Giving Children Control: Fourth Graders Initiate and Sustain Discussions After Teacher Read-alouds

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"That was a great discussion today. What I'm really noticing about your discussions...is how well you listen to one another. And instead of just saying the comment that's in your head, you listen to what other people say and then your comment is a response, or you add to what they're saying, or you agree or disagree with what they're saying. We're really noticing how well you're doing that. In some classes the teacher talks, then the kids talk, then the teacher talks, but in this class you're talking a lot to each other and I'm hardly talking at all, which is exactly what I want. I really like the way you're responding to each other and the way you're listening."

For a couple of months, after daily teacher read aloud of novel chapters, my grade four class and I worked on giving control of our discussions from me, the teacher, to the children. The preceding comment was one of many I made to the class during the course of our work.

I have always allowed ample time for discussion after reading to the class, believing that it helps children to better understand the text on a basic level, as well as encouraging them to examine characters and their motivations, make predictions, discuss the author's style and choices and explore the characteristics of various genres of writing. The discussions were conducted in what is likely a typical manner: children would raise their hands if they had something to say and I would choose at random, trying to ensure that I gave as many as possible a chance to talk.

Our discussions were lively, but something was lacking. I was bothered by the disjointed quality of our talk. One child would make a comment, and the next child's comment would bear no relationship to what the first had said. Sometimes we'd come back to the same topic, or thread, some minutes later, but there would be no development of ideas; the discussions consisted of isolated comments. As well, I felt I needed to validate each child's comment by saying something afterwards. Over the years I moved from paraphrasing what the child had said (a sure way to let them know they didn't have to listen too closely to one another, as I would repeat each comment!), to making a general statement of approval ("Good thinking.", "Yes!"), to merely nodding my head and acknowledging that I had heard the comment. The effect pf these practices was to focus the children's attention on me between every speaker. I was in control of the discussion.

Early in the school year I talked to the children about my concerns. I noted that many were participating and making interesting comments, but that the format of our discussions did not allow them to build on one another's ideas. A new format was proposed. To begin, I would choose one child who had his or her hand raised. If someone had something to say that related to

or built upon that comment, he or she could speak next without raising his or her hand. Similarly, if the next person's comment was related, they too could speak without being chosen by me. We would continue in this way until that particular idea, or thread, had been exhausted. I would then choose another child from those who had their hands raised, and a new thread would begin.

Galins (1994) points out that teachers, through "ratification" of each child's comments, "transmit a very clear message about the types of communication that are appropriate for school" (p.18). Indeed, after years of needing permission to talk in a discussion, some children were hesitant to speak out without being chosen or hearing what I thought of the previous comment, but soon most were jumping in, themselves becoming "ratifiers of the discourse" (Galins, p.18). Quite spontaneously they started to preface their ideas with expressions such as, "This goes with Chris' comment", "I agree with Lauren", "I sort of agree with Petra, but I sort of don't", demonstrating that they were listening well and making a conscious link between their thoughts and the ideas of their peers.

Despite the success of our new format, I still found that children looked to me for my reaction after each comment, rather than focussing on the person who was talking. As a result, I told them that I would look down when children talked. I didn't want them to think that I was being impolite or expressing indifference to what they had to say, but to take the aversion of my eyes as a reminder that they should not look at me. This seemed to help.

A further step, but one I would not undertake until the children's discussion skills were at quite a high level, would be to remove myself completely from the circle, giving total control of the discussion to the children. However, this would remove the opportunity to model appropriate comments and behavior, a crucial role for the teacher. A possibility would be to have children form Student Book Clubs (Rafael, et. al., 1995), where they would meet in small groups to discuss books they had read. This would give them a chance to further apply their discussion skills without a teacher's presence.

My goal is to talk as little as possible, and while these discussions are not a place for direct instruction, a great deal of teaching can occur through the teacher's judicious participation. Before I speak, I try to have in mind not only what I will say, but why I am saying it. Not only do I try to expand the children's repertoire of comments, but I consciously echo the types of comments they are making in order to reinforce what they are doing well. It is important, however, that the teacher wait until well into the discussion to make comments, what Chambers (1993) calls "teacher hold back", so that "hers doesn't become the privileged point of view" (p.52). Wells (1996) makes the point that the dialogic relationship between teaching and learning is not a "dialogue between equals", as the teacher needs to take on the role of leader and guide to ensure that the students "engage with the mandated curriculum and that they are assisted to appropriate it as effectively as possible." (p.12) To this end, I cannot remain silent, but must make comments and ask questions that provide scaffolding as the younger, less experienced members of the community learn to take part in discussions.

After the discussion is over, I am more direct in my teaching, commenting briefly on how the discussion went that day, what was successful and what I would like them to think about for next

time. As well, I might explain the motivation behind something that I did or said during the discussion. The comment at the beginning of the article is an example of this.

Another way to give children control is to refrain from asking a leading question or initiate a topic at the beginning of the discussion. The class sits on the floor, facing me as I read, as I have found there are fewer opportunities for distractions when the children do not face one another. There are few (or no) illustrations in the novels we read, so I also sit on the floor, where it is easier to make eye contact and draw the children in. When I finish reading, they move silently into a circle, a routine taught from the first day of school. Chambers (1993) emphasizes the importance of allowing the children to talk about their experience with the book, rather than "play[ing] the game 'Guess what's in teacher's head'" where they "report as their own the kind of responses they sense the teacher wants to hear". Children need to be confident that their comments will be "honourably reported, without risk of denial, belittlement or rejection". (p.45) I, too feel this is critical, so once everyone is settled I ask, "Any comments?", or simply look around the circle, and the discussion is able to proceed in any direction that the children desire.

The following is part of a transcript of a discussion held towards the end of the novel, Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of Nihm. The focus of my analysis will not be on the children's understanding of the plot, but on elements of their comments that relate to how they control and sustain the discussion. (Underlined sections indicate that two comments were uttered simultaneously. Astericks indicate that the words were inaudible.)

01 Teacher: William?
02 William: Wouldn't the poisonous gas have an effect on Mrs.Frisby?
03 Matthew: That's what I remember.(Others nod.)
04 William: So wouldn't she have to go with the rats and her kids?
05 Patrick: No, remember they're staying in the other house.
(Several children sitting nearby talk at once, adding to William's point)
06 William: But wouldn't the gas still go there?
07 Patrick (and several others): No, because they have a pump.
08 William: Oh.
09 Teacher: Matt
10 Matthew: I sort of agree with William. I think that Mrs. Frisby is going to end up moving with the rats because like she's going to realize that she shouldn't steal, cause their house is stolen like.
11 Dylan: Not really.
12 Brendan: They went through all that trouble at the start to get her house out.
13 Matthew: What do you mean?
14 Brendan: Like, they got seven rats, they went through all that trouble like pulling it out and -
(Several children are talking at once. The talk dies out.)
15 Matthew: And also I think that the exterminators said there might be other like rat holes on that farm so they'd probably like check everywhere, cause the humans wouldn't know if there were more rats.
(Several children begin to respond at once; Patrick's voice prevails.)
16 Patrick: They always said it was in the rose bush.
17 ?: Rose bush.

18 Matthew: So?

19 Patrick: She saw them. She said she saw them.

20 Matthew: They'd probably check. They'd probably check in the garden and everywhere else, just in case, like the humans wouldn't know, wouldn't know exactly where the rats are, like they know they're in the rose bush, but they don't know if there are more rats, like in a different...

21 Dylan: Except they know how, if they know how big rats are they wouldn't look for the tunnel that goes to Mrs. Frisby's house.

22 William: But the gas would probably get there anyhow.

23 Matthew: They'd probably be like spraying everywhere.

(Many talk at once.)

24 Dylan: * * * it's under the ground * *

25 William: Wouldn't, if the rats went through all that trouble to make their home, wouldn't Mrs. Frisby um like just be willing to give it up,'cause that's exactly what the rats are doing, they're giving up all their hard work and they're going to go move somewhere else?

26 Teacher: I was thinking that.

27 William: So why doesn't Mrs. Frisby do the exact same?

(Several children near William talk at once.)

28 Teacher: What do people think about what William just said?

This sequence of 28 turns is a small part of a discussion that lasted about 20 minutes. The conversation is initiated by William, chosen by me from children who had their hands raised, and sustained by a group of children who all happen to be boys. This was typical of our discussions: the class had 21 boys and 11 girls, and the boys talked far more than the girls -- a topic for a future study!

William, in turn 2, begins the thread with a question. In the past, I would have answered the question; indeed, the children would have expected it. By looking around at the group and not answering, I give them the message that they are expected to have the answer. They now routinely answer each other's questions. William asks two more questions towards the end of the transcript (turns 25 and 27). This is the only point during this sequence when I talk, trying to re-focus the children to think about what William has asked.

Dylan's comment of "not really" (turn 11) is the type of comment somebody might make in a real-life discussion, and as sometimes happens, is not picked up by anyone. It shows that he is interested in and evaluating others' comments.

Matt's comment, "what do you mean?" (turn 13) is the type of question often asked by a teacher who is trying to get children to extend their comments for the understanding of others. It is satisfying that the children have taken on this role and want to really understand what others are saying. In the past, I often felt as if I was the only one who was truly interested in everyone's comments!

There are a number of times (on or around turns 5, 7, 14, 23, 27) when several children start to answer at the same time, or when small groups of two or three children make comments to one another. At other times (turns 16-21) children's successive comments overlap. This is a reflection of what happens in real-life conversations. I made the children aware of this, but it did not

become a problem. The overlapping talk died out quickly, or children who were talking at once allowed one child to prevail (as in turn 16). Rather than being discouraged by the children talking at once, I saw this as a sign that our discussions were becoming more like real-life conversations, and less like "school talk".

Making and examining transcripts of our discussions was very illuminating, as it allowed me to see how often I was talking and what types of comments I was contributing. This heightened awareness of my role in our discussions helped me to be more selective about what I said and when I said it. Indeed, Wells (1996) points out that teachers who pay this type of "conscious attention" to their practice may be more likely to change the way they intuitively respond during classroom discourse (p.31).

Over the year the children developed a real sense of efficacy in their ability to carry on meaningful discussions after teacher read-alouds. Their reactions to a question on one of their weekly evaluations illustrates that a large majority of the children liked our new format and understood why it worked so well. Many children focussed on how building on each other's ideas allowed for ideas to flow more quickly and naturally, and gave more children a chance to talk:

"If you have something to go with what the other person just said you can just say your comment."
"It gives more people a chance to talk."
"People can talk more freely. We get sort of a flowing discussion."
"I like it because you can talk about something that relates without your hand. It would take longer if you wait to choose someone."

Others focussed on how building on each other's ideas produced a better quality discussion. They appreciated being able to make a comment that related to another comment, rather than waiting to be chosen and finding that the comment was no longer relevant, or not making a comment at all because the discussion topic was constantly changing:

"I like the second one better because if you do it the first way if you have something that relates you might get picked 10 minutes after."
"You get to say what you think and when you put your hand up you don't always get to say what you want to."
"If you have to say something that adds on you don't have to wait with your hand up."
"If you have your hand up and you have something to go with the other person and you don't pick them they would probably put their hand down."

Some liked the new format for purely practical reasons, such as "it gets kind of tiring holding your hand up". Many felt that the new format encouraged them to talk more than they had before:

"I don't have to raise my hand, I just talk."
"You can just say it when it goes with the other person's comment."
"You can talk out without raising your hand and it builds on."

"I get ideas from the other comments."
"I think it's because you can have more of a discussion."

A drawback is that some children had a problem getting past the ingrained school expectation of raising a hand and being acknowledged by the teacher before speaking. One said, "I don't like to jump in" and another felt that "right after someone talks there is a race to relate to the next speaker". One child said, "I am shy and I don't like to interrupt", perhaps feeling that the assertiveness necessary in taking a turn to speak would be seen as rude behavior.

A second related drawback is the issue of particular children dominating the discussion, which can easily happen when the teacher is not controlling turns to talk. The children and I were all well aware that some of their peers were quite assertive about making their comments heard. As well, there were times when a small group of children, usually friends or friendly adversaries, would get into a heated discussion or disagreement and monopolize the discussion. I brought up this issue several times after our discussions, not naming names, but merely pointing out that it was happening and suggesting a few solutions. I asked the children to reflect on their role in our discussions, and of the amount of time they spent talking. If they were taking up more than their share of time, they should allow others to talk, and others were encouraged to be more assertive when they had something to say. The children had some interesting ideas when asked for solutions:

"I think we should only talk four times in a discussion."
"I think they need to know that they are talking too much so they will not talk as much."
"Let them only have a amount of time."
"If you want to say something and so does the person, say to them may I go first!"
"You could try to tell them that other people want a turn and you don't own the floor."
"Maybe remind people to give others a chance. I think we should record a discussion so people can hear how much they actually talk."

This last suggestion would have been interesting to attempt! We did have video tapes of our discussions, but the year was almost over and we did not have time to try it. I do feel, however, that discussing the problem of certain children dominating the discussions resulted in some improvement, or at least an improved awareness of how this problem impacted upon our discussions. In future I would deal with this issue more directly, and earlier in the year. Viewing the video tapes provided me with opportunities to reflect on and change my practice. Looking back, I regret that the children were not also able to learn from watching the recordings of our discussions.

I have always found the shared experience of teacher read-aloud of novels a strong influence on the building of classroom community, and this was even more the case once control of the discussions was given over to the children . The expectation in our community was that children would initiate and sustain our discussions about the novels. Through joint participation in discussions, the children became skilled at this. As a mentor, I participated in the discussions by making comments and asking questions that allowed children to work and to learn within their zones of proximal development. My comments and questions provided scaffolding for the children, the apprentices, so that they could become full members of the community. (Vygotsky,

1987) Their growing ability to make relevant comments and build on each other's ideas, without the teacher being the sole authority, had a profound influence on the children's sense of themselves as a cohesive group who enjoyed listening to stories and talking with and listening to one another. These feelings of success, generated by controlling their own discussions, were a very positive part of our year together.

References

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