Providing Support for Dialogue in Literature Discussions about Social Justice

Karla J. Möller

Teachers make important choices in discussion groups as they support children's dialogue about social inequities.

Brandon: That is so dumb... Why would they put questions like that on a [voter] test? "How many bubbles in a bar of soap?"

Karla: Why do you think?

Brandon: So they, so they won't--

Allen: 'Cause they probably didn’t want the Blacks to vote.

Brandon: The Whites had to answer that though, 'cause... the Whites took the test, too.

Amby: I guess, I guess they didn’t let the Blacks pass.

Brandon: They had a better school. The Whites had better schools than the Blacks did.

Allen: 'Cause they, they probably didn’t want the Blacks to vote 'cause, like, back then... they, like, thought that the Blacks were dumb and stuff.

Karla: Do you think they asked them the same questions?

Brandon: Ms. Möller... is there even an answer to this: "How high is up?"
This excerpt highlights the children's engagement with issues of social justice and my choices to support their questions and contributions, prompt them to expand their ideas, and share my opinions. The dialogue took place in Donna Clausen's fourth-grade classroom. I am a university researcher and former elementary school teacher who collaborated with Donna at her invitation as she implemented her literature-based reading program, including discussion circles and extended free-choice reading. For the discussion circles, Donna and I taught in student-centered heterogeneous groups. As my group read and responded, we grappled with themes that added depth to our understanding of history, cultures, behaviors, and attitudes; expanded concepts of pleasure in reading; and focused attention on a teacher's responsibilities and choices in literature discussion pedagogy—especially in cases in which children explore emotionally challenging events and social inequities.

### The Teaching and Learning Environment

Donna taught in a rural southern school in which I volunteered during the 1998-1999 year. After discovering our mutual interest in engaging children with diversity through literature, Donna invited me to share the 1999-2000 year with her class. Her students—two African Americans, one Vietnamese, and the rest European Americans (as are Donna and myself)—had a range of reading abilities, strengths, and struggles and were living in a variety of financial and familial circumstances. Donna and I felt that small-group literature discussions had the potential to make reading a more desirable and authentic activity and to enhance children's relationships with books (Möller & Allen, 2000; Roser & Martinez, 1995; Samway & Whang, 1996). From experience we knew that simply instructing children to read, write, and talk is not sufficient. Even active discussions can foster stereotyping, silencing, or other destructive behaviors (e.g., Allen, Möller, & Stroup, in press; Evans, 1996; Short & Kaufman, 1995) either toward group members or members of cultures presented in the books. Because of this, Donna spent the first months laying groundwork for success. She read aloud with enthusiasm and generated multiple response opportunities, creating an environment in which children and adults reflected on a range of controversial topics. She emphasized the social nature of learning, teaching interpersonal skills and designing activities to encourage authentic questions, support understanding of literary elements, and assist a shift from surface talk to more deeply layered
dialogue. She helped students learn about and enhance respect for each other in ways that, as Amby said, "really pulled us together a lot." The class practiced discussions with picture books and a short novel. These jointly read texts became touchstones that aided in the creation of a classroom community. On alternate days students read and prepared in class or met for discussion and planning, using Fridays to catch up, work on projects, or engage in extra free-choice reading. The focus was on opportunities for all children to participate in the range of activities offered, not on the ability to decode. To avoid a situation in which students faced put-downs by peers as "poor" readers or one in which students self-selected into "reading-ability" groups by choice of book, we used teacher-selected heterogeneous groups that took into account classroom interaction patterns. Audiocassettes of the books were available for children to listen to in class or take home as needed after independent reading time. We combined role sheets (Daniels, 1994) with having children choose volunteer assignments. Additionally, students were supplied with self-stick notes and encouraged to reach beyond defined roles and mark passages or words, make notes, ask questions, illustrate a scene or whatever struck them as they read and responded. As Amby noted, the role sheet structure "gave us our first layer and then we just kept building on"—building discussions on student-generated questions, comments, and connections. The role sheets also served a vital function in helping to alleviate the impact of power differentials along lines of social standing and reading, opening a space for each child to shine and be the authority.

Donna and I encouraged students to exhibit and expand their competencies, to make choices, and to collaboratively construct meaning. We acted as facilitators, scaffolders, modelers, participants, and observers. We felt a responsibility to encourage reflection on issues of diversity and social justice. The books I selected exposed children to a variety of cultural and historical settings and contained themes that could challenge readers' thinking. Run Away Home provided a historical perspective on difficulties facing African Americans and Native Americans in the late 1800s in the U.S. South, while The Heart of a Chief (Bruchac, 1998) addressed such issues as cultural pride and preservation, poverty, and alcoholism in contemporary Native American communities. In a setting of rural poverty, Wish on a Unicorn (Hesse, 1991) highlighted social norms by which human value and relationships are judged. When faced with unfamiliar characters or unsettling events, students may reveal stereotypical and prejudiced thinking or may need background knowledge. The students were responsible for discussions, but I supported the dialogue as needed when students raised issues relating to culture, ethnicity, and injustices—historically and in the present.

The books I selected exposed children to a variety of cultural and historical settings and contained themes that could challenge readers' thinking.

ONE TEACHER'S CHOICES IN DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SOCIAL AND PERSONAL JUSTICE

Educators approach literature discussion pedagogy from a variety of perspectives. Some advocate a strong teacher presence in groups (e.g., Feds & Peterson, 1997), others combine formal teacher-guided groups with time for informal student discussions (e.g., Samway & Whang, 1996), and still others emphasize purely peer-led groups (e.g., McMahon, Raphael, Goatley, & Pardo, 1997). Some reserve the term teacher-led for teaching that consists of controlled hand raising, turn taking, and initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) (Cazden, 1988) patterns at the teacher's sole direction (Almasi & Gambrell, 1994), while others use the term for groups that are not necessarily teacher-centered (Cox, 1997). "Interested in understanding the different potentials that exist in small-group discussions when teachers are and are not present" (p. 140), Short and Kauffman (1995) sought to move the professional dialogue beyond a teacher-led/student-led distinction. Short, Kauffman, Kaser, Kahn, and Crawford (1999) called for further examination of teachers as participants in groups rather than as inquisitors or evaluators.

With these fourth graders, I participated on different levels. During discussions in which the children did not need me, I backed up physically or dropped my head as I listened. On other occasions I responded as a fellow reader. There were times, however, when students needed my support to open a space for them to share or my advocacy for their contribution. Other times, they needed me to supply information to clarify unfamiliar events or ways of thinking, to offer comfort when a story event connected to their knowledge of injustice and suffering in their families or in the world, or to suggest possibilities when they needed support to address their ethnocentric beliefs, find source material, or organize action.
Sometimes, the children had background information about historical injustice that helped them connect to their reading. Allen and Brandon wrote essays and presented an oral rendition of an Eloise Greenfield (1978) poem about Harriet Tubman when the Underground Railroad came up in discussion. At other times, the children took on the challenge of finding pertinent information on their own. After the group joked about the word wigwam, Amby researched Native American housing structures and reported on the variety. As their dialogue flowed, I listened inconspicuously in awe of their abilities to share, agree, and disagree. When they needed support, I stepped in.

Teacher Participation to Open Spaces for Students to Share

At times my role was peripheral. I listened as Brandon connected racist segregation in Run Away Home to the present: "I remember hearing about this one mayor who said Black and White people shouldn’t be together, and that’s why God made them different colors because he didn’t want them to be together."

The group reacted quickly. Amby countered, “God wanted us to be different colors to learn to like each other and not judge each other from the outside.” As Ashley agreed and Brandon argued: “How do you know what God’s thinking?” Moe’s attempts to speak were overlooked. When I opened space for him, his view that the mayor “should be obeying God’s words” and following “God’s rules” spurred further debate:

Brandon: But, but, but, I don’t think they can do that even if they wanted to.

Amby: Some people might not believe in the Bible.

Brandon: Because some people don’t believe in the Bible. They have like, they have like other gods, like . . .

Ashley: Yeah, but, well, some people do.

Brandon: Like Buddha and everything.

Ashley nodded, “Some people believe in God and some people believe in other things.” Opening the floor for Moe provided an opportunity for the members to add a new layer of understanding about diverse religious beliefs. Occasionally, a student had a greater need for teacher support, such as when Allen stayed after the group discussion to talk with me. Responding to a passage about the Knights of the Southern Order of Manhood committing acts of violence against an African American community, Allen said: “Ms. Möller. [Pause.] You know there’s still people who do that like.” I encouraged him to “finish that thought.” Allen added, “It’s, like, they woulda, a long time ago, burn people’s barns and stuff.” “Uh-huh,” I nodded, and he continued:

There’s still people who do that sometimes. They call them Ku Klux Klan ‘cause they don’t . . . like Black people and stuff . . . . They said a group of Ku Klux Klan people . . . tied this Black guy up to the back of a truck, and they drag him like a hundred miles. And when they found him he was . . . in bones and stuff. And they were talking about that.

Nodding, I said I had heard about James Byrd Jr. Allen said he was not sure when the crime took place. I asked if he wanted to talk about it; he shook his head no. I added, “That is something really important that you brought up; that you were saying it’s not just like back then, right?” Allen nodded, so I cautiously probed, “Would you bring that up at . . . our next circle?” He smiled and replied, “Yep.” Supplied with a transcript of his words, he shared his comment the next day. Amby connected to the imprisonment of Apaches “for no particular reason.” Then came silence. Not wanting Allen’s deeply felt and cautiously shared connection quickly shelved, I asked, “Anybody else? Any comments about what he said?” That opened the floodgates. Amby cried, “It’s not fair!” Brandon extended, “It’s more than not fair.” Amby nodded: “It’s cruelty.”

Ashley: They should make laws not to do that!

Brandon: There are laws not to do that.

Ashley: I know but, but they still do it.

Amby: They ought to enforce it more than they do. They let people get away with it.

Allen: But, it, they can’t stop them.

Brandon: Even when they were separated and Blacks had to use different, like—

Ashley: Water fountains and—

Brandon: Entries and everything. It’s still against the law to . . . murder a Black person . . .

Allen: Yeah.

Ashley: Yeah, but I think if a Black person like killed a White person, he would get in more trouble than if a White person killed a Black person.

Moe: Yeah, that’s weird.
This was the first step the group took toward connecting with current racist violence and judicial injustice. The discussion continued over the next weeks. Having his contribution valued by his teacher and peers led Allen to share more.

**Teacher Participation to Provide Encouragement for Student Contributions**

At times teacher support for a student who wanted to share an idea included efforts to validate contributions—especially for fragile members or members who risked initiating discussions on areas of social justice that clashed with the majority’s viewpoint—and to encourage the rest of the group to focus on the idea. When Amby wanted her group to lead a class discussion about the misappropriation of Native American names and symbols by professional sports teams, she needed support to encourage her peers to value her comments. I told the group Amby had “an idea about *The Heart of a Chief*... She’s going to tell y'all. I want you to look at Amby and listen.”

Amby: *That way they [the story characters] opened up the use of Indian names and things like that and how that wasn’t making Indians feel honored—I wanted to try to open that up to the class and, and maybe later on to the school. And, you know, and I was hoping that word would kind of get around and maybe later we wouldn’t have a baseball team named the Braves and—*

Brandon: *No!*

Kelly: *No!*

Karla: *Let her, well, let her finish. And then you can respond. Let her finish.*

Amby was in the minority on this issue (only Ashley supported her initially), and the danger of her being silenced by the others was great. My choice to intervene was critical to her having the opportunity to give full voice to her idea. Since Ashley struggled the most with print-based aspects of literacy, it was especially important that she and her peers view her as a respected group member. One day she asked, “Why can’t women play baseball?” Though Moe shrugged and added, “It wouldn’t make a difference to me,” Allen countered, “They play softball.” Brandon looked at the girls and quickly agreed, “Yeah, you guys play softball.” Ashley’s questioning gender distinctions in professional baseball was otherwise unanswered, so I entered the discussion to support her by asking, “What about this question about professional baseball?” Brandon decided women did not play because “nobody wants to.” Then Allen reasoned that women were excluded from professional baseball “probably because women kept...getting hit by the ball.” Brandon readily agreed that there had been professional women’s teams, but assumed the players were not very good or tough enough. Though Ashley needed support to get debate going on her question, she, and later Amby, articulated their point—“But [girls] play basketball... And they play soccer and all” (Ashley); “Every-

Kelly commented, “Boys aren’t known to cry, or... when, like, boys cry, they don’t like people to see... because they think, ‘Man, I’m a baby if I cry’ or something.” As the group agreed, Kelly expanded, “Like say, if Moe [Ashley snickered] read that and he started to cry, he would sort of feel embarrassed, I think he would.”

Moe: *Yeah, I would. I, I wouldn’t try to cry, but... I wouldn’t try to cry, but if it was really deep, I'd be crying.*

Karla: *Yeah, I think, I think that it's important that we all feel that it's okay...*

Moe: *Like...*

Karla: *Mm-hm?*

Moe: *Like sometimes I try not to cry, but I go bursting into tears anyway.*

Karla: *And that's okay. I think we all have those emotions, you know.*

Moe, who prided himself on his facade of bravado, openly admitted to feelings of sadness he had tried to
hide on earlier occasions despite Ashley’s laughter and Kelly’s statement that it would embarrass him. As Moe gave an embarrassed laugh, I verbalized encouragement and released the floor when he chose to add to his revealing comment.

Teacher Participation to Clarify Unfamiliar Events or Ways of Thinking

At times the books included references to historical injustices unfamiliar to the children (e.g., the Carlisle School, Apache imprisonment in Pensacola). In these instances, my support consisted of supplying historical background as needed and requested. For example, the Japanese American internment camp Manzanar was mentioned in The Heart of a Chief, and Amby wanted to talk about the word internment. Kelly asked, “So some of our people were, like, in a camp?” As I told them about the relocation, Ashley became upset, asking “Why did they do that?” and “But why did they take them?” Though frustrated by the content of my narration, the children wanted to know and responded thoughtfully. Kelly prompted her peers to “think if we had to live through that now, what it would be like.” I mentioned that the internment was “an example of extreme prejudice and racism about a whole group of people who were citizens of this country... There was a lot of paranoia.”

Ashley: What’s paranoia mean?

Karla: When people just get real obsessed and worried about something happening and kind of lose their, lose touch with, with—

Moe: People. [Spoken quietly and with a sad tone.]

Moe was silent through most of the discussion as Kelly and Ashley struggled to absorb the injustice. But his comment at the end brought the group together.

At other times the children had to reconcile alternative interpretations of a familiar historical event. During another discussion of The Heart of a Chief, the children initially attributed Native American views on Thanksgiving to a difference in beliefs and thought a textual reference to “Turkey Day” indicated a day celebrated by Native Americans. To clarify I suggested they read further—a passage in which a Native American character shared his views on children being decorated in “phony Indian costumes with eagle feather head

---

Professional Research on Teacher Roles in Literature Discussions Groups


- The authors discuss how they changed their literature-based reading program to involve students in more reflective responses through literature groups. They describe the role of the teacher in enabling children to interpret literature from personal perspectives and to engage in meaningful discussions with their peers.


- This ethnographic study describes a teacher’s role in supporting a class of third-grade students as they shifted from teacher-led discussions to student-led discussions. The teacher used a variety of intervention techniques to scaffold students’ development and understanding of the discussion process.


- The authors examine the roles of teachers and students and the types of talk that occurred in literature circles when teachers were and were not present. They found no qualitative differences between the types of issues discussed, but found that students spent more time working through the details of a story when the teacher was not there to intervene or clarify.

—Karen Smith

Language Arts, Vol. 79 No. 6, July 2002

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
dresses made of paper and cardboard. You feel like they're making fun of your whole culture" (p. 109).

Ashley: Yeah, but they really ain't making fun. They're just trying to tell you what Thanksgiving was like whenever the Europe people were here and the Indians helped the Europe people... and they had a big feast. See.

Karla: That's right. Let's go on and see why... Native Americans might have a different view of that history. Go ahead.

Moe read on as the main character described the pain in his community related to stories about Pilgrims that focus on a European immigrant point of view. The group quietly absorbed the painful facts of the historical decimation of the Native American population but agreed with Ashley that Native Americans "didn't want people to remember that happening back then" and with Moe that "they didn't want to remember the happy stuff that we think of." I interjected a one-word alternative that provided a possibility for reinterpretation:

Karla: They didn't want to celebrate it.

Moe: Yeah, they didn't want to celebrate it.

I reconected to Ashley's statement, noting I thought that was what she meant—that Native Americans did not care to celebrate an event that precipitated so much destruction and suffering. Amby, Moe, Kelly, and Ashley agreed at once with a simultaneous "Yeah." Ashley continued, reminding the group that Europeans "took Squanto and made him slave and... gave his... village smallpox... and they all died." With a new word to use to describe the character's views on Thanksgiving, the children were better able to distinguish between wanting to forget and wanting others to understand that for a large group of Americans, the event itself was not something to forget or to celebrate, but one to remember in sadness.

Teacher Participation to Support and Comfort Students Who Reveal Their Pain and Suffering

At times the children knew more than I did about hardship, such as racism, alcoholism, or poverty. Connecting to story events in these cases offered potential for readers to release their fears, to talk about painful experiences, and to know, as Ashley put it, "that you ain't... the only one." Sometimes I comforted, as when I put my arm around Ashley, letting her melt into my side when she shared a passage that made her cry. On another occasion,

At times the children knew more than I did about hardship, such as racism, alcoholism, or poverty.

I acknowledged Brandon's sadness and opened a space for him to extend his remarks, after he connected discussion of alcohol addiction in Heart of a Chief with worries about his father who smoked. Ashley commented that people who drink "could die from it." Brandon replied, "They think that's like a way out" and added hesitantly, "My dad kind of did that. I think he was, he was like under a lot of stress." Kelly agreed softly, "I think people drink... mainly because they're under a lot of stress like Brandon said." Ashley sighed, "Yeah."

Karla: And it hurts the people around you.

Kelly: Yeah.

Karla: I mean, it looks to me that Brandon was hurting from what he was saying.

Brandon: Yeah.

Karla: It's really hard.

Brandon: Like, he used to take me out, and, like, with his friends, and they smoked too, and they're all, they're always telling me, like, you know, "Don't, don't take, take example on us. You know, you don't want to do this when you get older," but, you know, how are you supposed to? It's hard to do that.

The discussion turned to the kind of problem that might drive people to substance abuse. Allen interjected, "Some, some people--", but the current of the discussion moved. I redirected it: "Let's let Allen go, 'cause he hasn't said much." Allen spoke with feeling:

Some people... go to prison and stuff about their drinking 'cause they... drink too much... They got... this thing called probation officers. Every time you go see them they take a drinking test. If they find that you've been drinking, they'll, like, send you to prison... I don't know why, but that's what happened to my sister... She went to see her probation officer... and... they found out she'd been drinking... She's still in prison.

We were called to lunch and had only enough time for Brandon to ask if it was a medical problem and for me to express brief support. The children needed more time—for Allen to have a chance to finish and for the group to respond. With my arm around Allen, I asked if he wanted us to eat lunch as a group. He nodded; the others immediately agreed. They chose also to use recess to continue our discussion. The group supported Allen as he extended his difficult story—his 22-year-old sister had.
been in jail, had a baby, and lost her job because she had no transportation. Then she began drinking and was in prison as a repeat offender. Allen's peers were indignant over her sentence and sympathetic to her difficulties. Allen nodded solemnly, drawing comfort from his peers' understanding of his sadness.

**Addressing Ethnocentric Beliefs and Taking Action**

Many forms of injustice are ingrained in our society. Teaching from a social justice focus includes an emphasis on action—on opening possibilities to shifting the ways we interact in our often unjust world. As Gay (1995) cautioned against de-valuing less than fully transformational approaches to multicultural education, however, we must also carefully reflect on how we define and value action for children. Working with these fourth graders, I saw action in many forms—in voluntary investigations, in projects they created, and in ways they pushed each other to greater awareness of specific injustices. But they also voiced conflicting ideas at times revealed stereotypical and racist views that were very troubling to hear.

I gently probed Amby's unanswered racist stereotype: “Have you really noticed what you were saying? Do you think it’s really true?” Amby sat silently for a moment and then admitted, “I worry about it.”

When Allen, the only African American in the group, chose to share his knowledge about the racist murder of James Byrd Jr., he revealed a heightened awareness of inequities compared to the other children. However, when Ashley expanded that Blacks often get in “more trouble” for crimes such as murder than do Whites, Allen countered it would “be all the same because, like both... will get put in the death penalty or something.” Before equity in the U.S. judicial system could be explored, Amby quickly connected to the past when “Whites always overruled Blacks” and then to her fears of retribution from her position of whiteness: “Today, I know, like, thousands of White people are... being killed by Blacks because I mean [pause], I’ve read... Black people saying, ‘I think it’s time we, like, get revenge on what they did to us way back then and stuff.’ [pause] And that isn’t fair. They should just be happy with what they have right now.”

Allen agreed with Amby’s imagined fear, commenting that he heard about “Black people killing White people, and Black people killing Black people.” Brandon connected to Martin Luther King Jr. and Gandhi as people who wanted “let the Blacks free without there being... a big war.”

Fifteen seconds of silence followed. I gently probed Amby’s unanswered racist stereotype: “Have you really noticed what you were saying? Do you think it’s really true?” Amby sat silently for a moment and then admitted, “I worry about it.” Ashley narratives challenged her views that African Americans should be content with the current level of justice in this country. She asked the group, “Why aren’t there laws to enforce this? Why? And if there are laws, why don’t they enforce it harder?”

Allen told another story:

> There was this girl named Brandy. And her cousin, she lived across from her. And she didn’t like Black people. Then my cousin... and the other girl was like best friends. Then the next day, that girl’s cousin, she told her if she hang around my cousin one more time, that she was going to kill her—because she didn’t like Black people.

I interjected to clarify to Amby that Allen’s story is from “nowadays.” Amby was visibly shaken:

> I’ve actually thought about stopping the world and going... back in time and... Okay, and starting with Adam and Eve. And I’m gonna, I want to go to every person and see where we first went wrong, correct that mistake, and go through the whole time up to now; correct everything. We’ll all be friends. Nobody’s dying. That’s the end of it.

Ashley interjected “Yeah” throughout Amby’s conversational turn. Amby continued, “Now somebody just needs to create a time machine.” Allen quietly closed this part of their discussion with a heart-felt pledge, “I’ll create one. If I get enough, if I be a genius one day.” I share this dialogue for several reasons. First, discussions of social injustice are not going to be easy. Second, it shows the fluidity of the children’s interactions, the stereotypes they held, and the effect of even brief interactions on extending understanding. Such issues can never be resolved in a day, though they must be addressed—as this group began to do.

*Language Arts, Vol. 79 No. 6, July 2002*
This topic was returned to and extended. Two meetings later, Allen read a passage in which Booker T. Washington advocated patience: “I am not saying we should not continue to struggle for justice, but we need to move more slowly, let the idea of equality become more acceptable to those in power” (pp. 107–108). Brandon quickly responded: “You don’t need an idea of equality. We’re all equal, just people don’t see it that way.” Ashley connected to the earlier discussion: “Yeah! Yeah, like the Ku Klux Klan. . . . They’re burning down people’s stuff. . . . in this book, and. . . . they’re still doing it. So, that’s, like. . . . not just back then, it’s still now! That’s what Allen was saying one day!” And Moe extended, “Yeah, some people think that we’re not equal.” After a discussion about inter- and intraracial violence and the need for patience, Amby declared suddenly: “We need Martin Luther King Jr. back.” When I asked why, Amby responded, “Because he could make all the people equal.” Moe was frustrated. “Just because Martin Luther King’s dead doesn’t mean that people can go back to like it was back then—and not be free, and people killing each other, just ‘cause he’s dead.”

The children reflected on the loss of Martin Luther King Jr. and his struggle for freedom and equality. Ashley connected his death to gun violence in general. She wanted to ban guns, Moe advocated getting rid of handguns, and Allen shared his feelings about gun control legislation. Brandon declared, “If I was the president now, I would make this system where you would have to pass a test and, like, promise that you would never use your gun against anybody.” Ashley countered, “The reason why Martin Luther King is dead is because. . . . people keep on shooting. See, ‘cause, and Martin Luther King got shot by somebody. JFK got shot by somebody, and some other people did.” Brandon commented that being “a great person” puts you “at a very high risk of someone trying to kill you.” I joined the discussion, asking why Dr. King took the risk. Ashley said he was “trying to fix everything.” Brandon added, “Because he believed so much in it. He couldn’t stand to not; to see his people being killed and everything.”

Ashley built on this, “Martin Luther King wanted the people to come together and be free and. . . . be friends.” Moe got quiet—then looked up at the group solemnly: “When I grow up I’m gonna try.” He later expanded his thought:

Moe: Since we’re the next generation, I think that, well, this is what I will do when I grow up. I’m going to try to do what Martin Luther King did—

Ashley: Yeah, but if you do that—

Moe: and try to bring everybody back.

Ashley: Yeah, but if you do that, then you’re going to get shot just like MLK did.

Karla: You might, you might not get shot, but—

Moe: Yes, but. . . . I’d die happy though, because I was trying to make a difference.

Brandon, a generally confident child, was describing a hypothetical scenario of power. Moe, a small child who had little personal power at home and who reported his father and an uncle encouraged his stepbrother to fight with him to toughen him up, was planning a future action in a time when he felt empowered. Allen, more personally aware of the risks as a person of color, was not sure: “I wouldn’t exactly do it,” adding that “risk can cost your life or something. And it can cost your house or something.” Ashley was aware that African Americans are “more at risk because they’re African American and [some] people don’t like African Americans.” And while Moe and Brandon felt confident they would take big action in the future, Amby, who previously advocated acceptance of the status quo and then sought her solution in a return to biblical paradise, had more immediate plans. She decided to research what laws were on the books to protect people of color from racist acts. I suggested the Teaching Tolerance Web site at www.tolerance.org.

Two days later she came to group with pages from the Southern Poverty Law Center Web site that documented injustices as well as focused actions of individuals and groups in the fight against hate crimes. The passages Amby shared resonated with her peers. After we finished Run Away Home, the children wanted to create a skit based on the book. Amby suggested they “compare and contrast. . . . like, slavery. . . . and the Ku Klux Klan and how it’s all still going on and then how everybody’s being treated.” Brandon extended this suggestion to a “skit about the past and then, a skit about the future, about how it is.” Moe and Allen agreed, both suggesting doing “a couple of chapters” from the book. “The most important chapters. . . . Like when the Knights come,” added Ashley.
The children wrote their play, using the book, Amby’s research findings, material Allen prepared for an oral presentation, classroom resources, and their imaginations and knowledge. They assigned parts, planned props, and practiced with and without teacher supervision. I advised and organized as needed (e.g., arranging practices and supplying requested materials). They pushed the edges of what could be allowed in this rural southern school—wanting to dress in Klan robes for a scene in which Klan members are revealed as violent, lawless cowards. Donna and I struggled with finding a balance between student ownership of the skit and our concern about the effect of children wearing makeshift Klan robes, even when depicting the group as despicable. We conferred with each other, the children, and the school counselor, who suggested a compromise the students embraced—using construction paper hoods, but no robes. The effect was nonetheless disconcerting. After the presentation, a class member was moved to share softly that her relatives used racist words. Another expressed surprise at the level of racist violence in her lifetime. All students decided to read Run Away Home, and references to the book and to this event continued among students and teachers.

**A SHIFT IN THE FOCUS ON THE TEACHER IN A COMPLEX SYSTEM**

Eeds and Peterson (1997) emphasize that the issue is not simply whether a teacher is present, but what she or he does when present. In our literary transactions and social interactions, the students had the freedom to explore their agendas but could also rely on me. Students need teacher demonstration, instruction, and support to break out of socialized patterns, such as IRE (initiate, response, evaluation) patterns (Spiegel, 1996) and their own racist beliefs or discriminatory stereotypes. The complexity of literary discussions across learners, books, and contexts involves multiple possibilities and shifting positions for teachers and students (Dugan, 1997; Raphael & Au, 1998; Short et al., 1999). Teachers can help focus on students’ inquiries and support multilayered reflection on society and self without taking over a discussion.

Educators must trust the literature, students, and themselves (Karnowski, 1997). They must also create a setting in which this trust pays off for students. The discussions between the children and me could not take place until they trusted me and each other enough to risk openness. Also I had to trust myself enough to our respectful listening chart. No child was criticized, even for a discriminatory remark, but neither were the remarks ignored. On the spot and over time, we tried to make sense of confusing parts, to support one another, and to interrogate textual and personally held stereotypes.

Patterson, Cotton, Kimbell-Lopez, Pavonetti, and VanHorn (1998) described small-group literature discussions using the physics metaphor of complex adaptive systems where interdependent components transact in generally unpredictable ways, creating energy and turmoil. This turbulence feeds into the system until a breaking point leads to transformation, forcing adaptation “at a higher level of complexity” (p. 146). In addition, discussion groups are “embedded within larger complex risk situations that required quick decisions but offered no easy answers or even certainty as to the best course of action. Extensive preparation and an ongoing atmosphere of caring were tools in developing trust. The kind of safety that developed did not mean that our talk was always pleasant or free of tension, nor did it shield us fully from insensitivity or rudeness. However, members could expect a balancing of support for responses with a questioning approach. We had an understanding that attentive listening and mutual respect were paramount. Students knew that breaches in this understanding would be addressed—hopefully by the students, but if not, then by me through gentle reminders or a request that we review adaptive systems—the classroom, the school, the community—and contained within them are “still other systems—individual students, social groups among the students, gender-based groups, and the teacher” (p. 151). This metaphor describes the potential power of discussions in which teachers and students trust themselves and each other to handle the complexity of literary, societal, and personal issues without any one party either dominating the process or relinquishing the responsibility to teach and learn. There need not be an either/or between teachers taking part and students having autonomous spaces for response. They are interconnected parts of the complex adaptive system that is teaching and learning.
References


Author Biography

Karla J. Möller is an assistant professor of Language Education at Indiana University, Bloomington.

JOURNAL OF THE ASSEMBLY FOR EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING (JAEPL) CALL FOR PAPERS

Dedicated to teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and interests, JAEPL invites submissions for its ninth annual issue. We solicit theory-grounded manuscripts that discuss pedagogical concerns focusing on exploring the boundaries of teaching and learning beyond traditional disciplines and methodologies.

Send by January 31, 2003, four (4) copies of letter-quality manuscripts (attach postage for mailing three copies to readers) or electronic submission in rich text format (RTF), MLA style, approximately 12–15 pages including works cited to: Linda Calendrillo, JAEPL Coeditor, English Department, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY 42101, e-mail: linda.calendrillo@WKU.edu. Send editorial inquiries to: Kristie S. Fleckenstein, JAEPL Coeditor, English Department, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306-0460, e-mail: kflecken@bsu.edu. Visit our Web site at: www.bsu.edu/english/publications/jaepl/index.htm.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.