Text-Based Discussions: Lessons Learned from One Fifth Grade Classroom
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Introduction

- Dialogic talk demonstrates qualities of real-world conversations in which participants share the responsibility of communication (Gambrell, 1996) and have opportunities to generate new meaning together (Bakhtin, 1981).
- Dialogic teaching is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative, and purposeful (Alexander, 2006).
- Students' literacy skills develop through dialogic experiences, yet the dominant form of classroom talk is recitation-based (Nystrand, 2006).
- Lower-tracked students experience fewer dialogic opportunities than their peers (Applebee et al., 2003; Gritter, 2012).
- Teachers struggle to maintain open discussions, even when intentionally trying to do so (Aukerman et al., 2008; Kucan et al., 2011).

Research Questions

1. In a racially diverse, lower-tracked fifth grade classroom, what happens when a teacher and her students participate in text-based discussions?
2. How do students exhibit identity through discussion in their fifth grade language arts classroom?

Methodology

Instrumental case studies analyze a situation, person, or group of people; the findings may be applied to similar circumstances (Stake, 1995).

The Case

Greenwood Elementary School
- 82% free/reduced lunch
- Title I school
- 34% reading proficient

Laura’s 5th Grade Classroom
- 16 students (8 boys, 8 girls)
- 44% Black
- 31% Hispanic
- 25% White
- 50% “at risk” of failure
- Lower-tracked
- 11 consented to participate

Duration
- Approximately 14 weeks

Focal Group
- Six focal students were followed more closely than other students and interviewed individually about their experiences in Laura’s language arts class. The focal group was heterogeneously mixed and reflected the class’ demographics.

Data Sources

Artifacts • Audio recordings • Observations • Interviews • Reflections

Data Analysis

- Examine raw data
- Develop master coding scheme
- Continue with ongoing data collection and analysis

Constant Comparative Analysis
(Corbin & Strauss, 2008)

Open/Axial Coding

- Conduct peer debriefing
- Implement member checking
- Revisit data and revise coding scheme

Verifying Themes

Findings

Theme 1: The Classroom Teacher’s Intentional Pedagogical Decisions Increased Dialogic Talk

Selecting Texts about Social Issues
- Alex: We definitely shouldn’t let them ride planes for what they did on 9/11. 9/11 happened and people wonder, “Why not let us come to your country?” That’s not fair.
- Julio: That’s a bad thing?
- Alex: Yeah! 9/11!
- Jai: My sister was trying to stop [my parents], and I sat there and tried to close my ears.

Increasing Dialogic Opportunities through Scaffolding
- Elliciting a personal story
- Redirecting students to text

Theme 2: Students Created their own Opportunities to Co-Construct Meaning in Discussions

Making Media References
- Diamond: No, there was this play called Madea’s Happy Family, and Shirley had passed away and they were telling their secrets. . . She got the r-word by her uncle.
- Jai: You don’t have to deal with that. You can call the police, and they will take you away.

Theme 3: Unsanctioned Talk Interrupted Students’ Learning

- Difficulty with Texts
- Silencing Others

- Decoding
- Concept
- Bullying
- Bragging
- Making racist comments

Theme 4: Students Explored their Personal Identities in Text-Based Discussions

- Diamond: Well, you hardly see, no offense, Mrs. Carter, but like Julio’s color, my color, Jai’s color, Briana’s, Roman’s.
- Jai: I’m not Black, but I understand where you’re coming from.

Discussion

- Flexible assessments
- Inclusivity of the Common Core
- Enhance access to texts about social issues
- Symbolic capital (Fairbanks & Arial, 2006) among communities of practice

Future Research

1. How can teachers prevent bullying during text-based discussions?
2. What support structures do teachers need to facilitate discussions related to trauma?
3. What happens when students reflect upon their identity exploration experiences in discussions?

Select References