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Kim Skinner

*Louisiana State University, kskinner@lsu.edu*

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# Text Selection for Read-Alouds: The Influence of Topic in Children's Discussions of Literary Texts

Kim Skinner, Ph.D.

**Abstract**— In today's classrooms, the teacher's text selection for read-alouds directly impacts students' opportunities to systematically participate in higher order thinking about texts. This ethnographic study examined the discursive processes and practices over time of elementary students (and their teacher) before, during, and after teacher-led read-aloud discussions of literary texts in an after-school philosophy club. The study investigated the student opportunities for talking, thinking, and understanding provided by discussing the controversial topics of the texts. The analyses illustrate the consequences to student thinking and meaning-making when controversial texts are used in read-alouds as a springboard for discussion, as well as the implications of those outcomes for elementary literacy teachers.

Much attention in current literature on elementary literacy instruction is concentrated on which texts should be read to students, with students, and by students. In the last decade, the focus of text selection has primarily swirled around the genres of texts read in the classroom, particularly the breadth and depth of student access to, and instruction about, multiple text genres and subgenres. In addition to the recent emphasis on genre choice and instruction, the almost universal adoption of the Common Core State Standards across the US (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), has thrust other text selection issues to the forefront, particularly the issue of text complexity. Text complexity is a characteristic of the language of the texts (Pearson, 2013), language that, according to the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy, students must analyze to determine the theme of texts and use as a stimulus for collaborative discussions of texts in which they clearly express their own ideas and build on the ideas of others.

In today's increasingly time-strapped classrooms, the teacher's text selection for read-alouds directly impacts the

students' opportunities to systematically participate in higher order thinking about texts. Drawing from examinations of reading instruction in contemporary classrooms, Keene (2012) demonstrated the ways certain texts illicit deep emotional responses in their readers, an evidence of a deep understanding of the text. She posited the quality of texts children have read to them and are reading themselves have a direct bearing on their subsequent understanding of the text. Concurring with Keene's consideration for the quality of the writing, Hahn (2002) pointed out that careful choice in read-aloud selection needs to include relevance of the textual content to the lives of the students. Warning teachers to avoid the nonchalance often prevalent when choosing a book to be read aloud, Hoyt (2000) provided a personal example, "I used to grab my read-aloud selection off the bookshelf as I walked to the read-aloud area. I was convinced that any read-aloud was good ... However, why would we settle for just 'good' when we can have great?" (p. 2).

Since one of the primary purposes of a teacher read-aloud is to model thinking deeply about text, teacher selection of a text that stimulates student reasoning and comprehension is of utmost importance. When deciding on books for inclusion in kindergarten and first grade read-alouds, Beck and McKeown (2001) chose texts that were intellectually challenging, contained some complexity of events, presented unfamiliar topics, and included subtleties of ideas. In *Still Learning to Read*, Sibberson and Szymusiak (2003) addressed the importance of choosing a text for read-aloud time that is a *talkworthy* text, a text about which the students will want to talk. Talkworthy texts include books in which the topic of the text encourages personal opinion or controversy. Texts that evoke different points of view and deal with the grey areas of life can spark controversy and debate among discussants. Whole group discussions regarding controversial read-aloud topics potentially result in dialogue rich in evidence of reasoning and personal meaning.

## READ-ALoud AS A "BEST PRACTICE"

Since the 1970s, the term "best practice" has been used in educational circles to denote an effective, research-based instructional practice. One such best practice, the read-aloud, is commonly used by teachers to model how the reader thinks about and procures meaning from a text. Effective read-alouds, according to Fisher, Flood, Lapp, and Frey (2004), contain seven components: (1) Selected texts match students' developmental,

Kim Skinner, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA. [kskinner@lsu.edu](mailto:kskinner@lsu.edu)

social, and emotional levels as well as their interests. (2) The teacher had previewed and practiced reading the text. (3) The purpose for the read-aloud was established by the teacher. (4) The text was read by the teacher in an animated and expressive way. (5) Fluent oral reading was modeled by the teacher. (6) The teacher periodically stopped reading to question students, focusing them on specifics of the text. (7) The teacher made connections to independent reading and writing. Literacy research supports the use of teacher read-alouds as an essential component of reading instruction (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985; Beck & McKeown, 2001).

During a read-aloud the teacher controls access to the text content for the student listeners but both teacher and students talk about, think about, and create meaning from the text (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). This instructional practice invites teacher and student discussion before, during, and after reading of a selected text. Routman (2000) explained the benefits of reading aloud to students includes the thinking and co-constructed meaning-making made evident through talk. Focusing on comprehension as well as language development, Beck and McKeown (2001) demonstrated that student discourse and understanding of challenging text can be guided during the read-aloud by the teacher asking students initial open-ended questions and subsequent follow-up questions. Thus, teacher read-alouds provide an opportunity for students to develop ways to critically think about and talk about texts.

## AN INVESTIGATION OF STUDENTS' DISCURSIVE INTERACTIONS ABOUT CONTROVERSIAL TEXTS

The year-long ethnographic study reported here examined the discursive processes and practices over time of elementary students (and their teacher) before, during, and after teacher-led read-aloud discussions of literary texts in an after-school philosophy club. The study investigated the student opportunities for talking, thinking, and understanding provided by discussing the controversial topics of the texts. The analyses illustrate the consequences to student thinking and meaning-making when controversial texts are used in read-alouds as a springboard for discussion, as well as the implications of those outcomes for elementary literacy teachers. The overarching question guiding these analyses is: what is the nature of student talking, thinking, and understanding during a read-aloud discussion in which a controversial text is read?

### Participants and Research Site

The participants were twenty children in grade four and their teacher at an ethnically-diverse, small town Title I school in the central region of the United States. Eleven girls and nine boys participated in the study. Four of the students were identified as "gifted and talented" and seven students were classified as "at-risk." The participants were members of a *Children as Philosophers* after-school club that met for one hour, once a week, from September-May. The author also participated in the study as a researcher and participant observer.

### Philosophy Club Program and Texts

In 14 of 20 sessions of the *Children as Philosophers* club, the teacher read a literary text to the children, followed by conversation that afforded the children the opportunity to explore philosophical

questions and address the topics and themes of the literature. The discussion form used in the philosophy club, *philosophical conversation*, has similarities to other types of discussion that encourage students to justify their claims, including Lipman's (2003) model of philosophical inquiry and *accountable talk* (Michaels, O'Connor, & Resnick, 2007). The common feature of these discourse formats is accountability to the learning community. Michaels and colleagues provided the following description of discourse that is accountable to the community: "When talk is accountable to the community, participants listen to others and build their contributions in response to those of others. They make concessions and partial concessions ... and provide reasons when they disagree or agree with others" (p. 4). In contrast to the usual discourse encountered in the classroom, the students in the philosophy club discursively constructed the meaning of texts with others, accomplished by listening to, respecting, considering the arguments of, and questioning one other, and by supporting, justifying, and positioning their personal meaning of texts.

The teacher selected children's literature and poetry for the philosophy club that had topics conducive for promoting lively discussion. Chosen for inclusion due to the controversial nature of the topics, these texts illustrated the possibilities of using children's literature to explore deep philosophical issues.

### Research Approach and Data Sources

Interactional ethnography (Castanheira, Crawford, Green, & Dixon, 2001) was the research approach used for this study. Through the lens of interactional ethnography, the classroom in this study was viewed as a culture-in-the-making (Collins & Green, 1992; Putney & Frank, 2008) and examinations were conducted of the ways meaning was discursively constructed and negotiated by students and their teacher over time. This approach allowed me to examine the developing practices of the read-aloud event within the philosophy club. Through the discursive actions and interactions of the participants, patterns of interaction were located in student-to-student and teacher-to-student discourse to identify the learning opportunities constructed and appropriated by members of the group.

Collected through participant observation, the corpus of data analyzed included fieldnotes, audio- and video-tapes, and participant interviews. Although transcriptions from the tapes were central to the study, the other sources provided triangulation of the data and additional insights. From the data, four levels of analysis were conducted: transcription of the video records and interviews (Green, Skukauskaite, Dixon, & Cordova, 2007); construction of structuration (Green, Weade, & Graham, 2001) and event (Spradley, 1980) maps; identification and analysis of a telling case (Mitchell, 1984); and examination of a rich point (Agar, 2006) within the telling case.

## FINDINGS

### The Role of the Texts

Through analysis of the teacher's expectations of the read aloud event, a segment of the transcript of the first day of the philosophy club was identified in which the teacher delineates the role of the read-aloud texts for thinking and meaning construction. As shown in Table 1, the teacher's account links the purpose for reading and discussing texts to thinking, meaning-making, and reasoning.

**TABLE 1.** Framing the Role of the Texts during Read-Alouds

Line	Teacher	Work Accomplished through Discourse
550	I'm going to	Labeling books as "interesting" and thought-provoking
551	read you	
552	some interesting books	
553	books that will really	
554	make you think	Linking purpose of conversation to meaning of texts
555	and we're going to have	
556	conversations	
557	about the meaning	
558	of those books	Identifying reasoning as a key feature of text conversations
559	and you'll give reasons	
560	for what you're thinking	

Curricular resources support or constrain student access to opportunities to learn. Read-alouds of authentic children's literature and poetry occurred in 14 of 20 sessions of the *Children as Philosophers* club. The teacher chose the texts she would read each week, intentionally and purposefully selecting literary texts that contained topics potentially controversial for the students. This content had the potential to stimulate discussion and require students to articulate and defend their ideas and build on the ideas of others. Information shared by the teacher during the planning session for Session 7 indicated she spent about an hour each week researching and previewing texts in preparation for each read-aloud session. Table 2 depicts the literary texts read to the children in the philosophy club and the teacher's rationale for the selection of each text.

Analysis of the teacher's text choices revealed that the teacher chose texts to correspond with topics she considered controversial and the students could make a personal connection. The topics of the text afforded the participants considerable opportunity for debate as they were contentious in nature, like philosophy itself. The texts were a component of the curriculum of the philosophy club and each particular text framed what opportunities were available for participation, thinking, and understanding by the students.

### Students Demonstrating Thinking about Text

From analysis of the video transcripts and my fieldnotes, this set of analyses is organized through a telling case, described by Mitchell (1984) as a method that allows the researcher to unveil things that were not formerly available to be known. The telling case highlights the ways the discussion of the text was enacted by teacher and students in this cultural space and the results of that discussion. The selection and analysis of the Session 7 read aloud event was informed by my ethnographic knowledge of the event in context. The layers of analysis that follow will locate and identify patterns within and across the unique structure of this event.

The students participating in Session 7 were discussing the

book by McKee (1978), *Tusk, Tusk*. This text has elephants as characters, initially black and white in color and living in a forest. They fight over perceived differences and in the end only peace-loving, now grey elephants have survived. Before the read aloud event, the teacher detailed her intent to turn over control of the discussion topic to the students. The teacher explained that she would read the book and then, "I am going to/ turn it around on you/ after we're finished/ and you/ are going to think/ of the questions/ for the discussion" (lines 027-032, video transcript of Session 7). These segments of video transcript in Table 3 document the students' first attempt at generating discussion questions based on topic of a book just read by the teacher.

My examination of these segments of transcript of student talk during the text discussion revealed that various students successfully enacted many of the literacy practices common after a read-aloud, particularly, posing questions related to topic and theme of the text (061-074), initiating questions and making connections to prior knowledge (lines 156-160), and attempting to change the topic of discussion (316-319). Higher order thinking about texts varied among participants in this session, however, as some students were able to determine the main ideas of the book, one student determined a possible theme, one student made a connection to learning in another content area, and one student unable to move past the literal comprehension of the particular text.

### Students' Awareness of Difference in Conversation

Through analysis of a rich point (Agar, 2006) within the telling case I revealed, through backward and forward mapping, how and why particular opportunities were accessed and accomplished by participants and the participants' meanings of the interactions.

The students participating in the Session 7 read aloud event were aware that this conversation was different than previous conversations. The shift in power by the teacher to the students for the direction of the conversation as well as the students' engagement with the particular text topic in *Tusk, Tusk*, resulted in the students

**TABLE 2.** Teacher's Choice of Literary Texts

Session	Text	Reason Text was Chosen
1	"Invitation" by Shel Silverstein	Provides a welcome message and reinforces community
2	<i>Miss Nelson is Missing</i> by Harry Allard & James Marshall	Explores meaning of respect and who warrants respect
3	<i>Swimmy</i> by Leo Lionni	Promotes concept of self and contextual changes to self
4	<i>The Giving Tree</i> by Shel Silverstein	Provokes thinking on love and can one love too much
5	<i>The Gift of Nothing</i> by Patrick McDonnell	Considers who counts as a friend and why
6	<i>Silver Packages</i> by Cynthia Rylant	Evaluates wants versus needs in relation to caring
7	<i>Tusk, Tusk</i> by David McKee	Explores difference and concept of prejudice
12	<i>The Important Book</i> by Margaret Wise Brown	Probes what is really important to you and if that changes
13	<i>Elvira</i> by Margaret Shannon	Investigates what counts as beauty and by whose standards
14	<i>Emily's Art</i> by Peter Catalanotto	Investigates what counts as art and who decides
15	<i>The Wolves in the Wall</i> by Neil Gaiman	Explores boundaries between real and imaginary
16	"Choose" by Carl Sandburg	Explores the consequences of our choices
17	<i>What Can I Dream About?</i> by Arnold Shapiro	Considers what counts as proof
18	<i>Gleam and Glow</i> by Eve Bunting	Examines the value of hope
19	<i>The Philosophers' Club</i> by Christopher Phillips	Considers what is important and to whom

**TABLE 3.** Students' Text Talk

Line	Student Discourse	Work Accomplished Through the Discourse
061	Monroe what is peace	Generating questions for group discussion of text
062	Lonnie what is:::	
063	um	
064	never mind	
(...)		
070	Eva what is hate	Exploring theme
071	I guess	
072	Maddie what causes war	
073	Lonnie what does it mean	
074	when two disagree	
(...)		
156	Lonnie is this like the war	Initiating question, asking students to consider meaning in relation to prior knowledge
157	between	
158	Martin Luther King:::	
159	you know::	
160	the whites and the blacks	
(...)		
316	Monroe okay	Attempting to redirect discussion to literal meaning of text
317	how did this	
318	turn into being	
319	about people	

**TABLE 4.** Noticing the Conversation has Changed

Line	Discussant	Discourse	Work Accomplished Through the Discourse
260	Lonnie	I only have one question	Appealing to teacher to intervene and direct conversation
261		to ask Dr. Newman	
263		when are we going	
264		to get	
265		to the point	Acknowledging discomfort with conversational style
266		because all these conversations	
267		are confusing me	
268		I just want	
269		to get	
270		to the point	
271	Eva	yeah	Affirming request for teacher intervention
272		this is the longest conversation	
273		we've had	
274		and it's kind of like	
275		we're fighting	Noticing and comparing features of current conversation
276		some are agreeing	
277		and some are disagreeing	
278	Maddie	yeah	
279		it's kinda like	
280		the book	

**TABLE 5.** Intertextual Link

Line	Actor	Discourse	Consequences
151	Maddie	it's just matters	Justifying her beliefs
152		if you like yourself	
153		or not	
154		it's like	Referencing prior topic of text discussion
155		what makes you you	
156		it's like blacks and whites	
157		make gray	Linking current thinking and understanding intertextually
158		they come together	
159		it doesn't matter	
160		how you look	

talking about text and their ideas using confrontational discourse and speaking back and forth to each other for an extended period of time. At the 30:42 time marker, 16 minutes and 32 seconds after the second conversation about the text commenced, Lonnie appealed to the teacher to intervene and direct the conversation, as illustrated in Table 4.

In the midst of the back and forth student-to-student interaction of Session 7, Lonnie looked directly at the teacher and pleaded with her to resolve the students' debate of text-related topics in order to procure a conclusion to the discussion. This conversation was more argumentative than any conversations from the previous sessions and the student control of much of the discourse and the combative nature of the discourse felt different to him.

This sudden shift from students addressing other students in conversation to a student's pleading to the teacher to get involved was surprising to the teacher (as evidenced by her quizzical look when Lonnie lobbied for her interference). By petitioning the teacher, Lonnie indicated his level of discomfort with the conversation and his desire for the teacher to reassert her power to focus and resolve their conversation. Two other students supported his request when both began their subsequent turns of talk with "yeah" (lines 271, 278) and also noted the argumentative nature of the discussion.

This appeal, and the discursive affirmations by two other students for teacher intervention and resolution, was a rich point (Agar, 2006) in the discourse. Following Agar, rich points are conceptualized as "departures from expectations," that signal "a difference between what you know and what you need to learn to understand and explain what just happened" (p. 9).

The role of the text as an opportunity to learn was also made visible by the discourse of the students in this session. In lines 278-280 of the transcript segment from Session 7, Maddie links the students' adoption of a controversial conversation style to the provocation depicted by the characters in the text. This link makes visible the role and relationship of the content of the text to the interactions of the students and shows the ways in which the teacher's choice of a controversial text provided the means for student accomplishment of a new form of discussion.

**Intertextual Relationships**

Group member knowledge and ways of knowing reveal the intertextual relationships of the group and how over time group members build on this intertextual knowledge (Bloome & Egan-Robertson, 1993). From repeated readings of the fieldnotes and video transcripts of the read aloud event in Session 7, I identified an intertextual link to a text from a previous read-aloud event. Theoretically viewed as webs of juxtaposed texts, this link to texts is meaningful and serves as resource to group members (Bloome, 1991). Table 5 shows the intertextual link in the Session 7 read aloud event that ties to previous text topic.

By linking the meaning of the current text to comprehension of the text topic explored in Session 3, "it's like/what makes you you" (lines 154-155), Maddie uses the previous text as a cultural resource for thinking and understanding in this session. As this example illustrates, intertextual relationships across texts, though separated by time and space, became resources, and thus opportunities for learning, for students in this social and historical group.

**DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS**

Learning is first and foremost the result of opportunities. In this particular educational space, findings from analyses of the discursive interactions of the students revealed the central role of the text in student knowledge construction and opportunities to learn. The opportunities to learn provided by the texts included opportunities for students to make intertextual links between texts to better understand the concepts and themes the texts addressed. However, the teacher's pedagogical knowledge, such as awareness of literary texts that promote lively discussion, knowledge of sources of text, and familiarity with several discussion formats for read-alouds, is consequential in order for the learning opportunities afforded by the text topic to be realized.

The results of this study show the consequences for student learning outcomes when provided opportunities to discuss thought-provoking texts with others over time. This is not to say that all students learned from each opportunity, but rather that learning outcomes changed for one or more participants. My findings lend support to the results from research by Putney, Green, Dixon,

Durán, and Yeager, (2000) that showed how opportunities for learning jointly constructed by the members of the class are often adopted with differential take-up by students.

Higher order thinking and reasoning skills are challenging for teachers to teach and for learners to learn. Acquisition of these skills requires multiple and varied learning opportunities exploring and discussing the meaning of challenging texts. As Eisner (2001) argued, "We need to provide opportunities for youngsters and adolescents to engage in challenging kinds of conversation, and need to help them know how to do so. Such conversation is too rare in schools" (p. 85). Additionally, implementation of the Common Core State Standards in elementary ELA classrooms includes having students write argument/opinion pieces, a skill that necessitates students having excellent reasoning skills. Engaging in discussions where students can learn to clearly express their ideas and build on the ideas of others over time potentially leads to acquisition of the ability to reason by students.

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