next to the items they felt would help them become better readers and had the option to write in their own ideas.

Teacher Perspective

Questions for the teacher interview were crafted after data collection. Notes from the teacher interview were used to create a more-comprehensive view of

Table 1.1 Reader Response Strategy Definitions and Examples

Strategy	Definition Within Study	Examples from Transcripts
Report	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No spoken extension of thought Responses come straight from text 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Student 1: And look at all the stuff that she has to do. She has to wash the baby, make the bed, clean the sheets, make the fire... (Field notes, 3-14)
Connection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Links between text and something else Compare and contrast New ideas in terms of held understandings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While reading <i>The Emperor's New Clothes</i>, students and the teacher were commenting on two women who were trying to persuade the king to pay them for sewing services. Student 1: I have a connection. They're trying to persuade him just like we try to persuade people in our letters. (Field notes, 3-6) The group was doing a picture walk of a book on insects. Student 12: This color is the color of the rock we studied. Student 7: Pink granite! (Field notes, 3-6)
Elaboration	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Extensions of connections Fill in the gaps Rethink story elements Acting out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher: How would you feel if your mom made a time machine? Student 17: I wouldn't feel very good. [Connection] Teacher: You wouldn't? How come? Student 17: What if you set in it and it broke down? [Elaboration—What if?] Teacher: If it broke down and you couldn't get back? That would be scary. How would you like it if your mom made a time machine? Student 18: I wouldn't like it because it would be scary. [Elaboration] Student 2: I'd like it because I could go to the future or I could go back to the dinosaurs. [Elaboration] (Field notes, 2-21)

Table 1.2 Reader Response Strategy Definitions and Examples

Strategy	Definition Within Study	Examples from Transcripts
Evaluation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of the author, reader, character, story world, violations to reality, pictures, others' interpretations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher: Why didn't they want to fight? Student: They're sad about something. [Evaluation of characters] Teacher: What might have happened between the Quorks and Pods? Student 8: Because you see right here there aren't a lot of those guys, so I'm guessing that the Quorks killed a lot of their family members and they're probably really mad or sad. [Elaboration] Student 6: That's kind depressing. [Evaluation-others' interpretation] (Field notes, 3-7) • Student 12: Ms. S, I thought your heart looked like a heart. [Evaluation-violation of reality] (Field notes, 3-13)
Clarification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through discussion • In terms of a personal dilemma • Questioning of others • Used to understand details, check predictions, compare with knowledge 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student 10: It's like my prediction was correct. The game came out to the world. [Clarification to check predictions] (Field notes, 3-7) • Teacher: What's the setting? Student 1: It was probably years ago because you wouldn't see people riding donkeys around now. [Clarification using comparison to understand the setting] (Field notes, 3-6)

the classroom and teachers' intentions and practices. Themes from the interview helped me to understand student responses to literature within guided reading groups in this classroom.

RESULTS

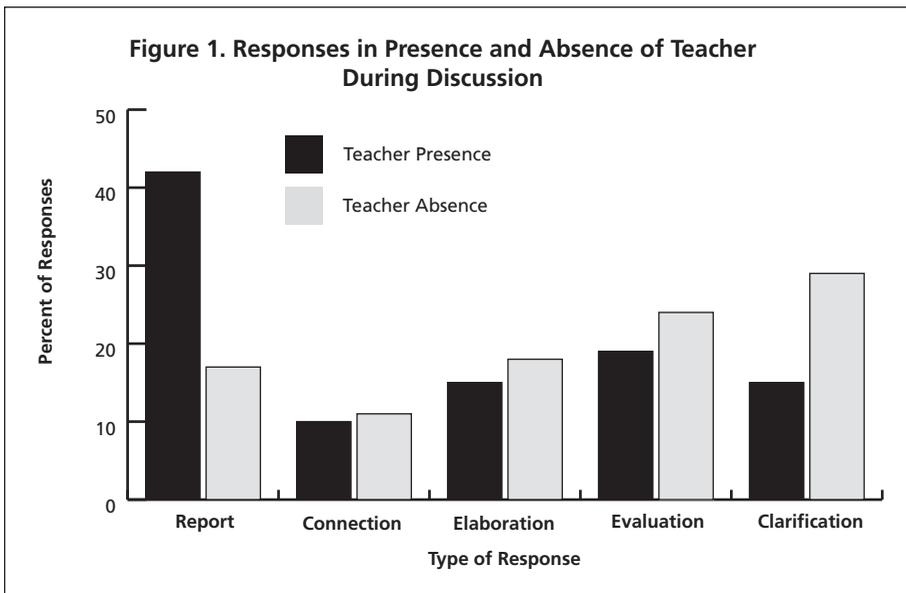
In total, 653 student responses to text were coded based on the reader response strategy exhibited. Of those responses, 561 occurred in the presence of the teacher, while 92 occurred in her absence. Because of the discrepancy between the numbers of responses in the two conditions, I used percentages to compare response strategies used in reading groups. I found that when the teacher was gone, often students continued to discuss the text. In addition, more cognitively demanding responses resulted from the teacher's open-ended prompts than from close-ended prompts.

Reader Response Strategies

The broad categories of reader response—connections, elaborations, evaluations, and clarifications—were based on an initial literature review on reader response and analysis of common responses from students in this study. An additional response type, reports, was added based upon analysis of the transcripts. Reports were statements that appeared to take very little thought and produced no extension of the text; answers or statements came directly from the texts with no need for analysis or further interpretation. The code procedural was used for statements that involved such things as students finding their places in a text or reading sections of the text aloud. These were rare from students so are not included in analysis. Definitions and examples of reports, connections, elaborations, evaluations, and clarifications are given in Table 1.

Teacher presence vs. absence in all guided reading groups

The percentages of response strategies used in both the presence and absence of the teacher are shown in Figure 1. Of all responses produced while the teacher was present, 42% were reports, 10% were connections, 15% were elaborations, 19% were evaluations, and 15% were clarifications. This data indicates a dominance of reporting information straight from the text while the teacher was present over any other response strategy. When the teacher was absent, however, 17% of responses were reports, 11% connections, 18% elaborations, 24% evaluations, and 29% clarifications. This result demonstrates the low-level questioning and responses indicative of the evaluative teacher-led guided reading group, while students were more prone to experiment and use more-complex response strategies in her absence. In addition, the high percentage of clarifications in the absence of the teacher may show students' willingness to help one another to understand text.



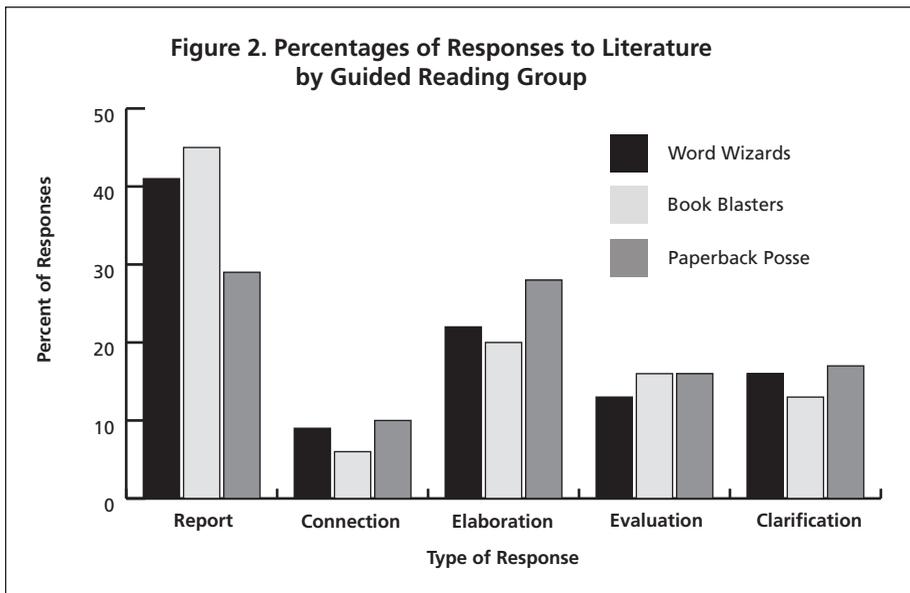
Response strategies used by guided reading groups in all settings

When we look at each guided reading group and the total of their response types when they were with the teacher and on their own, we see that most responses were reports, the simplest type (41% Word Wizards; 45% Book Blasters; 29% Paperback Posse). The next most-frequently used response was elaboration (22% Word Wizards; 20% Book Blasters; 28% Paperback Posse). All three groups used evaluation (13% Word Wizards; 16% Book Blasters; 16% Paperback Posse) and clarification (16% Word Wizards; 13% Book Blasters; 17% Paperback Posse) at similar frequencies. Connections were the least utilized strategy among all three groups (9% Word Wizards; 6% Book Blasters; 10% Paperback Posse). All three of the reading groups used each response strategy, as displayed in Figure 2.

Responses by student-led groups

Figure 3 shows the response strategies that students used within their guided reading groups in the absence of the teacher. All three groups used reporting, elaborations, and clarifications within their responses. In fact, Word Wizards (2 years below grade level) used elaborations in 45% of their responses and Book Blasters (1 year below grade level) used clarifications in 48% of their responses. These percentages demonstrate a possible overreliance on one strategy by each of the below grade-level reading groups.

While the two below grade-level groups each relied predominantly on one particular response type, each group also completely neglected one of the response types. While the teacher was gone, Word Wizards failed to use evalu-



ations and Book Blasters did not use connections. The only group that used all of the response strategies as defined in this study was Paperback Posse, the group reading on grade level.

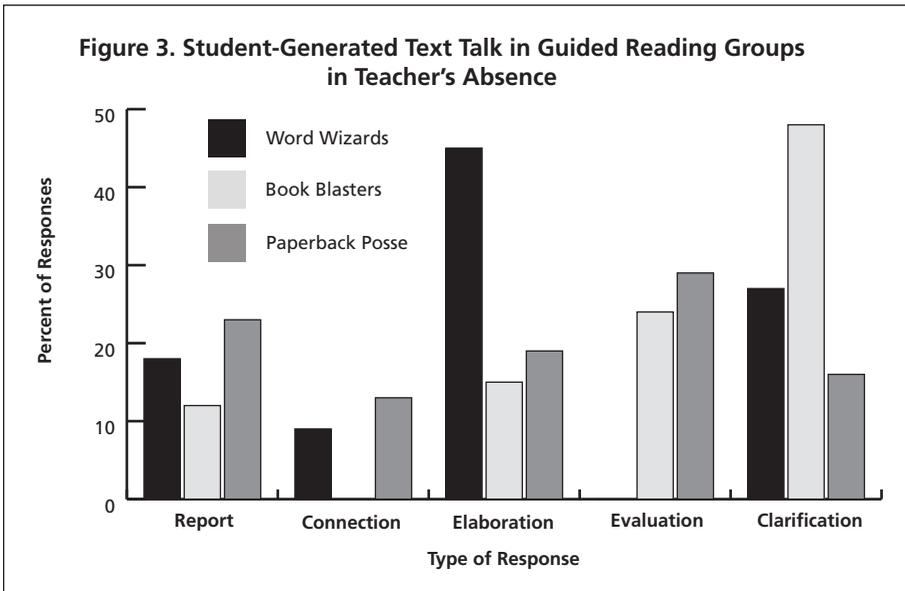
Another look at Figure 2 shows that Word Wizards used evaluations and the Book Blasters used connections when they were in a group with a teacher. While there was an overreliance on reporting prompts from the teacher, there was also scaffolding which was enabling students to use strategies (connections and evaluations) they were not yet performing on their own.

Another interesting phenomenon occurred on several occasions when the teacher left and then reentered a guided reading group. Students sometimes became very engaged in discussion about a text in the teacher's absence, as exhibited by the transcript in Appendix A. Students used a wide range of response types and continued the discussion for a long period of time. They were comparing experiences with one another and with the book, acting things out from the story, *Headfirst Into the Oatmeal* (Taylor, 2000), and analyzing characters' actions. However, when the teacher reentered the discussion the following transaction took place.

Teacher: OK, what are you thinking? Catch me up.

Student: Um... because the husband's saying that the wife's not doing anything and he's complaining and everything. [Reporting]

(Field Notes 3-14)



This may have been a knee-jerk reaction by the student, accustomed to answering basic text-based questions from a teacher. It may have been the answer the student thought the teacher wanted to hear. For some reason, the students' newly developed understandings about the text were not shared with the teacher.

Questioning

In the last example, the teacher reentered a very engaged group and asked an open-ended question with an uninspiring result. The teacher had left the group with an open-ended task: "Let's see what happens." While the resulting discussion was rich, when the teacher returned with an open-ended question the students returned to the role of receiver rather than creator of knowledge — regurgitating information straight from the text rather than sharing the intricate understandings they had just discussed with one another.

Questions can be used to assess understandings of text, to further thinking, or to clarify misunderstandings. In the following excerpt a student used a question to try to clarify her understanding.

Student: How come our legs are so big if we have little bitty bones like that right there? [Clarification through questioning]

(Field Notes, 3-13)

Unfortunately this question went unacknowledged by the teacher or the student's peers. Often, time constraints or the teacher's proximity to the child can lead to missed opportunities for teachable moments. However, this does demonstrate student-driven inquiry that could lead to further understandings.

The teacher sometimes used questions to give students a task or purpose for reading when she left the guided reading group. When she left a group with a close-ended question or task, as demonstrated in the following scenario, students were easily distracted from the text and onto other subjects.

Teacher: On page 9, he goes down to the basement and there are these big letters. Why are they big like that? What's the word you've learned that means sound words like crash, boom? Go to the poetry board and tell me when I get back.

The teacher went to the phone as the students headed to the poetry board. They found their answer and returned to the meeting space chanting onomatopoeia.

Quickly the conversation turned to candy and one student's yoyo. The students started chanting the months of the year. They were completely off-task without further direction. When the teacher returned, she asked for the word, the students all said *onomatopoeia*, and the group continued working through the book.

(Field notes, 3-14)

No further understanding of the story's meaning emerged when the teacher was gone in the previous scene. This may be due to the limited scope of the teacher's direction. Once students had the answer, they had no other direction or further explicitly directed purpose for the text. While students needed to learn the meaning of onomatopoeia, this exchange did not further discussion nor the creation of ideas.

In contrast, when the teacher left students with open-ended tasks much more thoughtful responses were produced. The teacher didn't always hear them, but students were more engaged in thoughtful discussion. For example, in the following scene the teacher left the group with this prompt so that she could deal with some misbehavior in the classroom.

Teacher: Read the first two pages and see what you think is gonna happen"

(Field notes, 3-7).

This directive led to the following discussion:

Student 8: I think they're gonna play a computer game.
[Clarification — make prediction]

Student 19: I think they're gonna fight them.
[Clarification — make prediction]

Student 7: Why don't you read to find out? [Procedural]
(Field Notes 3-7)

This example demonstrates the students' ability to follow the directions of the teachers with their own ideas and then to self-regulate. Student 7 took on the teacher's role and actually used a direction the teacher often used to get students reading for a purpose: "Why don't you read to find out?"

Student Surveys

A survey was read aloud to students in the classroom to find out what students thought would help them become better readers. Survey questions are shared in Table 2. Students were asked to mark selections that would help them to become better readers. They were also given space to add their own ideas.

Out of 24 respondents, 20 said their teacher should call on them more to read to the class; 19 said they should be allowed to read a variety of texts

**Table 2. Student Survey Results in Response to Question:
Which of These Things Would Help You to Become a Better Reader?**

Statement	Number Who Chose Option
My teacher could call on me more to read to the class.	20
Let me read comic books, newspapers, and other kinds of texts.	19
My school could give me more free reading time to read what I want.	19
My class could play more reading games.	19
My teacher could explain parts of stories that I don't understand.	17
My teacher could teach me how to pick a book that's JUST RIGHT for me.	17
My teacher could give me more time to write about what I've read.	16
My teacher could explain new words to me.	15
My teacher could give me more spelling words.	12
We could talk about what happens in stories more.	12
My teacher could read out loud to the class more.	10
My teacher could give me more worksheets.	9
Let me spend more time in reading groups.	7

N = 24

including comic books and newspapers. Nineteen students also said that playing more reading games would make them better readers. More time to read self-selected material was also favored by 19 students. Of 24 students, only 12 thought that talking more about what happens in stories would make them better readers.

The responses that were selected most by this third-grade class were shared with the teacher. It is unclear whether these were used to affect instruction. From this survey data we can see that students want to read more-diverse materials. While their teacher said that they liked the Rigby books (in interview that follows), none of the students wrote into the survey that they wanted to read more Rigby books. The ability to select reading material, ample time to read, games that hone reading skills, and opportunities to practice and show those skills through reading aloud to the class are what these students thought would make them better readers.

Teacher Perspective

Following all observations, I had an informal conversation with the teacher of this classroom. She explained that as a student teacher, she had used a basal series and whole-group reading instruction. She expressed a preference for teaching with small guided reading groups because she could differentiate instruction for the varied ability levels in her class. She added that the lessons supplied in the teachers' manual are good, and that it makes it "easy to plan. There's way more than you can do" (personal interview, April, 2007). However, she added that there is too little time allowed to work with her small groups: The most time she could spend with any group was 30 minutes, and she didn't feel that was sufficient.

The focus of her lessons differed from lower- to higher-leveled groups. She explained that she asks the lower groups about such things as setting and conflict, while the higher-leveled readers are asked hypothetical questions such as "What would be different if he'd tried something different?"

This teacher said that her students "love the Rigby books," adding that they liked the fiction better than nonfiction. However, when I observed these groups I saw great enthusiasm for the nonfiction texts — specifically those about the human body and animals (Field notes, April, 2007).

After some discussion, I decided to share some of the patterns that had surfaced from the data. When presented with Figure 3, the teacher expressed shock. She was happy that students were saying anything about the texts in her absence and expressed interest in planning for more opportunities for response to literature within her classroom.

DISCUSSION

What I have found through these observations, analyses of student discourse, and through my own practice as a classroom teacher, is that powerful discus-

sion among students can occur within the confines of NCLB-type mandates (scripted reading programs and strict time requirements, for instance). Previous research has demonstrated that teacher-led discussion encourages less depth in student responses than student-led discussion (Almasi & Gambrell, 1994). The research presented here echoes those findings and sheds some light on a possible progression of acquisition that takes place in dialogic response strategies. This study also shows that teacher-led (or teacher-involved) discussions are places for students to practice with discussion patterns and strategies. Students used more-diverse response strategies when in the presence of the teacher, perhaps because she was helping them to construct their responses and ideas about the literature. Perhaps those students who read below grade level use one response strategy the majority of the time because they need exposure to or scaffolded practice with others. The success of a reader (defined here as comprehending texts on or above grade level) may be a direct reflection of a student's ability to respond to text in various ways.

In today's highly structured and heavily mandated educational system, there is room for student discussion if teachers will incorporate it into their practice and if administrators will allow it. While teachers are supplied with more scripts than they could use (whether or not they wish to use them), students must be allowed time to discuss texts on their own, and in their own terms. The free space offered among peers is the perfect venue for the manipulation and experimentation of ideas, of previously modeled behaviors, and of a "cognitive worktable" (Almasi et al., 1996). As educators, we must insure this discursive space in our classrooms exists — regardless of the materials used or mandated by the local or federal governments.

Within this space, teachers must pay attention to the types of prompts and questions they use. When interruptions occur in a lesson and a teacher must leave a group of students with a text, the use of open-ended questions and prompts will lead to more elaborate and involved discussion. In addition, it is important for teachers to pay attention to student responses and to offer guidance and a "constant nudging toward high-level work" (McIntyre et al., 2006, p. 61).

Students in this study indicated that they wanted more diversity in the literature to which they were exposed. We must include authentic literature in our instruction to enhance the reading experiences of our students and to acknowledge and accommodate their desires to read different types of texts. They also need to have time to read and discuss these texts at times with peers and at times in a teacher's presence.

Students also indicated that they want to choose the books they read. Small groups could select books to be read and discussed together. This would need to be carefully monitored by the teacher to insure that students select books that are sufficiently challenging, and that they truly discuss the texts. However, if students can hold these higher-level discussions at third grade, they should be encouraged to do just that. In addition, when students choose the books they

want to read, teachers can satisfy students' desires to read aloud to the class through group-created responses to literature.

Both student-led and teacher-led discussions are useful and important components to instruction, each offering important tools for students' strategic development and manipulation of ideas. While among their peers, students respond to literature with highly cognitive strategies, but only use a few of them. When students are in teacher-led groups, their text talk is scaffolded to involve a more-diverse array of strategic responses. When provided opportunities to participate in both peer- and teacher-led discussions all kids (regardless of reading level) can engage in high-level responses and thinking. While mandates may dictate the use of programs that don't always match our instructional philosophies, this study shows that regardless of the materials, teachers can incorporate discussion in uncommon ways. To do this, we must mold our questions and classrooms to be open and accepting, allowing students the time, space, and freedom to discuss literature both among their peers and in the presence of a teacher.

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