The Inquiry Acts of Bilingual Children in Literature Discussions

Literature discussions can open up possibilities for children to engage in meaningful inquiries around texts.

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Bilingual Inquiry Acts

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The children had been participating in literature discussions in their second-grade bilingual classroom for almost a year and had appropriated ways of talking about texts in small groups. They decided the order in which they wanted to talk and the languages they wanted to use—English, Spanish, and codeswitching. Although all of the children were considered bilingual at some level, Ada and Johaira were Spanish-dominant speakers and Amaury, Helena, and Steve were English dominant, as determined by the school’s classification of language proficiency. Indeed, Ada and Helena moved easily between the two languages. The last lines of the opening excerpt in which Helena asked her peers whether Oliver Button had to do what other boys told him point to a way to talk about texts that I characterize as inquiry. The students engaged in a process of inquiry as they addressed each other in the small group, entertained ideas, played with possibilities, and tried to understand critical issues that affected the characters of the book while also considering the story’s relevance to their lives.

There seems to be little disagreement about the cognitive and social benefits of a classroom that fosters children’s voices and peer interactions (Cazden, 2001; Vygotsky, 1987). However, the official discourse in education enacted through English Only programs, together with the use of prescriptive reading programs, have restricted the possibilities for this kind of classroom interaction and inquiry talk for English Language Learners (ELLs). In her work with educators, Nieto (2004) found, however, that along with the official discourse, we can always find a discourse of possibilities. The children’s voices in the opening excerpt remind us of an alternative discourse to the official one, a discourse in which ideas are explored instead of answering teachers’ test questions; in which the children themselves decide when to speak rather than waiting to be called on by the teacher (Cazden, 2001); and in which the students address each other directly and engage in meaningful inquiry around literary texts using the linguistic resources available to them.

Indeed, discussions of children’s literary events in which kind of talk has been and continues to be documented, albeit not frequently enough in linguistically diverse classrooms. In 1998, I had the privilege of conducting a larger study in a second-grade Spanish/English bilingual class located in a working-class neighborhood school in the southwestern U.S. (Martinez-Roldán, 2000). Over the course of a year, as the bilingual children met in small groups to discuss literature, I examined both their responses to literature and the context that supported these discussions.

In this article, I extend that analysis by examining the inquiry talk of a small group of bilingual children discussing the text Oliver Button Is a Sissy. The children raised many questions about the story and about issues of gender. The major focus of the article is on the participants’ inquiry talk and the context that mediated their talk, which I believe opens up possibilities to enrich our literacy practices for ELLs. Other issues, such as the children's ideas about gender, are considered in relation to that major focus. Before presenting the children’s discussion, I offer the definition of inquiry that informs the study, a glimpse into the classroom context in which the students’ literary talk developed, and a summary of the methods that enabled me to analyze their discussions.

**INQUIRY ACTS**

I am using the word “inquiry” as defined by Lindfors (1999) who writes about acts of inquiry as language acts in which a speaker attempts to elicit another’s help in going beyond his or her own present understanding. As such, they provide a window into children’s thinking, allowing us to glimpse what they are making sense of and how they use others to help them understand. Lindfors describes inquiry language acts as the union of four aspects. The first one is communicative purpose or intention. Language acts have a variety of purposes, and for a language act to be an inquiry act, we must be able to hear the presence of a purpose for inquiry in children’s words. The second aspect is an expression of purpose, content, or stance. Inquiry acts do not need to be expressed as questions. Consider the following sentences: “I’m still wondering whether Oliver Button is a boy or a girl.” or “Do you guys think that Oliver should do whatever others tell him to do?” Although it may be easier to recognize the second sentence as an inquiry act, they both are. Lindfors suggests that syntax is not the issue; “the focus is meaning and purpose, whatever their expressive form” (p. 6). She calls our attention to the distinction...
A third important factor in inquiry refers to the participants: not only as individuals but as partners engaged in a collaborative activity through dialogue. A focus on the participants should lead us to examine how individual inquiry acts contribute to the making of larger dialogic texts—whole conversations that are exploratory in their intent. Finally, when examining inquiry acts, we need to pay attention to the context. Context involves weaving together time, place, and participants with their meanings, expressions, and purposes. It is a dynamic reality, ever-shifting, in which speakers’ acts of inquiry shape their notions of what’s happening while these notions, in turn, shape the inquiry acts themselves.

Lindfors also distinguishes between different kinds of inquiry acts. Two kinds of inquiring are especially relevant to this study—information-seeking and wondering. Information-seeking inquiry acts include facts, clarifications, justifications, explanations, and confirmations that support the speaker in understanding or making sense of something. Wondering inquiry acts are those in which the speaker invites speculations, conjectures, entertains ideas, considers possible words, and engages another in playing with possibilities, reflecting, considering, and exploring.

An example of children engaged in wondering inquiry acts can be found in the third-grade bilingual classroom described by Crowell (1993). In Crowell’s classroom, the children participated in literature discussions as inquirers in order to understand the issue of war during the U.S. involvement in the first Persian Gulf conflict. As a small group of students read and discussed texts about war, the children wondered why “some people don’t like others who are different? Aren’t the bombs we’re dropping in Iraq hurting innocent people, too?” (p. 53). There seemed to be an understanding in this classroom that a literature discussion was a reading event particularly suited to thinking about texts and life. Indeed, in Crowell’s classroom, the whole curriculum was organized around inquiry, and so the classroom context supported the children as inquirers.

**THE BILINGUAL CONTEXT OF THE CLASSROOM**

The setting for this study was a bilingual elementary school in the U.S. Southwest with a 93% Hispanic school population, according to official school reports. Hispanics (the term used by the school to identify Latino/a children and also by the parents of the children in this study) were mostly of Mexican descent, both U.S.-born and recent immigrants. The classroom had 21 seven- and eight-year-olds, all of whom were of Mexican descent. Ten were English-dominant and 11 were Spanish-dominant, as determined by the school’s classification of language proficiency.

Julia López-Robertson has been a bilingual teacher for five years. She creates a learning environment where children are invited to think, especially about the books they read and the themes they study. The curriculum is oriented towards inquiry and children are invited to share their thoughts and to pose questions on a regular basis. Although reading and writing instruction is offered in the student’s first language, the children use their first and second languages as they participate in classroom activities, and both languages are used interchangeably throughout the day.

As part of her language arts curriculum, Julia uses a range of reading engagements explicitly designed to connect children and books, such as story time, DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) time, writing workshops, guided reading groups, and small-group literature discussions. Julia and I met in a university course, and together we decided to initiate small group literature discussions or literature circles with her students. Small-group literature discussions in this classroom were literacy events in which a small group of students read or listened to the same book and met to discuss their ideas and opinions about the text with one another (Short & Pierce, 1998). The groups were heterogeneous, organized according to the students’ book choices. The literature circles aimed at encouraging students to take an aesthetic stance toward literature (Rosenblatt, 1995), helping them make connections to their lives and to other texts and to develop their own taste in books. Therefore, when Julia and I organized the literature circles, we encouraged students as individual readers and as a group to experience the text aesthetically and to focus on making meaning. We did not assign roles for the students to perform in the literature circles. The literature discussions were also organized with the purpose of
engaging students in thoughtful discussions and inquiry not only about the texts they read, but about social issues. In other words, the groups provided a context for students to engage in literary talk about texts while listening and considering each others’ voices and perspectives regardless of individual reading proficiency or language dominance.

Julia and I agreed that the books selected for literature circles should be related to social issues to provide a context for students to think together about critical questions. We decided to organize the curriculum around the broad concept of “sense of place and sense of belonging,” which we translated in Spanish as “sentido de pertenencia y sentirse parte de un lugar.” Over the course of two weeks, we engaged in four activities that supported the students in exploring, negotiating, and understanding this broad concept.

First, we read aloud and had whole-class discussions about picture books that presented different ways in which people find their sense of place or belonging (see Figure 1). Second, each student created a box of special things that reflected their sense of place and belonging, such as baby pictures, blankets, photos, and letters from relatives. It was evident that they derived their sense of belonging from their families, their own history and growth, and the people they loved. Third, the children browsed through more than 50 picture books presenting different perspectives on this broad concept, and they wrote questions about the books on index cards, generating a total of 105 questions. Last, we created a web representing the children’s initial understandings of “sense of place” and “sense of belonging.” The children made connections to the issue they identified as “feeling left out,” “feeling out of place,” or “why some people laugh at others.” These connections provided the basis for the organization of the literature circles around issues of discrimination and provided a context for inquiry.

As the children discussed these connections, they were especially curious about the issue of gender equity. Therefore, we pulled together a set of children’s books dealing with this topic: El libro de los cerdos [Piggybook] (Browne, 1991), My Mother the Mail Carrier/Mi mamá la cartera (Maury, 1976), Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991), and the text that is the focus of this article, Oliver Button Is a Sissy (dePaola, 1979).

EXAMINING THE CHILDREN’S TALK

My interest in understanding the students’ meanings and perspectives on literature discussions led me to adopt an interpretive stance (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Erickson, 1986) to examine their participation in literature discussions over the course of a year. A qualitative case study design (Merriam, 1998) afforded me the opportunity to examine closely and in detail the children’s talk in small groups. From 11 small group literature discussions that had undergone two layers of analysis (content analysis and analysis of literary responses) in the larger study, I chose the discussion of Oliver Button Is a Sissy for close examination of children’s inquiries. This literature discussion stood out in the larger study because it was one of the longest discussions the children sustained. These young bilingual students were so involved in their inquiries about issues of gender raised by the text that they sustained their discussion of literature for 50 minutes, and they did not want to end the discussion. The discussion also included numerous “wondering acts,” thus providing a unique opportunity to examine the children’s engagement in inquiry.

I first identified “inquiry acts” in terms of purpose and expressive form and examined the children’s responses to those inquiry acts as well as the effect of those inquiry acts on the discussion. I paid attention to the participants, to who brought the inquiry acts into the discussion, and to whether the inquiry became a collaborative endeavor. I examined whether the inquiry acts moved the discussion forward and how they evolved throughout the discussion. I wondered also about the meanings the students were making through those inquiry acts. My inquiry led


Figure 1. Books presenting different perspectives on the issue of sense of place and belonging
me to organize the transcript of the discussion, which had 654 conversational turns, into inquiry segments marked, mostly, by topic shifts. I then examined the mediational character of the literature discussion and identified the multiple tools and cultural resources that supported the children’s inquiries.

The following section is organized around two of the major inquiries the children brought into the discussion—the boys’ talk around the topic of gender polarization and the girls’ talk around the topic of crossing and resisting gender boundaries. It is important to note that boys and girls engaged in each other’s inquiries and that I am not establishing a dichotomy between boys’ and girls’ kinds of talk. I then move to a discussion of the specific mediational means or resources that supported the children’s inquiry process within the small groups. All of the excerpts included in this article are from the same literature discussion. I retained the language of the participants, using italics for the Spanish text; the English translations appear in brackets as needed.

THE INQUIRY ACTS OF THE CHILDREN

In the picture storybook *Oliver Button Is a Sissy*, Oliver shows preferences for activities that the boys in his school associate with girls, such as dancing, picking flowers, and playing with paper dolls. He does not follow the gender scripts that other boys and his own father think he should follow, so they call him a sissy. The second-grade students began this discussion by sharing comments about parts of the story they did or did not like. The children expressed empathy with Oliver’s crossing of gender boundaries and rejected and questioned the other boys’ negative behavior toward Oliver.

After those initial interchanges in the small group, Amaury initiated the following inquiry segment.

**Understanding Gender Polarization**

Amaury wanted to know why playing dress-up was considered something that only girls do:

58 Amaury: *What was the girly about playing dress-up?*

59 Steve: *I didn’t hear you very good.*

60 Amaury: *What was so girly about playing dress-up?*

61 Steve: *I don’t know.*

(The discussion continues)

65 Steve: *Probably he likes to play girls’ games.*

66 Amaury: *But he said, it says in the book that he was pretending to be a star.*

67 Steve: *I know. Wait. What page are you on? This one?*

68 Ada: *He got it too [pink sticky notes to mark the pages].*

69 Steve: *[Reading from the text]. “Then he would sing and dance and make believe he was a movie star. ‘Oliver,’ said his papa, ‘Don’t be such a sissy! Go out and play baseball or football or basketball. Any kind of ball!’”*

When Amaury asked, “What was girly about playing dress-up?” (# 58), Steve seemed to recognize Amaury’s question as an invitation to engage in inquiry, and responded that “Probably he [Oliver] likes to play girls’ games” (# 65). With this response, Steve introduced the issue of gender polarization, defined by Bem (1993) as mutually exclusive scripts for being male and female. Amaury confronts the plausibility of that interpretation with the written text and brings a perspective different than Steve’s, “But he said, it says in the book that he was pretending to be a star” (# 66). Amaury comes back to his inquiry about the view of dressing up as a girl’s game. In this next excerpt, I ask a question to support the children’s discussion and to encourage them to address the issue of gender polarization introduced by Steve.

81 Amaury: *I said what was so girly about playing dress-up?*

82 Steve: *I don’t know. /Maybe his dad (inaudible)/*

83 Helena: */Nothing./*

84 Amaury: *I couldn’t hear you.*

85 Steve: *Maybe his dad wants him to play a boy game instead of girl game ’cause maybe his dad doesn’t think he gets exercise.*

86 Carmen: *OK, but, do you think that there are boys, I have a question in relation to Steve’s and Amaury’s [comments]. So do you think that there are boy games and girl games?*

87 Steve: *Yeah.*

88 Ada: *No. I don’t think that. I think he dresses up because the boys dress [up] too.*
Ada positions herself as favoring Oliver’s gender border crossing and indirectly questions Steve’s dichotomy by saying that “boys dress [up] too” (#88). Amaury extends Ada’s comments, confronting Steve with his own reality when he says that “Steve played dress-up before” (#89). Steve acknowledges that it is true—he likes to dress up. He is drawn into tension because although he likes to dress up, as his friend Amaury has pointed out, he is not a girl (#90). The children’s interactions in this inquiry segment resemble the kinds of interactions Lindfors (1999) has found taking place in inquiry contexts. She proposes that when partners interact, they necessarily come together, yet remain separate and distinct; they know how to take each other’s words, and their turns play off each other appropriately, especially in the oppositional turns.

Using her words, we can see in this excerpt that the tension raised by Amaury’s comment (#89) seems “right”; the children know “how hard to push and pull, thrust and back off, without jeopardizing the interaction. Each partner knows who she is dealing with and each language act reflects this other-awareness” (Lindfors, 1999, p. 11). From this point on, Steve and the rest of the group engaged in inquiry try to understand and negotiate their ideas about gender polarization. The girls, particularly Helena and Ada, took their inquiry further by raising and resisting the issue of gender boundaries, and their inquiry led them ultimately to question gender inequities.

**CROSSING AND RESISTING GENDER BOUNDARIES**

It is evident in the previous excerpts that the children were discussing issues related to the crossing of perceived gender lines, which Thorne (1993) defines as “the process through which a girl or a boy may seek access to groups and activities of the other gender” (p. 121). However, for the most part, they kept their discussion at the level of the fictional character’s experiences and about boys and girls in general. Indeed, later when Helena asked if Oliver had to do whatever the other boys said, everyone in the small group advocated for Oliver’s rights to do what he wanted. Ada, for example, said, “No, it’s his life. It’s his life. He doesn’t listen to them because he has his own life. It’s not others’ life.”

Ada’s hypothetical statement was an inquiry in which she was entertaining new possibilities. Her inquiry question had the potential of opening up the discussion to new possibilities. Interestingly, no one took up Ada’s comment. Minutes later, I invited Ada to repeat her concern; this time, she did it in a more explicit and categorical way, and made use of her bilingualism to get her message across:

343 Ada: *Yo digo, que si yo quiero ser un hombre, ¿por qué no debo de ser un hombre?* [I say that if I want to be a man, why should I not be a man?]

344 Steve: Could you tell it in English, please?

345 Ada: *Ok. If I want to be a boy, why do people tell me I not be a boy?*

346 Steve: Because they don’t like you that way.

347 Amaury: Yeah.

Steve’s response, “Because they don’t like you that way” (#346), and Amaury’s “Yeah” (#347) contradicted their previous discourse on the right of people to do whatever they want. Therefore, Ada articulated clearly that if it was her life, and if she was born to be herself, and if her peers had been saying that a person can be whatever she wants, why would people tell her that she cannot be a boy. All of the children got involved in supporting, probing, or challenging
Ada’s stance and inquiry. Using her home-based language, Ada questioned gender differences in terms of “gendered” activities:

¿Por qué hay unos hombres que hacen cosas de mujeres y las mujeres no pueden? (#411). Yo quiero decir, por qué hay unas cosas que las mujeres hacen y los hombres no puedan hacer? (#448).

[Why it is that there are some men who do women’s things and women cannot do? What I mean is, why it is that there are some things that women do and men cannot do?]

She then provided examples of those activities expressed in Spanish for the most part. The following excerpts indicate some of the examples Ada provided as the discussion proceeded:

- 363 “Como Peter Pan, yo quiero jugar soccer y no me dejan jugar.” [As in Peter Pan, I want to play soccer and they don’t let me play.] In this comment, Ada makes an intertextual connection to a story the students had read in the classroom, Amazing Grace (Hoffman, 1991). In the story, a girl named Grace wanted to represent Peter Pan in a school play, but her peers thought she could not do it because she was Black and she was a girl. By the end of the story, they had changed their minds regarding Grace’s participation in the play.

- 399 “No hay [mujeres en el Army] porque mi hermano fue y no había nada de mujeres.” [There are no women in the Army because my brother went there and there wasn’t a single woman.] Ada had previously stated her desires to be not just a woman in the Army but an officer, “That’s what I want to be: an Army officer” (#388).

- 451 “Los hombres no tienen babies.” [Men do not have babies.] For Ada, having babies is a painful process. In her arguments, she made reference to soap operas and relatives’ experiences as her sources of knowledge regarding giving birth.

- 518 “Yo no puedo ser Presidente; no’más hombres pueden.” [I cannot be President; only men can be.] She repeated in English, “Women cannot be President” (#518). I affirmed to Ada that women can be President, an idea that Steve did not accept and so he offered Ada a different alternative—“You can be the President’s wife.” All the members of the group, including Johaira, who was new at school, and myself used our experiences to share examples with Ada that challenged the dichotomy of men’s jobs/women’s jobs. However, we were not addressing Ada’s major concern. As her examples show, her main inquiry was indeed related to her emergent sense of social constraints that lead to women having fewer opportunities than men.

Leaving the Discussion Open

The children’s engagement in authentic inquiries is evident in that no matter how much they struggled to make sense of the conflicting ideas they were negotiating, they still wanted to continue talking and thinking of these issues after 50 minutes of discussion:

582 Ada: Pero yo tengo una cosa pa’ éste [sobre el libro]. [But I have something else to say about this (book)].

At the end of their discussion, the children’s questions, dilemmas, and inquiries had not been resolved. In fact, Steve was “still wondering about that boy and girl thingy” (#632; 651), and Ada was not sure what to think about this issue. As authentic inquiry acts, their discourse remained open; the focus was on the process itself, rather than on a product or final answer. Their utterances tended to play with alternatives, leaving room to imagine possible worlds.

Supporting Inquiry Talk

These children were not exceptions in their pursuits of inquiries. They were “regular kids”—young bilingual Spanish/English students attending a public school in a low-income neighborhood; children who had different “levels” of language proficiency in English and Spanish as well as different reading proficiency levels. So what supported their sophisticated talk about texts and about life? It seems to me that the quality of talk that the children had in
this literature discussion can be explained through the Vygotskian principle that learning is socially mediated (Moll, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Contrary to accounts of learning and development as an “in-the-head” phenomenon, Vygotsky’s sociocultural and historical theory provides an account of learning and development as a mediated process. He attributed a major role in development to social, cultural, and historical factors and proposed that cultural and psychological tools (i.e., language, works of art, writing) and other human beings (i.e., teachers, peers) mediate children’s thinking and learning. Culture and community are not just factors that impact learning; they are, as several scholars have pointed out, the mediational means through which ideas are developed (Cole, 1994; Daniels, 2001; Moll, 2001). In this non-deterministic account, the child is actively transforming the very forces that mediate her thinking and learning in collaboration with others. In this section, I highlight some of the mediational means, cultural resources, and conditions that I submit mediated the children’s inquiries in this discussion.

Through the Mediation of Language: Opportunities to Use Their Home-based Discourse

Vygotsky (1987) considered language to be the most crucial mediational means of children’s learning and cognitive development. Through language, children self-regulate their behavior and influence others. Consider, for example, the way Ada drew from a wide repertoire of linguistic forms and codes to engage others in her own attempts to understand, using English, Spanish, and codeswitching. Their first language as well as codeswitching were linguistic resources that enabled these ELLs, and bilingual students in particular, to engage in inquiry, and were tools that mediated their thinking and participation (Martínez-Roldán, 2003). Indeed, given the formative effects of language in children’s development, many scholars raise concerns about the consequences of putting up barriers to participation and about excluding students from participation (Daniels, 2001; Gutiérrez, 1994) by means of interaction patterns that teachers enable or restrict in their classrooms.

The teacher did not wait until the students had developed specific language or reading skills to facilitate critical discussions and inquiry talk.

Through the Mediation of Texts: Opportunities to Engage in Meaningful Reading

Literature has been described both as a psychological tool that mediates the human experience and as an instrument of cognitive change (Kozulin, 1998). The children’s discussion was centered on a piece of literature, a picture storybook that addresses one dimension of the human experience—negotiating and accepting our own and others’ identities. The texts used for literature discussion in this classroom were books that the students could potentially connect to, think about, and/or talk about, whether the books were read aloud to them or read with others. As Egawa (1990) emphasizes, meaningful connections with books are more likely to happen with meaningful stories. However, a good book is not enough to support meaningful discussions and inquiry talk. Students need sufficient opportunities to participate in discussions of texts. As Roller and Beed (1994) also found in their study, some of the children’s discussions in this second-grade bilingual classroom were great, and others were not as rich, but very short and without much interaction. From a sociocultural-historical perspective, those not-so-grand discussions were as important as the great ones, because the children were learning through participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991). We could not predict when the children were going to engage in meaningful inquiries, and the progression towards more meaningful discussions was not linear. Nevertheless, through their ongoing participation, the children were becoming members of a literate community appropriating and transforming ways of participating and talking about texts. They were experiencing multiple discourses from their peers, the adults, and the book authors. In this classroom, the teacher did not wait until the students had developed specific language or reading skills to facilitate critical discussions and inquiry talk.

Through the Mediation of Others: The Adults

Julia and I each took on the role of facilitator/mediator of the discussions, not only during the discussions, but as we orchestrated a context before the actual discussions took place. Part of this context included a space where students could enjoy the texts, learn to listen to each other, and pursue their own inquiries, while we demonstrated ways of participating through our own talk. We also mediated as we listened to the students’ questions and interests before choosing the texts for discussions, selected the texts, read them aloud, and as Julia organized and put together the small groups. We also supported the
children’s inquiries by providing time and opportunity to talk about the same texts more than once. For instance, after seeing the students’ interest in the Oliver Button story, we offered it again for discussion so they could further pursue their individual inquiries. As a result, we ended up having three literature discussions—four small groups in each—around gender issues.

One of the ways I mediated the Oliver Button discussion was by making requests for clarification, restating comments, asking questions, and making comments designed to encourage and invite students to expand their ideas or to express an opinion. I also mediated this literature discussion through listening to the students—not listening to check for comprehension but “inquiry listening.” I was interested in making sense of the children’s inquiries and I had learned from my earlier interactions with the children that sometimes the best way to reach that understanding is through listening more and talking less. Lindfors (1999) points out the importance of considering the active, constructive, and interpretive process that listening entails. She highlights how listeners may participate fully even if they do not speak at all in dialogic events involving more than two individuals. For her, listening becomes an act of inquiry in inquiry episodes, “for the listener creates from the speaker’s words a meaningful inquiry act” (p. 143). It seems to me that all the participants engaged in “inquiry listening” at different points in this discussion, making it possible to construct and negotiate meaning from the text as well as from students’ life experiences.

**Through the Mediation of Others: Their Peers**

The children’s discussions were not only mediated by psychological tools, cultural resources, and adults. The children themselves became mediators of their thinking and talk. Through their talk and inquiries, students shaped and transformed the very context of the discussions. In these heterogeneous groups, all students, not only the more proficient readers, became mediators of each other’s inquiries. As the excerpts illustrate, the children mediated those inquiries by listening, posing comments and questions, regulating their talk, appropriating words from each other, and most important, by extending or challenging others’ comments. When Amaury confronted Steve about his own preferences (#89), as well as when Ada challenged gender scripts, they “disrupted” the discussion while taking the group into a sophisticated discussion in which everyone engaged in their inquiries about gender issues. Their individual inquiry acts contributed to the making of a larger context for inquiry.

**Through the Mediation of Life Experiences**

Sociocultural-historical theory calls our attention not only to the mediational tools or means available to people in their immediate contexts, but also to the broader cultural and historical context of the world outside the classroom. As the children engaged in pondering, wondering, discussing, and arguing about gender issues, they brought the outside world into their discussion. Ada’s examples, for instance, were based on her experiences, not only in the playground, where the boys did not allow her to play soccer, but in the popular culture of her community and in her extended family’s experiences, particularly the female narratives about giving birth, and her observation/perception of job distribution by gender. The children’s experiences and their readings of the world were perhaps as important to the discussion as the immediate context of the literature discussions.

**Final Thoughts**

Although each classroom is unique and each teacher has his or her own ways of encouraging inquiry talk about texts, meaningful discussions and inquiry talk are more likely to occur when literature discussions are part of an inquiry context (Short, 1998a)—that is, part of a classroom where exploratory and wondering talk, uncertainty, tentativeness, and peer interactions are valued. In fact, Lindfors (1999) warns us about the potential dangers when non-inquiry purposes and events substitute for genuine inquiry events in the classroom. A clear example of this situation is when a whole-group discussion is more a public performance ritual than an exploration of ideas, or as it happened in Kong and Pearson’s (2003) study, when students struggled to learn to pose certain types of questions that had been modeled by the teacher even when they did not care about the responses. That is, students can learn to perform as good questioners without necessarily engaging in inquiry. As Lindfors notes, it is indeed difficult to generate questions to satisfy someone else, but it is not difficult to generate your own inquiries.

I share the concern voiced by other scholars that a strong focus on teaching the protocols, procedures, and particular ways of talking about texts can take away the focus on meaning-making and can relegate the aesthetic experience, the children’s transactions with texts, and their inquiries to a less prominent position (Eeds & Peterson, 1997; Short, 1998b). An overemphasis on teaching specific ways of talking about texts may focus students more on the final product than on the process. This is especially relevant as we try to support students as inquirers because inquiry utterances “are often imperfectly
Case studies are comprehensive research strategies that allow us to examine, reveal, or illustrate phenomena in education (Yin, 2002). Case studies are most effective when grounded in theory that guides their design and what we are able to say about what we learn from them.

A case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context (Yin, 2002) as a way of learning about how children, teachers, and other educational participants experience the world around them (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). It is not an experiment in which the phenomenon is separated from its context (as in single-subject research). A case study is a study of a “case of” or a bounded system, meaning that it is an examination of a specific phenomenon such as a program, an event, a person, a process, an institution, or a social group (Merriam, 1997). A bounded system might be an instance of some concern, issue, or question (e.g., the study of one literature circle group drawn from several).

Considerations when deciding to use case study research strategies include:

• Our research questions guide our decisions about methodology. Case studies are useful when we want to understand what is happening and/or how or why something happens (Yin, 2002). Questions about how many or how often do not usually lend themselves to the case study as a research strategy.

• What you want to understand, the theoretical perspective from which you’d like to understand it, and the ways in which you want talk about it help determine the “case” that you want to study. You can then select an instance or sample (e.g., a second-grade classroom, a group within that classroom, one child within that classroom or within that group).

• Case studies tend to take a holistic view of the phenomenon studied and its context to look at puzzling situations or questions that arise in everyday classroom practice.

• Case studies rely on multiple sources of data (e.g., interviews, observations, written texts and documents) and multiple ways of collecting and analyzing data, often reflective of an over time perspective.

• Case studies usually rely on inductive reasoning. Data is grounded in the context of the event, person, group, process, program studied. What we come to understand emerges from that data, similar to ethnographic research.

• Finished case studies are usually descriptive, with rich detail.

• Case studies can confirm what is known for the reader, extend the reader’s experience, provide new insights or, in “telling cases,” reveal or make visible something that was not available to be known before (Mitchell, 1984).


—Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group: Beth Yeager and Sabrina Tuyay
major challenge to the creation of inquiry contexts for literature discussions. Accountability seems to drive the educational endeavor. As Lindfors suggests, in such contexts, wondering will not score any points; moreover, it takes time to foster inquiry talk. Inquiry educators must take on this challenge and figure out creative ways to open up spaces for inquiry around texts in the classroom. When they succeed, more children will embrace the goals of reading and learning, and, like Ada, announce that “Tomorrow I will choose this book again.”

References


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