

# "Teacher-Watching": Examining Teacher Talk in Literature Circles

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*In this article, Short, Kaufman, Kaser Kahn, and Crawford turn the camera on themselves as they examine teacher talk in literature circles.*

We have spent a great deal of time engaged in "kidwatching" (Goodman, 1978) as teachers and classroom-based researchers. We have closely observed children talking, writing, dramatizing, singing, and drawing in a variety of classroom events. Along with many other researchers, we have analyzed the transcripts of children engaged in conversation and dialogue about literature to understand how they construct and negotiate meaning through their talk. What we hadn't fully realized, however, was how closely our students were also observing our talk:

MS. C.: Is there anything else you want to add about the book?

THEA: I think it was very weird that only one man was against slavery.

LACY: There were others who were helping him, too.

JIM: One person started it and then it went on. One person can make a difference.

THEA: I have a question for Ms. Crawford. I want to know if there's something *you* really liked about the book.

Thea clearly saw a difference between the talk of her teacher and her own talk in this discussion. Her question challenged us to turn the lens onto ourselves.

While kidwatching will always be essential to our teaching, it has become increasingly clear to us that we also need to engage in "teacher-watching" (Rowe, 1998a). If our experiences as observers of our own teaching are typical, we believe that many kidwatchers have neglected or avoided turning the camera or tape recorder on themselves. Looking at ourselves is not particularly comfortable and can be painful. This discomfort is offset by the realization that through careful observation of our talk we are likely to uncover the hidden roles we play and we can become more reflective as teachers.

Teachers are high-status participants who set the tone and direction for many literacy events and so the nature of teacher talk is particularly important. At the same time, it is often the most habitual and least examined aspect of classroom practice (Rowe, 1998a). Classroom literacy engagements are multifaceted events involving curricular invitations and the arrangement of materials, space, time, and people. Talk before, during,

and after literacy events is one of the most important means through which classroom events are accomplished (Barnes, 1992). A sociocultural perspective suggests that children internalize social interaction patterns as sociocognitive strategies to be used in approaching text and reading events (Vygotsky, 1978). Sociolinguistic perspectives further demonstrate that teacher-child interactions provide or deny children access to talk during ongoing literacy events (Bloome, 1987; Halliday, 1978). Additionally, children learn about the nature of text, appropriate ways to discuss and respond to books, and come to define themselves as particular kinds of readers through these events (Rowe, 1998b).

Given the importance of teacher talk in literacy events, we decided to take a close look at our talk through collaborative research in which we compared the talk occurring within literature circles where teachers were and were not present. We wanted to examine the roles of teachers and students and the types of talk that occur in these two contexts.

### THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

We conducted this research as a collaborative team of four teacher researchers and one university researcher, all of whom have worked together over the last six years on a variety of projects. Using the methodology developed in an initial study (Short & Kauffman, 1995), each teacher researcher invited her students to join one of four small-group literature circles (4-5 students) to read and discuss a picture book. In each room, two literature circles (one with the teacher and one without the teacher) discussed *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993) and two other literature circles discussed *John Brown: One Man Against Slavery* (Everett, 1993).

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The two picture books dealt with the social issues of prejudice and racism, topics that were part of inquiries already going on in the four classrooms. *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993) focuses on a young Japanese American boy in an internment camp during World War II and tells how he deals with prejudice through playing baseball. *John Brown: One Man Against Slavery* (Everett, 1993) has striking illustrations that depict John Brown's belief in the equality of all peoples and shows the 1859 raid of Harpers Ferry which led to his execution.

Students volunteered to join a particular literature circle, the typical practice in all four classrooms, and so the groups

were quite diverse in their membership. Each discussion lasted approximately thirty minutes and was audio taped. The discussions occurred in May, by which time students were experienced and comfortable with literature circles. Because we learned so much about our talk during the first year of the study, we repeated the same literature circles the following May. We wanted to make changes in how we interacted within the groups and then reexamine our talk in the transcripts.

The four classrooms were all intermediate multi-age classrooms (ages 9-11) in Tucson, Arizona. Two classrooms were located in a school which serves a middle-class community, while the other two schools serve low-income and working-class communities. All three schools include students from ethnically diverse backgrounds. As teacher researchers, we have worked with literature circles and inquiry-based curriculum for a number of years (Short & Harste, with Burke, 1996). Our learning environments are built upon a strong sense of community and inquiry where students are problem-posers and problem-solvers (Freire, 1985). Throughout the year, students participate in literature circles related to the class inquiry focus. They are not given lists of questions to discuss, but are invited to share what's on their minds and, from this sharing, to find particular issues to think more deeply about as a group. We use the class read-aloud time to demonstrate talk about books, and we move in and out of the literature circles as students discuss. Students are thus comfortable talking about books with and without the teacher.

The audiotapes of the discussions were transcribed and analyzed using constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to create categories of the types of literary talk and of the social roles taken by group members. For each of the four classrooms, Kathy and each teacher first analyzed the four transcripts from that teacher's classroom. After the transcripts were analyzed separately, we met as a group to make final decisions about the categories, to compare the patterns of talk and social interaction across the classrooms, and to discuss our interpretations of these patterns.

### TEACHER ROLES WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

In examining the transcripts in which the teacher was a member of the group, we noted the roles that we had taken and the ways in which we had influenced the talk. The roles which we identified included teachers as facilitators, participants, mediators, and active listeners. These roles were not discrete or rigid, and we moved in and out of them throughout the literature circles in response to student interactions and the topics under discussion.

#### Teacher as Facilitator

The facilitator role involved teachers encouraging student interaction and talk and monitoring social interactions which

interfered with discussion. This was the role that we most frequently assumed, especially during the first year of the study. The primary type of facilitator talk entailed encouraging students to extend or expand their ideas. We frequently used comments such as "Why do you think that?" and "What do you mean?" to encourage students to share more of their thinking. Our questions proceeded from genuine curiosity—We were truly interested in understanding their thinking. Students did not appear to view these questions as challenges or indications that something was "wrong," and they usually responded by elaborating on their prior comments.

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A second type of facilitator role involved providing additional information to clarify details related to the story. Because we had greater knowledge of the historical setting, we clarified misunderstandings, such as the difference between internment camps and concentration camps, or the different time periods of John Brown and the Civil Rights Movement.

A third type of facilitator talk was to restate comments from students when we felt others had missed something important or when we wanted to encourage students to consider a comment in greater depth. However, students made their own decisions about whether or not to engage in a discussion around these issues. For example, when Sandy said, "Stephanie, I'd like to hear more about what you said at the beginning about you and baseball," Stephanie shared a personal experience of running to third base. The group then immediately returned to their previous topic of "being made fun of," rather than continuing in the direction that Sandy had suggested through her question. Another function of restatement was to clarify a student's point, such as when Kathleen stated, "So what you are saying is that slavery is abuse?"

A fourth type of facilitator talk involved conversational maintenance. Sometimes this talk was aimed at maintaining order—"I can't hear when you are all talking." Other times the talk was an invitation to switch topics of discussion—"Was there anything else in this book that you wanted to talk about?" Still other times, the talk was an invitation for silent students to participate—"What do *you* think, Carlos? What do you want to add?"

The final type of facilitator talk involved challenging a student's comment. When A. J. said that "all Japanese and Chinese people pitch the same way" in a discussion of *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), Kathleen immediately questioned his statement, asking whether he really meant *all*. She directly challenged his statement because he had been in her classroom for two years and she knew she wouldn't silence

him by asking him to think about his statement as expressing a stereotype.

The argument has sometimes been made that teachers need to be present to avoid problems with group dynamics. However, sometimes a group is simply the wrong combination of personalities and not even an expert facilitator can make a difference. In one of Leslie's groups, a set of twins took over, finishing each other's thoughts and closing others out of the discussion. Leslie used a range of facilitation strategies to open up the discussion, but to no avail. The group finally limped to an end. The only solution we could see would have been to ask one of the twins to leave the group.

While we were the primary users of facilitator talk, students also asked questions of each other, invited others to participate, and directed attention to other topics of discussion. Their responses indicated that they saw this role as part of being a group member although they engaged in significantly less of this talk when we were present than they did when in groups without an adult. Their ability to facilitate indicated to us that perhaps we were assuming this role too readily when we participated in the group.

### **Teacher as Participant**

The participant role involved teachers interacting as readers by sharing personal connections, opinions, and questions that stemmed from their understandings of the book. The types of participant talk which we used included: (a) sharing our own connections to a book ("This book reminds me of *Roll of Thunder*"); (b) talking about related personal experiences ("My son was made fun of when he played baseball"); (c) making broad thematic statements ("We should all be equal, regardless of skin color"); (d) asking questions about issues that genuinely puzzled us ("I wonder if the daughter ever agreed with John Brown about using force?"); and (e) expressing personal opinions and evaluations ("I found it interesting that the boy could still hit the ball even though he was stressed out because he was continuously watched by the guard").

Students accepted their teacher's opinions as being part of the group process and they built on them with their own comments. Gloria's comment about the boy and the guard led into a long discussion about the pressure that boys feel when their fathers come to watch them play baseball. Students were also not hesitant to challenge their teacher's statements. In one transcript, several students tell Leslie, "I don't agree with you" and then argue for a different perspective.

One function of the teacher's comments was to raise issues that built from students' ideas, but also to push the group to consider other perspectives on or connections to that idea. For example, after students had engaged in a long discussion about slavery and hatred among Blacks and Whites during the time of John Brown, Gloria commented, "A lot of people were fighting to end slavery, but they didn't want to live with Blacks or have anything to do with them. I see that today"

Her comment pushed the group to consider racism as it exists in the world today and not assume it was only part of the past. She shared her own thoughts and questions as a reader instead of only using facilitator talk to encourage students to extend their comments.

Through these examples, we saw the potential for teachers to use their own connections as readers to push student thinking. However, in the first-year transcripts, there were few instances in which we shared our own opinions and connections and only one example where we shared a personal experience. In most cases, we used facilitator talk to push student thinking. While students did engage in facilitator talk in the transcripts where we were not present, they needed much less of this talk to have a productive discussion. This data made us question whether we take on facilitator roles too easily because of our past experiences with how schools define the role of the teacher. We assume that we *need* to guide the discussion in some way because "that's what teachers do." Also, in our attempts not to dominate the conversation, we may sit back too much from the group and only enter the discussion when facilitation is needed.

In addition, we recognized the importance of demonstrating the kind of talk we were encouraging in students. We wanted children to open up and share their personal opinions, experiences, and connections about a book, and yet we ourselves stayed on safe ground and didn't share our personal responses. In doing so, we may have sent a message to students about our own willingness to be vulnerable, a message that we didn't intend.

The transcripts made us realize that we could raise the intellectual ante by participating as readers instead of always using the facilitator role to extend discussion. We were relying on facilitator talk to challenge students intellectually and to create new zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978), and were missing opportunities to create those zones by sharing our own connections. We view the role of facilitator as important and valid, but don't want it to dominate our talk. And so we made a conscious effort to change our talk during the second year of the study by sharing more of our connections and experiences instead of only asking questions meant to push the group's thinking. The transcripts from that year indicate that we had a better balance between facilitator and participant talk.

### Teacher as Mediator

The mediator role involved teachers using facilitator or participant talk to encourage students to connect their discussion about the book to their own life experiences and values. Vygotsky (1978) noted that mediation occurs when an individual modifies a situation as part of the process of responding to it. While there are many ways in which teachers mediate discussion, in this case we noted that teachers sometimes asked questions or made comments that invited students to explore

their own personal and sociocultural issues, rather than to engage in literary talk. One type of mediator talk occurred when teachers used the discussion to gain personal knowledge of children's thinking and experiences. These discussions tended to have less actual talk about the book because teachers encouraged children to explore their personal feelings and experiences. For example, when Sam commented that other people tease him, Gloria asked Sam to talk about *why* he thought other children picked on him and didn't like him. Through this conversation, she was able to better understand Sam's perceptions and responses to children in the room.

Another type of mediator talk involved using literature discussions as a place for students to work through personal issues and to share and discuss values. School doesn't often provide the space and invitation for this type of discussion. Literature circles allowed teachers to understand children's thinking and to challenge them to consider other possibilities. When Sandy met with four boys to discuss *Baseball Saved Us* (Mochizuki, 1993), Brent noted that anger helped the boy hit a home run and stated, "I think it [anger] helps when I play baseball." Sandy replied, "It helps to get angry? When do you get angry?" These questions led to a discussion of the ways in which anger did and did not help them in their daily lives. Several of these boys had a great deal of anger which was coming out in inappropriate ways in the classroom and playground and so Sandy connected to Brent's statement in order to encourage him to think about his actions.

Through the role of mediator, we invited students to talk about important life issues. Students were highly engaged in these discussions and clearly valued the opportunity to talk through life issues. However, these discussions took the students away from the book and literary talk and, to some degree, focused on the teacher's agenda. Because we were more aware of our talk and its impact on children, we made more conscious choices to value both literary talk and "life talk" as we participated in the groups. We also continued our practice of only occasionally joining a group so that students could pursue their own agendas and issues in literature circles.

### Teacher as Active Listener

It was evident in the transcripts that we had, for the most part, accomplished our goal of moving away from teacher-dominated discussions. This movement was evident in the low number of speech turns we had in relation to our students and in the fact we usually did not control who spoke and what counted as an acceptable interpretation. This control was established through group negotiation, not through teacher domination. The I-R-E (initiation, reply, evaluation) response pattern so widely documented in research (Mehan, 1979) was not present in the transcripts. We definitely influenced the discussion, but so did other group members.

However, we also found that there were still teacher behaviors present that sent unintended messages. One of these

behaviors was "active listening" where we acknowledged children's statements with background comments such as "yeah" or "hmmm." Some active listening is a natural part of conversation, but we noted that in groups where teachers engaged in significant amounts of active listening, students more frequently interrupted each other and talked on top of each other. This overuse of active listening seemed to cue students to focus on us and compete for our attention. Also, when students talked on top of each other, we sorted out their comments and helped them continue the conversation. When we were not present, students had to listen more carefully to each other.

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In examining transcripts where we were not present, we saw little verbal evidence of active listening by children. As adults, we made greater use of these strategies than students, although students may have used visual signals that did not show up on audiotape. The purpose of active listening is to acknowledge students and affirm their thinking. However, we wonder whether we are instead affirming our power and status as adults. When we engage in active listening with adults, the message may indeed be affirmation, but with children the message may be to sanction our power. We decided to more carefully monitor how much we used active listening the following year. Our goal was not to eliminate active listening but to make sure we didn't take over the group through too much active listening talk.

We also noted that when teachers are distracted by other events in the classroom, their need to "hurry" the group can result in dominating the talk time and agenda. In one transcript, Gloria continually asks questions to keep the conversation moving quickly from topic to topic, sometimes cutting off children who are working through an idea. At one point, Julieta tries to develop a metaphor of how slavery is like a game that never ends. Gloria misses her comment and moves the group onto another topic. Julieta later joined the group discussing the same book without the teacher and used this group to think through her metaphor.

As we talked about why Gloria's participation in this group differed so dramatically from the other groups in which she was a member, Gloria noted that she was very distracted throughout this discussion because of events that were occurring in the room that day. Students were engaged in projects where her support was needed and her focus was on completing the literature circle as quickly as possible so she could return to her other responsibilities. Consequently, she was impatient and distracted and students would have had a

more productive group without her presence. The experience taught us that there are certain days when the situation is such that teachers shouldn't join a literature circle. We all have days when we can't attend because of other issues in the classroom. Instead of joining a group because we feel we "should," it's better for students to meet by themselves.

## STUDENTS' STRATEGIES AND TALK WITHIN LITERATURE CIRCLES

We examined groups in which we were not present to get a more complete picture of how our talk influenced the discussion. While some educators feel that teachers must be present for in-depth dialogue to occur (Eeds & Peterson, 1995), we were relieved to see that all of the student groups focused their discussions in productive ways. They found issues of concern to them that related to the book and to their own lives and they used the group to think through these ideas. As we further examined the transcripts, we noted strategies that students used to generate and facilitate their discussions that related to our roles within the classroom.

### Get-Going Strategies

The first year, each student group used a strategy to get the discussion started. Some began with group members stating what they liked about the book or sharing their favorite parts. Others began with a shared retelling of the book which sometimes involved an extended and detailed reconstruction of the plot. Some began by talking about their thinking and connections—"This book reminds me of" talk. Still other groups moved between several of these kinds of talk.

While we had not expected to see such definite patterns in the ways in which students began their groups, their use of a "get-going" strategy fit with our experiences with adults. These strategies provide a means for group members to move from the initial awkwardness of not knowing what to say into an engaged dialogue. While "how to get started" had not been discussed in our classrooms, students recognized the need for such a strategy and began their groups in a way that felt comfortable to them based on their experiences, especially during whole-class read-aloud times.

Interestingly, during the second year, we did not see distinct "get-going" strategies in most of the groups; they started their groups by talking about a range of issues. We believe that this occurred because a majority of students were in their second year in these multi-age classrooms and so had become comfortable with this form of talk and with each other.

### Students as Facilitators

While much of the student talk in our transcripts focused on sharing connections, experiences, and opinions, students did engage in facilitator talk. They asked questions which

encouraged others to expand their comments and invited students who were silent to share. For example, Philip turned to Carlos at one point and said, "What do you want to say? What were your feelings about it? Get in touch with your inner self." When the discussion went in a direction that took students away from the book, someone always brought the discussion back to the book. We also noted that they shared more of their own feelings about the books, and more of their own personal stories than we had.

In some groups, students shared the facilitation in an informal manner with two or three children taking on this role. The discussion was free flowing with the conversation naturally moving back and forth among the different group members. There were no clear indications of turn-taking or major shifts in topics imposed by a particular student. No one person acted as facilitator or engaged in behaviors that signaled formal facilitation. Students flexibly moved in and out of participation and facilitation roles.

In other groups, a specific structure emerged that the group followed and one or two group members took on a formal role as facilitator. In several transcripts, it appeared as if group members were reading a set of questions or had a specific set of rules that they were following. However, there was no "script" or list of questions available for students. Interestingly, the groups which developed these structures were ones which the classroom teacher had labeled as "weak" because the students were not "strong talkers" in the class.

For example, one group began with a shared retelling of the book's plot and then discussed the theme of the book. It's evident from the transcript that they were done discussing within five minutes. Since they knew they needed to continue talking (especially since they were being taped), they had to find something to talk about. Several group members used a set of questions-"What did the book remind you of?", "What do you think are some of the issues in this book?", and "What did you like about this book?"-to sustain the discussion. Kathleen identified these questions as ones she asked at the beginning of the year to encourage discussions of the class read-aloud books. Students had obviously taken her behaviors during their class read-alouds as a demonstration of how to talk about books.

One of Sandy's groups was nervous about being taped and seemed to have a set of rules that they were following-"We aren't supposed to talk about [retell] the story. We are supposed to talk about what we thought about it and about the moral." These are not rules that Sandy remembers discussing and yet students had surmised these from her interactions in class discussions.

In each case, groups that were primarily composed of students who were not strong in verbal discussions seemed to seize upon a specific structure to support their talk. These groups usually had one or two students who took on a formal role as a facilitator. They used more turn-taking behaviors and made more abrupt shifts in topics once everyone had their

turn to talk about the current question or topic. In addition, they tended to stay with topics they considered "safe"-topics that were easy to talk about and lacked controversy. In each case, we identified their structures as adaptations of teacher talk during class read-aloud discussions. Using these structures, students did have a productive discussion. In only one case did a student totally dominate a discussion by asking questions, dictating the group agenda, and cutting off students who were talking. This particular student, however, engaged in these behaviors with or without a teacher present.

The extent to which students attended to our talk was evident in the frequency of certain phrases in the transcripts. Kathleen often said "I agree (or disagree) with you because ..." as a way to demonstrate building off of someone else's comments. These same phrases appear throughout her students' talk. The student transcripts from Gloria's classrooms were filled with "I think," Sandy's with "I wonder," and Leslie's with "In my opinion"-all being phrases we often used.

Students' use of these structures reflects the importance of teacher demonstrations in class discussions and literature circles. In examining the first-year data, we realized that we provided demonstrations of facilitation that students could use when they encountered difficulty. However, we had not provided demonstrations of using participant talk to share connections and experiences or to make comments that build from others. It is not surprising then that students usually did not use this talk when their groups struggled.

### Discussion of Topics and Issues

We were encouraged to find that students in literature circles where teachers were not present worked hard at understanding the book and raised significant issues. While some groups struggled more than others and so developed definite structures for their discussions, they still had productive discussions. We saw no qualitative difference between the issues discussed when teachers were present and when they were not. In both contexts, issues such as teasing, racism, and prejudice were raised.

One major difference was that more topics were discussed when we were present because we encouraged the introduction of a wider range of issues. Students also spent a longer time talking about a particular topic when we were not present. In one transcript, students debated whether they would risk their lives for another person and whether it was better to fight for another's freedom or to quietly buy slaves and set them free. Their central concern was whether freedom itself or the way in which one becomes free was most important. This debate led into confusing connections to issues about the U.S./Mexico border as each person tried to prove his or her point. As we read through the transcript, we realized that we would have stepped in and resolved the debate early in the process because students were arguing the same issues over and over without moving forward. While we would have resolved the

issue earlier, the students did finally talk themselves out of this deadlock and were able to deal with their own agenda given the time to do so. This example illustrated for us one reason why students need the opportunity to work through issues without always relying on teachers to facilitate the process.

We also noticed that students spent more time working through details of the story, especially historical facts, when the teacher was not present. We usually clarified plot and historical details when we were present, but students had to puzzle through these details when we weren't. Students also tended to question each other's statements about details when the teacher wasn't present. When the teacher was present, they seemed to assume that if the teacher didn't say anything, the other person must be correct.

## TYPES OF TALK ACROSS THE LITERATURE CIRCLES

In examining the types of talk which occurred, we looked at whether the categories varied according to the teacher's presence or to a particular book. Each transcript was coded according to the literary categories of personal opinion, evaluation, personal connections, intertextual connections to books/movies, thematic statements, inferences, style of writing/illustration, retelling, clarification and extension, inquiry question, restatement, and conversational maintenance. We did not find particular patterns based on the type of book or the presence of the teacher. The only pattern which emerged was that *John Brown: One Man Against Slavery* (Everett, 1993) encouraged talk about illustrations because of the dynamic and symbolic nature of the illustrations.

One pattern which we did note was that all of the groups focused on a search for connections in order to make sense of what they were reading. We were encouraged by this finding because earlier research (Hartman, 1990; Short, 1992) had noted that children come to expect textual isolation in school and do not look for intertextual connections. Our students made intertextual connections to their personal experiences, historical events, current events, class inquiries, movies, and books. One interesting difference was that students tended to make connections to movies and television while teachers made connections to books. Students come from a visual mass-media culture and their connections were significant to them, but tended to be devalued by us.

A second pattern was that each group went beyond retellings to engage in thoughtful discussions of the books using one of two major types of talk. Some groups focused primarily on their personal connections and experiences related to issues from the book, rather than directly on the plot or theme of the book. These issues included name calling, abuse, baseball, the homeless, racism, and summer camp. We felt it was significant that these issues came from class inquiry studies as well as children's personal experiences outside of school. Students seemed to have taken on their school

inquiries as significant aspects of the "action knowledge" (Barnes, 1992) which they utilized to think about their world. This "life talk" occurred when teachers were and were not present.

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Other groups engaged in more "literary talk" by focusing on personal opinions and evaluations of the book which they used in order to talk their way into understanding a particularly puzzling aspect of the book. For example, several groups kept returning to the issue of "How *did* baseball save them?" They talked about possible reasons and then went on to other topics, only to return to this question and pose another explanation. Another group noticed that there was a yellow hat in almost every picture. Despite the teacher's efforts to raise other issues, they poured over the pictures trying to determine the hat's significance.

One final observation was that essentially all of the talk was analytical rather than imaginary. Rowe (1998b) found that much of young children's talk about books involves dramatic play and imagination rather than an analytical perspective. By fourth and fifth grade, our students no longer evidenced the imaginary talk which was so prevalent among young children—a finding which we believe is the result of the exclusive focus on analytical talk in schools.

Only one child used imaginary talk the first year. Eddie constantly urged his classmates to imagine themselves inside the book. "Picture yourself working on a hot day and doing that for your whole life." He also put himself in the situation and talked about how terrible it would be if he were separated from his family—"I feel like I want to break this pencil because I am so mad at what they did back then." Near the end of this transcript, Eddie suggests that the group have a "moment of silence and think what it would be like to be a slave." The group shut off the recorder for a moment of silence and then continued their discussion.

During the second year, several of the classrooms became more engaged in dramatic interpretations and improvisations as a response to literature. We did see a few more instances of imaginary talk in the transcripts that year, but it was still clear that students had learned well the message that analytical talk is what schools value.

## CONCLUSION

As we examined our data, new understandings and questions emerged which we want to pursue. One issue is the importance

of the demonstrations that occur during the class read-aloud time. The students in our classrooms did not have direct instruction or training on "how to do" literature circles, nor did they practice particular roles. However, it was clear that we taught them about this talk and the roles they could take through our demonstrations during class read-aloud discussions. These read-aloud times have assumed an increasing significance for us and we would like to study their role in the classroom community and curriculum. We knew that students had really struggled in their discussions at the beginning of the year and that their ability to have productive discussions during this study was due to the many demonstrations and experiences we had provided earlier. However, since these were not the focus of our research, we need to examine those early read-aloud times more closely to see what occurs.

We also want to continue to explore the role of the teacher as a participant. We are curious about the influence we may have on children's talk when we share more of our personal experiences, connections, and opinions and use less facilitator talk. We are also interested in pursuing whether and how students signal active listening to each other. In addition, we want to examine other ways in which we may be sending different messages than we intend to students.

The most important benefit that we feel we gained from this research is not an answer to the questions of what roles teachers should take in literature circles, but an awareness of the decisions we are making and their effect on the group. The roles of facilitator, participant, mediator, and active listener are all valid roles for us to assume at various points. In the past, we often took on these roles without realizing that we were doing so. Through this research, we became aware of how our talk and social interaction influence children's discussions. We also became more aware of the ways in which students facilitate and negotiate meaning when we are not present. Discussions with and without teachers present offer different, but equally valuable, potentials for social interaction and meaning-making. The issue is not to choose between student groups and groups with teachers, because both are essential to students' growth as thinkers and readers.

These understandings strengthen our knowledge base as teachers and positively affect the ways in which we interact with students and negotiate curricular structures to support and challenge them as thinkers and learners. In our work with other teachers, we see two extremes in how educators view the need for curricular structures. One extreme is to simply put students into groups without supportive structures or demonstrations. These groups rarely evolve beyond sharing and social conversation and can, in fact, become destructive in terms of student relationships with each other (Evans, 1996). At the other extreme, some educators use direct instruction and modeling of "how to do" literature groups, assign roles and tasks, or act as a group leader who asks questions to push student thinking (Daniels, 1995; McGee, 1995; Wienczek &

O'Flahavan, 1994). Instead of modeling for students what they must do, we believe that we need to provide demonstrations within meaningful contexts of what students might do in these groups (Smith, 1981). Students also need opportunities to reflect on the content and process of their group discussions. We want to collaborate with students in ways that support them in their current thinking and challenge them to consider new possibilities.

These findings are supported by the work of Bakhtin (1981) and Vygotsky (1978) who argue that meanings created in social interactions are internalized in the form of thought. These internalized interactions are used in subsequent interactions, influencing the dialogue which occurs within the minds of learners and between participants. Learning, thus, has its roots in a social dialectic or dialogue. Students need opportunities to exchange ideas and be involved in dialogue because these dialogues provide the foundation of learning and of democracy (Pradl, 1995).

Just as we ask children to examine and push their thinking, so must we as teachers and researchers more closely examine our own beliefs, practices, and interactions. Through our dialogue with each other, as we analyzed the transcripts and searched for patterns and interpretations, we learned to think in new ways about our talk, teaching, and students. The power of dialogue to transform thinking is a potential available to all of us as learners, teachers, and researchers if we create the contexts and the flexible roles in our classrooms and research that encourage this dialogue.

Connecting kidwatching and teacher-watching has the potential to allow teachers to refine and define our talk and roles in ways that aren't possible when we only look broadly at our teaching. Teacher-watching provides us with the opportunity to carefully examine and reflect on our practice and change our patterns of talk to match the intent of our curriculum and beliefs.

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