

Co-constructing a Student-Led Discussion: Students' and Teachers' Talk in a Democratic Classroom

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Abstract

While previous research has identified discourse practices beyond IRE in which students and teachers can engage during student-led literature-based discussions, little research has examined how young children discuss issues of interest outside of a literature discussion model. This ethnographic study conducted in a local a public elementary school tracks students' and teachers' navigation practices and contributions during weekly "student-led" discussions to better understand issues of intellectual agency and authority within democratic classrooms. The research question is how does a group of multiage students and their teachers construct and navigate democratic, student-led discussions? Subquestions are 1) What practices do students engage in during the discussions? (2) What practices do teachers engage in during the discussions? (3) What ideas are introduced, explored, and examined during the discussions?

Introduction/Statement of Research

In this ethnography, I explore one unique classroom located in a local public school. Readers will walk into Rooms 1 and 2 at a local public elementary school to see how two teachers and 57 students (ages 5 to 12 years old) are able to co-construct a democratic learning community. In this current era of standardization, it is often implied that schools are institutions where teachers impart certain knowledge and skills (determined by the state and/or federal government) to students, and the main goal of elementary school is to ensure that students are "proficient" in reading, writing, and math as measured by a multiple choice test. Dewey (1916) would be disappointed by our increasingly limited view on the goals of schools. As he pointed out nearly 100 years ago: "The notion that the 'essentials' of elementary education are the three R's mechanically treated, is based upon ignorance of the essentials needed for realization of democratic ideals" (p. 200).

While educational leaders and politicians may use the rhetoric of democracy to idealize the work of schools in our country, the reality is that "schools have been remarkably undemocratic institutions" (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 13). For teachers who feel pressured by the increasingly standardized curriculum that encourages a "banking" (Freire, 1997) model of education, this ethnography gives voice to an alternative kind of learning space and knowledge production—one where teachers and students work together through the messy (and ambitious) work of co-constructing a democratic classroom.

Literature Review

Language is an integral part of what occurs in classrooms daily between students and teachers. However, there is little consensus about what *role* language plays—or should play—in teaching and learning. Some of the earliest research examining talk in classrooms (Bellack, 1966; Mehan, 1979) found a predictable pattern of teacher and student interaction. It was described as teacher **I**nitiation, student **R**esponse, typically followed by teacher **E**valuation (IRE). Following a teacher’s question, students raise their hands to “bid” for speaking time. The teacher calls on a student who is permitted to talk until the teacher takes the floor again. Often the teacher evaluates the student’s response before initiating the next IRE cycle. IRE remains one of the most common discourse patterns found in 21st century classrooms. Wells (1999) argues that this points to the pervasive assumption in education that children are unable to construct useful or valid knowledge if it does not come from the teacher or is at least given a “stamp of official approval” (p. 145). This reflects the empiricist paradigm of knowledge where individuals “receive” verified knowledge from an expert. Cazden (2001) calls IRE the “default pattern—what happens unless deliberative action is taken to achieve some other alternative” (p. 53).

An alternative discourse pattern that is possible in classrooms is a discussion-based, dialogic model of learning (Wells, 1999). Burbules (1993) defined discussion as a type of dialogue where questions, responses, redirections, and building statements are woven together in a developmental sequence. Within the broad term *discussion*, Parker (2006) delineates two purposeful classroom discourse structures: seminar and deliberation. These vary in terms of *what* is being shared and *why*, but also with *whom*. The goal of a seminar discussion is to reach an “enlarged understanding” of a text or issue, while deliberation aims to reach a consensus about what should be done about a shared problem (p. 13). In both discourse structures, students must develop the sort of political friendship that allows for a “culture of argument” in the classroom (Walzer, 2004, p. 107). While teachers often attempt to minimize argument and conflict, especially in elementary classrooms, it is the tools of effective argument that are the basis for participating in a democratic society (Parker, 2006).

Children come to school with a variety of everyday discourses acquired through participation in their family life (e.g., storytelling, sharing information, arguing with siblings) that are elaborated and expanded upon according to the practices that are valued in school, peer culture, academic disciplines, and professions. Education is primarily a process of mastering new discourses (Applebee, 1996); as students move through school, discourses become increasingly formalized. Each discourse offers children a set of cultural tools for making sense of and sharing ideas and experiences: “These [discourses] include not just concepts and associated vocabulary, but the rhetorical structures ... [and] the patterns of action” (p. 9). The participatory nature of democracy requires that students learn the complex discourses of discussion, critique, and argument. These discourses must be learned through *participating* in a community that values discussion as a cultural tool for understanding and producing collective knowledge (Applebee,

1996). Democratic citizenship is a matter of competence for participation and voice, and public schools are especially powerful locations for discussion to occur because they are often the most diverse communities in which children [and adults] find themselves (Parker, 2006).

Researchers have long raised questions concerning how schools and teachers might best support students in the lofty goal of becoming democratic citizens. The evolving conversations about democratic aims in classrooms have been rooted in the larger educational discourse, in which Rogoff, Turkkanis, and Bartlett (2001) suggest a sort of swinging pendulum has long been at work: moving back and forth between “adult control of learning” and “children’s freedom to discover” (p. 6). However, in Mayer’s (2012) recent book, *Classroom Discourse and Democracy: Making Meaning Together*, she argues that this dichotomy of “adult control” versus “children’s freedom” (p. 2) is not helpful when considering the roles teachers need to take on in classrooms. She describes democratic classrooms as “interpretive communities”: groups of people dedicated to working together to make sense of the world. Mayer identifies three types of learning structures that teachers must learn to orchestrate within their classrooms: student-led, co-led, and teacher-led. She posits that by learning to appreciate both the affordances and constraints of each form of talk, teachers will have a better understanding of when each is called for in the process of apprenticing children into the effective use democratic discourses and practices.

Teacher-led, co-led, and student-led negotiations of meaning are defined according “to the extent of ‘interpretive authority’ that is granted to students” (Mayer, 2012, p. 9). In this paper, I focus on what I argue is a student-led discussion, which Mayer describes as a structure where students have greater intellectual authority and more space or time to collectively build knowledge with peers. Even with the student-led structure, teachers are still challenged to “orchestrate” the talk in subtle and nuanced ways. Teachers may “revoice” what a student has said, but they explicitly withhold offering specific claims or evaluating student responses. This last part, evaluating students, has been especially difficult for teachers to let go of given that the IRE pattern of talk has become the default in most classrooms. Integrating student-led discourse into classrooms is critical because democratic learning communities are “charged with the responsibility of constructing understandings in relation to students’ personal understandings and to those of the broader culture” (p. 8).

While previous research has identified navigational practices (beyond IRE) in which students and teachers can engage during student-led literature-based discussions, little research has examined how young children discuss issues of interest outside of a literature discussion model. Research is needed to explore how children navigate difference during discussion and how teachers and students work together to collectively construct knowledge in a democratic classroom.

Theoretical Framework

Beliefs about the role of language in education are deeply connected to ways in which knowledge itself is conceived (Wells, 1999). In the empiricist paradigm, the goal of education is to ensure that *individual* students acquire empirically verified knowledge that is considered most useful and important. This perspective is contrasted with sociocultural theorists like Vygotsky (1978) who view knowledge as constantly *constructed* and *reconstructed* between participants in specific situated activities, and learning as intimately connected to students' social participation in the community around them. Regarding the use of talk in classrooms, Mercer (2004) observed, "A sociocultural perspective highlights the possibility that educational success and failure may be explained by the quality of educational *dialogue*, rather than simply considering the capability of *individual* students or the skill of their teachers" (p. 139; italics added).

In this paper I explore classroom talk from a sociocultural perspective, looking closely at the role of language in connection to knowledge production at my field site. Interactional patterns between students and teachers are emphasized as I come to better understand how ideas are constructed and reconstructed during the course of classroom discussions.

Overview of Project

This paper draws on data from a larger, long-term ethnographic study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) exploring literacy learning and interactions in a multiage classroom. The study was conducted at a preK–6th grade public school in a medium-sized, Midwestern university town. As a participant-observer, I collected data one morning a week (approximately three hours) for three months. I recorded whole-class and small-group talk during classroom literacy engagements using thick field notes and audio recordings. IRB approval was obtained for data collection in this classroom. As part of the protocol for ensuring confidentiality for all participants, pseudonyms have been used for the students and teachers.

In this paper, I focus on a subset of the data collected: "student-led" whole class discussions that occurred each Thursday morning. Given the dominance of IRE-structured talk in classrooms, student-led discussions offer a unique opportunity to look at students' and teachers' discourse practices during the process of collective knowledge building. As noted in the literature review, democratic classrooms do not just happen; they result from "explicit attempts by educators to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life" (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 9). This study tracks students' and teachers' practices and contributions during a discussion to better understand issues of intellectual agency and authority within democratic classrooms. The research question is how does a group of multiage students and their teachers construct and navigate democratic, student-led discussions? Subquestions are 1) What practices do students engage in during the discussions? (2) What practices do teachers engage in during the discussions? (3) What ideas are introduced, explored, and examined during the discussions?

Participants

Participants were 57 students in a multiage classroom and two classroom teachers (Robin and Kirk). Students ranged in age from kindergarten to sixth grade (see Table 1 for a breakdown of student participants by grade level). Of the 57 students in the class, 50 identified as European- American, 4 identified as multiracial, 2 identified as African-American, and 1 identified as Latina. Over 70% of students at this school were eligible to receive free or reduced lunch. Five students were identified as receiving special education services. Robin and Kirk had co-taught in the K–6 multiage classroom for the previous eleven years.

Setting

Robin and Kirk’s physical classroom space consisted of two classrooms (Rooms 1 and 2) connected by a small teacher office area that was converted into a “library” and quiet reading room for students, complete with comfortable beanbag chairs, pillows, and a large overstuffed chair. This space was used so students could move fluidly between the two rooms without going into the hallway. Room 1 was arranged with enough tables and chairs for all students to be seated at one time while Room 2 was organized in such a way as to provide ample floor space for all participants to sit in a large circle. Both classrooms had lamps scattered throughout; the overhead florescent lights were often turned off so that only the lamps and natural light from the windows lit up the space. Students’ artwork filled the walls, providing a record students’ and teachers’ work together.

Data Collection

Robin and Kirk considered “student talk” to be an integral component of the learning across all subjects areas. Talk took on a variety of forms in this multiage classroom—from the informal, natural “talk” that regularly occurred between students engaged in reading and writing activities to more formalized routines like whole-class meetings, small group literature circles, and student inquiry presentations. Within any of these activities, talk ranged on a continuum from teacher-led to student-led.

One routine in which students and teachers in this multiage class regularly engaged each morning was a whole class meeting (Kriete, 1999; Yeager & Silva, 2002). “Every Thursday [when the data selected for this paper were collected], instead of students sharing personal stories, the entire class participated in a democratic discussion that participants collectively referred to as “What’s On My Mind” [WOMM]. A basket in the classroom labeled with the acronym WOMM was used throughout the week to collect topic ideas that students were interested in talking more about with the class. The topics for discussion during WOMM were always initiated by students, and covered classroom, school, community, national,

Figure 1. Grade Levels of Multiage Participants

Grade	Number of students
Kindergarten	5
First	4
Second	5
Third	9
Fourth	12
Fifth	13
Sixth	9
Total	57

Table 1. Participant Breakdown

and world issues. Apple & Beane (2007) identified this kind of student input as a key element of a democratic curriculum, arguing that classrooms must “not only [include] what adults think important, but also the questions and concerns that young people have about themselves and their world” (p. 17). WOMM discussions offered the longest consecutive stretches of student-led talk during my observations.

Eight WOMM discussions were observed as part of a larger ethnographic study. I audiorecorded each discussion and took “quite thick” field notes including information about students’ gestures, body postures, gaze, and tone of voice (Carspecken, 1996). This reflects my stance that meaning is embodied in nonverbal acts as well as verbal ones. I also recorded my own “observer comments” [OC] during the observation and “reflective thoughts” in a field notebook after leaving the school. Each week I transcribed the audio recordings in great detail, noting emphases, pauses, repetitions, and false starts. My thick field notes and observer comments were inserted into the transcript to provide an expanded and extensive record of the class discussion.

The analytic coding schemes for student and teacher discourse practices were developed using all eight discussions as data sources, but in this paper I focus on the analysis of one specific discussion, for several reasons. First, the time devoted to this particular student-directed discussion (35 minutes) was much longer than “typical” WOMM discussions (15-20 minutes). The length of this meeting affords an extended look at how students navigate and construct knowledge together during WOMM discussions. Second, the topic selected for the meeting proved to be especially generative in terms of the diversity of student contributions and perspectives. Damico & Rosaen (2009) point out that when it comes to class discussion, not all subject matter is equal in terms of its “fluidity and complexity” (p. 1188). Some questions or topics have commonly accepted ideas and facts that can make a generative discussion more difficult.

WOMM Topic Selection

Alexis, a fourth grade African American student, submitted the topic “Arizona Laws” earlier in the week and opened up the conversation Thursday morning by giving background information about the topic to other students:

[44] Alexis: *Well, a lot of people have heard of the different laws that people in Arizona are passing and that people in Arizona are trying to pass. And um, I just kind of was thinking about all the different laws have passed and all of them haven't but are trying to pass and then all of the ones that haven't passed, but most of them have. So I just wanted to kind of talk about the different kinds of laws and how they're kind of ... and I don't understand why they would want these laws.*

[46] Alexis: *Well ... for example, the law in Arizona where for example if you're Latino or if [you] look like you're from Mexico or Africa or something they'll pull you over and they'll say you need blah blah blah birth certificate to show*

that you were born in America and that you're not an illegal immigrant. Cause also I have some family there, but, it's kind of really weird ... and ... and I also heard that they were trying to pass that law in Indiana. And I hope that doesn't happen for everyone else here, but then even if it does happen I'm kind of happy, I mean I don't want to leave, but ... I mean even if it does happen here that would kind of make me want to leave more.

After this brief overview of the topic, Alexis became the “leader” of the WOMM conversation (i.e., the discussion moved from being teacher-led to student-led). She had the responsibility of calling on other participants with their hands raised to share ideas, comments, and questions. This WOMM discussion format backgrounded the traditional role of teachers as being “in charge” (teacher-led) and foregrounded students as actively constructing knowledge through exploratory talk (student-led).

It is important here to situate Alexis’s proposed WOMM topic and the eventual whole-class conversation that occurred in the classroom at the end of February 2011 within state and national conversations that were simultaneously being played out in the media that month. In the days preceding this conversation, an Arizona state senator had proposed legislation that would deny children of undocumented immigrants the right to attend K-12 public schools in Arizona, and would also deny citizenship to children born in the United States to illegal immigrant parents. On a more local level, the Indiana State Senate passed an anti-immigration bill that echoed Arizona’s efforts two days prior to the WOMM discussion.

Data Analysis

A “turn at talk” was used as the unit of analysis, and was defined as a speaker’s uninterrupted sequence of utterances, no matter how many or few. The 227 turns at talk in the “Arizona Laws” WOMM discussion were first coded according to basic descriptive information about participants (e.g., student or teacher, grade level, ethnicity).

Emergent coding schemes were developed to identify student and teacher navigational practices. When analyzing a turn at talk, my long-term engagement in the classroom as a participant-observer augmented the coding process. Observing students’ and teachers’ discourse patterns across different parts of the school day fostered a deeper appreciation of subtleties in the transcripts. I was able to triangulate the findings obtained through the qualitative coding process with my extensive field notes and informal interviews collected in the months preceding this discussion. My extended ethnographic work in this classroom afforded me comprehensive knowledge of each participant, which supported the validity of the coding process.

Coding Student Navigation Practices

While the foundational IRE sequence has long served as a conceptual cornerstone for generative analyses of classroom talk, Mayer (2012) argues that “it cannot support a comprehensive exploration of the issue of intellectual agency and authority with democratic classrooms.” (p.135). In an attempt to build on previous work in the field, I began the coding process by identifying more complex coding schemes that researchers have previously used to analyze complex student talk.

The initial codes for student navigation practices came from the work of Damico (2009), who identified three types of student navigation practices used in a fifth grade whole class discussion: (1) asking questions, (2) disagreeing or expressing conflicting viewpoints (referring explicitly to each other), and (3) offering a meta-analysis. In Damico’s case study, the teacher took on a more prominent role of facilitating the discussion (co-led or teacher-led), which contrasts with the WOMM discussion structure (student-led) analyzed in this paper. The distinct context for this paper required that additional codes be identified for student navigation practices. Damico’s coding scheme was extended by using Orsolini and Pontecorvo’s (1992) codes for young children engaged in small- and large-group discussions, and Mercer’s (2004) six features of explanatory talk. After a long process of merging and revising the final set of codes, it was possible for a student’s turn at talk to be coded with more than one navigation practice.

Table 2. Coding for Students Navigation Practices

Code	Navigation Practice	Explanation
Q	Asking <u>questions</u> <i>[Following a questioning taxonomy suggested by Saha (1984) & used by van Zee & Minstrell, 1997]</i>	Utterances that begin with interrogative words, such as what, where, when, why, who; begin with a verb (e.g., "Do you ...?"); end with a tag (e.g., "..., do you think?"). Also included are more subtle questioning utterances that contain embedded questions (e.g., "I wonder whether ..." or "I don't know why...").
R	Sharing <u>relevant information</u>	A previous telling or a claim produced in a previous response is elaborated on (no explicit, intentional connection to a speaker or idea).
ED	Explicit disagreeing or expressing conflicting viewpoints	Child refers explicitly to a previous speaker or explicitly situates his/her response in opposition to a previous utterance.
EA	Explicit agreeing or expressing additional information in support	Child refers explicitly to a previous speaker or explicitly situates his/her response in support of a previous utterance.
II	Interject a comment, <u>interrupt</u>	Child speaks without being called on. Interrupts a person currently speaking or jumps in as soon as someone else finishes an utterance.

IW	Interject a comment, <u>whisper</u>	Child speaks at same time as current speaker, but whispers utterance so quietly that current speaker cannot hear.
M	Offer a meta-analysis	Child pulls together multiple ideas/viewpoints that have previously been discussed.
CD	Control discourse	Manage a discussion, including reminding discussion participants of ground rules, keeping other students quiet, calling on new speakers, making sure everyone heard the speaker, and clarifying the previous response.
A	Simple Answer	Information requested by a previous speaker is provided but not extended.

Coding Teacher Navigation Practices

Developing codes for teacher practices occurred in much the same recursive way as the codes for student practices. The starting point for teacher navigation codes also came from the work of Damico (2009), and included: (1) Asking questions, (2) Valuing and building on ideas, (3) Treating student questions and ideas as text, (4) Prompting explanatory reasoning, and (5) Incorporating texts in discussion. These were merged with Orsolini and Pontecorvo's (1992) "teacher talk codes." The coding schemes were similar, but the language used by Orsolini and Pontecorvo better explained the navigational moves by teachers when responding to students in the context of a WOMM discussion. Damico's "valuing" and "prompting" codes were merged into "revoicing and rephrasing," with two subcodes nested underneath based on whether the teacher addressed an individual speaker or the whole class.

Two additional teacher navigation codes were added, including "controlling discourse" (for the same reasons discussed in the student navigation section) and "evaluating and critiquing student ideas." The evaluation code was added based on the IRE pattern of student-teacher interactions cited in previous literature. The frequency of teacher "evaluation" of student responses is negatively related to the opportunity for open student participation and "exploratory talk." See Table 3 for further definitions and examples of the coding scheme developed for teacher navigation practices.

Table 3. Codes for Teaching Navigation Practices

Code	Navigation Practice	Explanation
Q	Asking question	See Table 2 for full explanation of the “Asking question” code.
RA	Revoicing & Rephrasing: Information provided by a previous child’s utterance is repeated or rephrased by the teacher and possibly added on to.	(A) Talk addressed to the previous speaker in order to get him/her to continue talking (prompting explanatory reasoning).
RB		(B) Talk addressed to the whole group to underline an item of information introduced by a previous speaker. Sometimes new information is added by the speaker (valuing and building on ideas).
T	Incorporating texts into discussion	Teacher cites a text —a book, article, movie, song, etc.— as a way to help students make connections with current conversation.
E	Evaluating & critiquing student ideas	Teacher offers a critique of student ideas or explicitly corrects a student’s utterance.
CD	Control discourse	Manage a discussion, including reminding discussion participants of ground rules, keeping other students quiet, calling on new speakers, making sure everyone heard the speaker, and clarifying the previous response.

Coding Ideational Content

Exploring the third subquestion, *What ideas are introduced, explored, and examined during the discussion?*, required a more grounded and emergent process of code development than was necessary when looking at navigational practices. The process involved continually and recursively comparing the ideational content shared in each turn at talk (Wilkinson, 1991). In an attempt to truly “hear” what participants were saying, *in vivo* codes were initially applied to each turn; these short phrases were pulled directly from the participants’ responses. In subsequent passes through the data, repeating ideas were identified from the ideational *in vivo* codes.

Once a “repeating idea” was identified, a process of comparative analysis was used to compare each turn at talk in the transcript against those already placed within the conceptual category. Comparative analysis was used until saturation was reached and no new themes emerged. The three main ideational themes that emerged within the WOMM class discussion were 1) Arizona immigration laws, 2) relationship between laws and freedom, and 3) necessity of laws. Each theme had multiple child codes embedded within it (see Table 4 for further definitions and examples of the coding scheme; see Appendix A for a conceptual map of the discussion).

Table 4. Ideational Coding Scheme		
Name of Code	Description of Code	Example from the Transcript
Theme 1: Immigration Laws (Arizona and Indiana)		
Laws can be unfair	There are instances when laws are unfair and inequitable	[224] Vivian: <i>“My problem with this law is that in Arizona it would be hard not to have tan skin because it’s like so hot. Um, and so... also there’s probably a lot of people there because it used to be Mexico...”</i>
Immigration laws don’t make sense in Indiana	Immigration laws make sense in Arizona, but not Indiana	[49] Becca: <i>“I don’t see why they would want to, um, do it in Indiana cause it sort of, it makes sense in Arizona but in Indiana it doesn’t make sense to have that law.”</i>
Theme 2: Relationship between laws and freedom		
Freedom means not having laws	Our freedom is limited by laws that keep the world a safe place to live in; freedom thought of as only existing in the absence of laws	[60] Myles: <i>“And, we’re not really free because we still have laws. And there is freedom of speech and stuff, but you still break the law and the law is there.”</i>
Possible to be “free” <u>and</u> have laws	A nuanced perspective that highlights that freedom and laws can coexist; laws allow us to be “free”	[76] Adam: <i>“Well, just because you have laws doesn’t mean that it’s not a free place ... the point of a free place is that you have freedom, not that you can do whatever you want, so it’s not like if you’re in a free place you can do whatever you want because that would be absolutely horrible.”</i>
Theme 3: Necessity of laws		
We need laws!		
World without laws filled with chaos and fear	A fear-oriented perspective suggesting that laws are necessary to restrict humans’ behavior, which is naturally oriented to “steal” and “kill”	[122] Scott: <i>“Um, I was going to say um if there were no laws people would just be killing each other and killing and, and since there’s no laws there would be no police and they wouldn’t be able to put people in jail.”</i>

Laws allow us to deal with people who break the law	Laws aren't there to restrict behavior, but rather to provide guidelines for how to fairly deal with people who do break laws	[117] Vivian: <i>"Um, the law isn't exactly what's keeping people from killing each other and stealing stuff, it's pretty much just like, laws lets people deal with the people who kill each other and steal stuff."</i>
Laws protect the collective interests of a community	Laws protect community resources that might lost if only individual desires were pursued	[72] Eli: <i>"... if there weren't any laws... like a hundreds of, or parts of history, a lot of, a ton would be just gone because let's say somebody, even though we aren't here, in Italy then big big just buildings could be put up over thousands of artifacts."</i>
We don't need laws!		
People would act the same with or without laws	Human nature is inherently good; humans would act the same with or without laws in place	[192] Sam: <i>"So what I was thinking is that if there was no laws you'd probably just live a normal life ... Because you know everybody wouldn't be like, ok now there's no laws I can steal anything I want."</i>
Communities would work to police themselves even without official laws	Laws aren't necessary for humans to know what is "good" and "bad," humans would protect one another	[158] Alex: <i>"I mean, if someone caused enough problems a billion people would come up and put them into some kind of a jail if there was a law system or not."</i>

Discussion

The weekly WOMM discussions were a valued tradition in this K-6 multiage classroom. In the days leading up to the WOMM discussion, I often heard Robin and Kirk respond to a student's comment or question with some version of the following invitation: "That's so interesting! You should write down that that topic for WOMM so we can talk more about it on Thursday." Teachers worked to get students to understand that all topics/questions could be better understood through a collective and participatory meaning-making process.

Students revealed a diverse web of connections and divergent thinking as the ideational flow of conversation moved from "immigration laws in Arizona" to "the necessity of laws" while touching on complex issues ranging from human nature to historical inequities. If this had been a different classroom where teachers attempted to guide this discussion using IRE to ensure "coverage" of a related state academic social studies standard, many students' contributions would have likely been silenced or redirected. For example, Alex questioned the overall necessity of the government and of laws:

Alex [4th grade]: *"Well when people say, I know a lot [of] people that say if there are no laws there wouldn't be police so people wouldn't have to go to jail."*

I mean, if someone caused enough problems a billion people would come up and put them into some kind of a jail if there was a law system or not. And people forget that if you do something too bad, people are going to react. People act as though no laws means there's no reaction And there was a time when there practically was no laws back in Egypt"

Alex openly challenged other students'—and the state academic standard's—claims that governments are unquestionably necessary. His critique stands in opposition to the way “government” is typically talked about in schools as a “‘truth’ arisen from some immutable, infallible source” (Apple & Beane, 2007, p. 15). Alex used a historical reference to remind students of a time when governments weren't as large and all-powerful as they are today. Although Robin or Kirk could have easily jumped in here to “evaluate” this response by pointing out that ancient Greece is considered the “birthplace of democracy,” they instead remained in the background of the discussion and allowed students to respond to the claim: “in the process of stretching their concepts to find a common ground; as [students] collaborate and argue with others, they consider new alternatives and recast their ideas to communicate or to convince” (Rogoff, 1990, p. 196). In the following two sections I take a closer look at students' and teachers' navigational practices during the discussion and explore how this connects to teachers' aims for co-creating a democratic classroom.

Student Navigation Practices

See Table 5 for an overview of the frequency with which students engaged in particular navigation practices during the WOMM discussion. Although the “sharing relevant information” practice (f=37) occurred most often, looking at the “explicitly agree” (f=12) and “explicitly disagree” (f=23) codes together (f=35) shows that nearly half of the time that students shared ideas (during an approved turn), they were explicitly positioning themselves in relation to previous speakers. This type of talk is specific to academic discourses like discussion and debate, and is not the kind of talk that young children typically use in everyday, informal speech. Children *learn* to talk like this. Even Jonas, one of the youngest students in the class, tried to explicitly position his idea in relation to Sam:

[216] Jonas [kindergarten]: *Um, well, I was saying ... well maybe like Sam was saying ... if there's no laws then like nobody, then everybody would die cause ...*

Student Navigation Practice (code)	Frequency
Sharing relevant information	37
Controlling discourse	32
<i>Controlling discourse (without Alexis)</i>	9
Explicit disagreeing	23
Interject (interrupt)	16
Asking a question	16
Interject (whisper)	13
Explicit agreeing	12
Simple answer	11
Meta-analysis	0

In a multiage classroom such as this, WOMM meetings were a kind of “apprenticeship in thinking” (Rogoff, 1990), offering younger students and new students opportunities to “learn from observing and participating with peers and more skilled members of their society, developing the skills to handle culturally defined problems with available tools” (p. 7). The tools of democratic discourse are practices that students typically have little experience with in their real lives (or in most schools), given that “good” citizenship is complicated by discourses of childhood that situate young learners as innocent, inexperienced, and in need of protection.

In democratic classroom discussions, navigational practices can be viewed as “cultural tools” (Mayer, 2012) that allow knowledge to be collectively constructed. Learning to explicitly agree or disagree with peers requires that students listen to one another in an attempt to understand ideas that are shared. Throughout the conversation, students consistently positioned themselves in relation to previous speakers, which reflected an understanding that democratic discussions are co-constructed by extending, questioning, and critiquing each other’s ideas. In the following turn at talk, Adam offered a critical reading of Tanner’s previous contribution, as well as a critical reading of the world:

[76] Adam [6th grader]: *Well, just because you have laws doesn't mean that it's not a free place. Because if, that doesn't even make sense, because the point of a free place is that you have freedom, not that you can do whatever you want, so it's not like if you're in a free place you can do whatever you want because that would be absolutely horrible. So it's, yes Tanner, we do live in a free state, and that doesn't mean it's not and that doesn't mean it doesn't have issues and*

problems to deal with, but it doesn't mean because just because we have laws that it's not a free place.

Adam validated Tanner by suggesting that “yes ... we do live in free state,” but then went on to explain his divergent opinion about what it means to be “free.” Critique, rather than a tearing down, actually comes to be seen as a “construction of meaning” in the dialogic classroom as learners explore and interrogate multiple stances with the intention of being better able to reject, accept, or revise a stance from an informed position (Fecho, 2011).

Students were very aware (and at times protective) of their interpretive authority during WOMM discussions. This was evident in the initial discourse moves between Alexis (student leader) and Robin (teacher). Alexis began by introducing her topic:

[44] Alexis: *“Well, a lot of people have heard of the different laws that people in Arizona are passing and that people in Arizona are trying to pass. And um, I just kind of was thinking about all the different laws have passed and all of them haven't ... I don't understand why they would want these laws.”*

Robin jumped in here to ask a series of questions, requesting more information about the specific “laws” that Alexis wanted to discuss and asking for clarification. Alexis responded by making a connection between laws passed in Arizona to potential laws being passed in Indiana.

[46] Alexis: *“Well ... for example, the law in Arizona where for example if you're Latino or if look like you're from Mexico or Africa or something they'll pull you over and they'll say you need blah blah blah birth certificate to show that you were born in America and that you're not an illegal immigrant ... and I also heard that they were trying to pass that law in Indiana.”*

[47] Robin: *Because you're already leaving, and you're thinking wow, I'm frustrated with the state of Indiana?*

[48] Alexis: *Yeah.* [Pause as she looks to see whose hands are up.] *Becca and then Myles.*

Alexis made a significant navigational move in turn 48 when she responded to Robin's previous question with a simple answer (“Yeah”) before moving forward with the discussion by calling on students with their hands raised. This navigational decision by Alexis moved the interactional sequence away from the pattern of traditional IRE talk and opened up space for students to construct more dialogic talk through runs of consecutive turns. When students speak immediately after other one another, it is an indicator of greater student control over topic (Chinn et al., 2001). Alexis's move to call on other students marked a navigational turning point in the conversation away from predictable teacher-student interaction. Robin could have reasserted her power and requested that Alexis answer the question more

completely, but instead Robin essentially “handed off” power here by allowing Alexis to move forward with the student-led discussion.

Teacher Navigation Practices

This WOMM discussion offers an opportunity to look closely at the subtle moves that teachers made during student-led talk. As discussed in the literature review, teachers still work to orchestrate learning during student-led talk, but they rely on a very different set of navigational practices than the traditional IRE. Teachers must position themselves as *learners* (rather than evaluators) in reaction to how students are thinking and what students know: “[teachers’] role [is] one of nurturing and maintaining a scholarly quality of interpretive process” (Mayer, 2012 p. 117).

Student Navigation Practice (code)	Frequency
Controlling discourse	37
Asking a question	20
Repetition and Rephrasing: <i>Addressed to group</i>	6
Repetition and Rephrasing: <i>Addressed to individual</i>	4
Incorporating texts into discussion	1
Evaluating and critiquing student ideas	0

See Table 6 above for the frequency of teacher navigation practices. There was a complete absence of teachers “evaluating and critiquing” student responses, which suggests the kind of willingness to suspend judgment that is necessary when listening to students with the intention to understand their ideas rather with the intention to judge and evaluate. Robin’s and Kirk’s main navigational practices during the discussion were to monitor and control student behavior, mostly in the form of protecting the talking space for the selected speaker from interruptions (“controlling discourse”). Notice also that Robin and Kirk did not introduce any new substantive claims or knowledge to the discussion. In the following sections I highlight two different instances when Robin inserted herself into the discussion. Looking closely at these instances offers a picture of the complex orchestration in which teachers engage during student-led discussions in the democratic classroom.

Revoicing Tanner's Divergent Idea

Becca and Myles, both older students, began the discussion by sticking closely to Alexis's proposed topic (i.e., Theme 1: Immigration laws):

[49] Becca [5th grader]: *I don't see why they would want to, um, do it in Indiana cause it sort of, it makes sense in Arizona but in Indiana it doesn't make sense to have that law.*

[50] Tanner [2nd grader, not "officially" called on to speak, interjected in a voice loud enough that only those near him can hear clearly]: *"Yeah, Indiana's a free state."*

[52] Myles [6th grader]: *"Well, kinda like Becca was saying, it doesn't really make sense in Indiana. But, you really see it in Arizona because they're on the border and ... they and in Indiana we are like on the other side of the country from the border."*

Although Myles was sitting close enough to hear Tanner's interjection (turn 52) about Indiana being a "free state," Myles chose to stick with the "official" topic of the discussion, citing geography as the main reason why immigration laws were unnecessary in Indiana compared to a state like Arizona so close to the "border." Tanner's interjection might have been ignored as simply a naïve, misinformed remark; however, in this discussion Tanner's interjection marked a significant ideational turning point. A few turns later, Robin implicitly suggested that she believed this younger student's idea was worth further consideration when she revoiced his interjection:

[58] Robin [teacher]: *What Tanner said was interesting ... I'm wondering what it means to live in a free state?*

In a typical IRE structure Robin might have evaluated Tanner's interjection (or ignored it), and yet here she chose to revoice his idea by "wondering what it means to live in a free state." Revoicing, as described by O'Connor and Michaels (1993), is a sequence in which the student has the ultimate interpretive clout to agree or disagree with the teacher's reformulation. The simple act of revoicing supports discussion as a construction of knowledge by multiple participants rather than positioning the teacher as the source of authoritative knowledge. Within the WOMM discussion, the intent of Robin's revoicing was not an invitation for Tanner to explain or revise his thinking; it was an invitation for the entire class to share ideas related to his interjection. Tanner's and Robin's turns at talk reframed the WOMM conversation: moving it away from a strict focus on immigration laws and inviting a broader exploration of laws and freedom (i.e., Theme 2: Relationship between laws and freedom).

But why Tanner? What was it about his comment that caused Robin to insert herself in the discussions? During my extended time in this classroom, it was clear that Tanner often struggled with sitting and listening for long periods of time. He

was an active student who always needed to be doing multiple things at once; for example, he often drew while Kirk was reading aloud. Waiting for a turn during the WOMM discussion required a great deal of patience for students—it could be 4-5 minutes from the time a student raised his/her hand until he/she shared an idea with the group. For an impulsive student like Tanner, waiting this long from the moment an idea entered his mind until he was able to share it was incredibly difficult (if not impossible). During the first few minutes of the WOMM discussion, Tanner interjected multiple comments after a speaker finished. Robin ignored some of them and also quietly reminded him that “he did not need to comment.” He continued to interject comments, which signaled to Robin that he was interested in being involved in this discussion. Recognizing how difficult it was for Tanner to wait for an official turn, but valuing his interesting comment of “living in a free state,” Robin made the decision to revoice this divergent idea to the group. Based on informal interviews, I can conclude that Robin made the decision to revoice Tanner’s comment for two main reasons: 1) she was hoping to encourage Tanner’s participation in the discussion in a more official capacity (i.e., she wanted him to feel invested in the discussion enough that he’d be willing to raise his hand for a turn); and 2) she wanted to withhold from evaluating Tanner’s comment and relied on other students to question and challenge the assumptions embedded within his remark.

Revoicing Harpo’s Expert Knowledge

Harpo was a well-respected 6th grader who many students identified as “one of the smartest kids in our class.” He knew a great deal about current events and even studied “organically modified organisms” for his final research project of the year. Harpo and I often engaged in political conversations, as he seemed to enjoy interacting with adults more so than other students. I happened to be sitting near Harpo during this WOMM discussion, and the entire time he was whispering short quips and responses to other speakers. Finally, 12 minutes into the discussion, Harpo raised his hand to officially participate in the meeting. In response to two previous students who hypothesized that a world without laws would be “out of control” and filled with “mayhem” and “killing,” Harpo offered the clearest, most nuanced explanation as to why he disagreed with these responses:

[104] Harpo [6th grader]: *“Ok, so the first thing I have to say is totally off topic, but I think it’s really, really, really wrong to say that without laws everything would be chaos and everyone would be killing each other. Because, with tons of people, I mean think even without um laws, there is some human decency in people that would uh make them stand up for other people [voice trails off to almost a whisper]. I don’t know. Like if you go back long enough ago when there were no laws. And then the other thing is for Arizona they want to make sure you’re not an illegal immigrant because they’re having a lot of problems with them taking jobs and everything”*

Harpo’s choice of words not only positioned him as an expert in the way he was able to talk about and justify ideational content, but also in the way he reflected a deep

understanding of the *practice* of discussion itself. His preface, “the first thing I have to say is totally off topic,” acted as a sort of metastatement reflecting his understanding that the discussion had strayed from the original prompt of immigration laws. His response addressed the more recent developing themes as well as Alexis’s initial turns at talk that initiated the discussion. By suggesting that laws aren’t necessary to control citizens’ behaviors, Harpo referenced the heart of a participatory democratic society, which is that citizens must be self-regulating—individualism must be tailored in light of the collective good of the community. He offered an abstract concept (“human decency”) and historical reference (“long enough ago when there were not laws”) as justification for his position; students offering evidence of laws being unnecessary consistently used these same two forms of justification. As soon as Harpo finished, Robin immediately inserted herself into the discussion with a request:

[105] Robin: *Harpo, could you restate what you just said, the last thing?*

[106] Harpo: *And ah, in Arizona, make sure uh they’re not taking over jobs down there I guess. Kind of...*

In his response, Harpo seemed to second-guess himself. In an “observer comment” in my field notes, I wrote that all of sudden he “acted as if he was being forced to talk,” while a few moments earlier he was confident and eager to share. Perhaps sensing this apprehension, Robin used revoicing and finally questioning in multiple attempts to reengage Harpo with the ideas he had just shared:

[108] Robin: *“In Arizona there is an issue with... “*

[109] Harpo [tries to talk over Robin]: *“There with the law...”*

[110] Robin [eye contact with Harpo]: *“immigrants taking jobs.”*

[111] Harpo: *“I guess so.”*

[112] Robin: *“Is that what you’re talking about? Do you think that’s why they’re concerned?”*

[113] Harpo: *“Partially... I don’t know.”*

This sequence pulls apart the subtle differences in the reasons why a teacher may choose to repeat or revoice a student utterance. In turn 108 Robin revoiced what Harpo shared in a louder voice so that other participants could hear his ideas. There was a sense that he had some expert knowledge that Robin felt was important for all students to hear and consider. In turn 112 Robin used revoicing and questioning to encourage Harpo to keep talking and perhaps offer explanatory reasoning. She knew Harpo well enough to know that his knowledge about immigration issues was far more extensive than other students’ in the class; however, Harpo replied with “partially, I don’t know,” which abruptly ended his turn at talk.

Harpo was an extremely shy student, and this seemed to be a case of him misinterpreting Robin’s intention. By questioning and revoicing, Robin was trying to

validate his ideas, but his body language and soft voice indicated that he became increasingly self-conscious, perhaps wondering if he had shared information that wasn't correct. Harpo's vignette reflects the complexities involved in orchestrating student-led talk in democratic classrooms. Robin's decision-making process was incredibly nuanced from moment to moment, and it required far more than simply sitting back and letting students talk.

Conclusion

As the discussion progressed over the final 15 minutes, students worked to construct this relationship between freedom and laws by critiquing one another and the world outside the classroom. The "seminar" nature of the discussion invited students to not only account for their own thinking, but to open up to a world filled with diverse perspectives. The purpose of student-led WOMM discussions was an "enlarged understanding," not a consensus on the final, "official" story (Parker, 2006). While there was no explicit evidence of individual perspectives changing over the course of the discussion, the findings highlight the diversity of ideas that were examined, explored, and constructed as students learned to participate in a community "where they have a stake" (Haynes, 2002, p. 56).

In future work I intend to look more closely at how young children in this multiage classroom get "apprenticed" into ways of participating in the community—especially of interest are the tools of critique and argument. The WOMM discussion focused on in this paper is just one example of how "exploratory talk" offers students a glimpse of knowledge emerging in democratic classrooms through "the restless, impatient continuing, hopeful inquiry [humans] pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 1997, p. 58).

A Post Script

Vivian, a 6th grade student in the class, composed an eloquent thank you letter that she gave to Robin and Kirk on the last day of school (see Appendix B for a copy of the full letter). In it, Vivian explicitly cited WOMM discussions as one of the things she "loved" most about being a member of this class:

In WOMM we get to discuss and debate issues, both in the classroom and in the outside world. This teaches us how to get along with other people's opinions, and how to look at other sides of a problem – something that can't be taught from a textbook. (V. Johnson, personal communication, June 6, 2011)

When considering the *purpose of school*, this note exemplifies the kind of thinking that I think is at the heart of what it means to democratize classrooms. This excerpt suggests that Vivian recognized that these weekly discussions helped her make sense of the world and life outside of school. By explicitly downplaying the knowledge offered by textbooks, she called into question the dominant interpretations offered through the official school curriculum. She viewed knowledge production as a process of discussion among diverse individuals

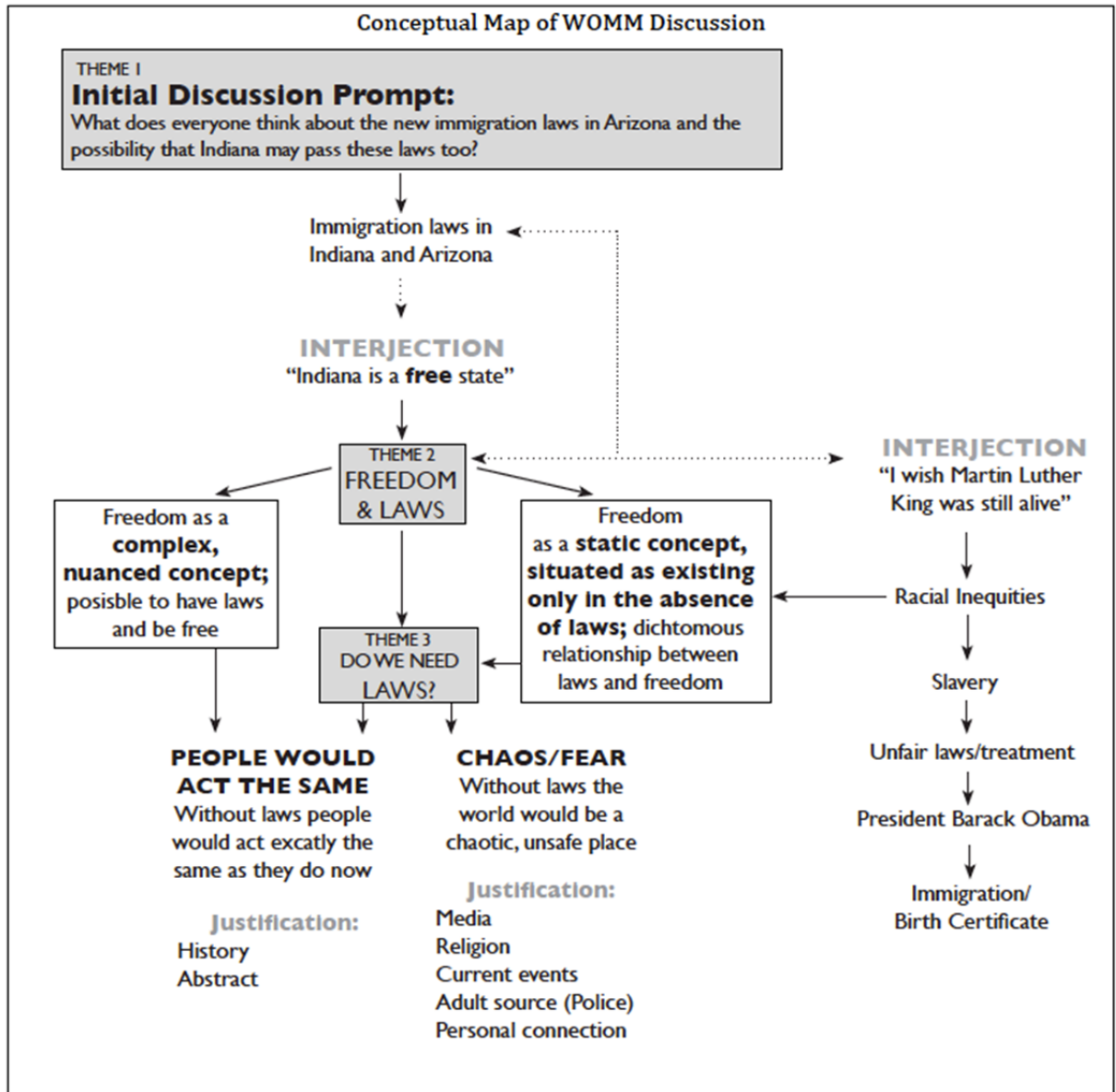
working to understand each other's unique perspectives. As Mayer (2012) suggests, it is through "providing opportunities for all students to make sense of their immediate experience in a culturally literate manner and in relation to broader social realities, [that] teachers help to democratize the world" (p. 38).

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Appendix A Conceptual Map of WOMM Discussion



Appendix B

Thank you letter from 6th Grader to Robin & Kirk

Dear Ms. B and Mr. G,

I've loved being in this class ever since first grade. This class is truly unique. All my friends are really close, and even people I'm not friends with seem like distant cousins.

One thing I love about this class is the freedom. In other classes, they might assign books or writing subjects, but in this class, we get to choose practical everything we do, and I think that that's what makes all of us love reading and writing so much.

I also love your focus on critical thinking. When we all had to decorate our doors with ways to stop bullying, everyone else did pictures of sharks or Cookie Monster or Pac-Man. I'm not saying anything's wrong with that, but our doors were covered in real, well-thought solutions while others just listed things that you shouldn't do.

→ In WOMM, we get to discuss and debate issues, both in the classroom and in the outside world. This teaches how to get along with other people's opinions, and how to look at other sides of a problem something that can't be taught from a textbook.

And this class is so inclusive. I think that having the room 16 kids in our class is good for our class and their class. Outside of school, people with disabilities aren't separate from everyone else, so learning how to interact with the other is good for both of us. It teaches tolerance which also can't be taught with a textbook.

In math, you are so helpful. The sixth graders get to help each other with problems, and even though I know we won't be able to do

that in middle school, we should. School is probably the only place where you can't work together.

I love the way our class is filled with traditions, legacies, and inside jokes, from the Broom Dance, the pencils, the banana split, and pieing (which we know, you're going to do, by the way) to The Penguin.

This letter would not be complete without something on Red vs. Gray. It has taken many forms, but I think (I'm not sure, though) that its roots can be traced back six years to when Toudora and I used to attack Mitch, Ben Kugler and Forrest during recess. This became chasing Benji, Spenc and Simon, which more and more people joined, some on our side and some on theirs. When we caught them, they would get dragged to a small and crowded 'jail'. This became boys vs girls, which had the same rules as Red vs Gray. The problem with this game was that some boys would go on the girls team and vice versa. So we made Red vs Gray. For a while the playground supervisors banned Red vs Gray, and so instead we played Dragons vs Unicorns, which just happened to have the same rules.

Now, Focus Study. You knew I would be getting to that, didn't you? Focus Study is the best. What I love is how open it is. We can study anything, pretty much, from Edgar Allan Poe to Robots to chepacabras. Younger kids can study cats or mice and have 45 slides on a powerpoint, each with a bright background covered in clipart, each with one fact like 'they are cute' and that's perfectly fine. Once they get to sixth grade, they'll have well-researched and well-written presentations. We can all learn from

each other.

That's the very best part about this class; we can all learn from each other, and everyone has something to give. Younger kids and older kids can be friends, and they can teach each other. We are all teachers, learners, and friends.

It's the absolute best place to be, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Love,



P.S. I'll visit as often as I can!