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ABSTRACT

Drawing from a five-site multicase study, this paper examines three middle school students' perspectives on weekly classroom discussions that took place over a 6-month period in order to analyze the dynamics of classroom talk and how discussions can be affected by the teacher's interaction with the students. The three students were members of an accelerated language arts curriculum for gifted eighth graders. They were initially in separate groups, but when students suggested forming "talk-alike" groups--separating the vocally dominant from the less vocal--the three ended up in a group known for its outspokenness. A short analysis of each student is provided, which includes each student's perception of his or her classroom participation, and a look at patterns of interruption during discussion. An analysis of students' perceptions, which reveals gendered perspectives of each other, is also provided. The concluding analysis of the implications of the discourse dynamics suggests that merely providing a forum for students to express themselves does not necessarily empower them. Contains 20 references. (SW)

"Talking is Something We're Pretty Deprived of at School": Middle School Students Speak Out

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"Talking is Something We're Pretty Deprived of at School":

Middle School Students Speak Out

In research projects previous to the one that motivated this paper, I attributed the rarity of middle school students' talk about assigned subject matter texts to the fact teachers tended to dominate classroom verbal interactions, especially when those interactions centered on clarifying concepts and refining students' thinking about what they had read (Alvermann & Hayes, 1989; Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Hinchman, 1987). Although I found this explanation of teacher dominance in classroom talk personally disquieting, it was nevertheless consistent with the research of others who had studied classroom talk at the middle and high school levels, both abroad (Barnes, Britton, & Rosen, 1971; Stubbs, 1983) and in the United States (Bellack, Kliebard, Hyman, & Smith, 1966; Dillon, 1989).

My continuing interest in classroom talk about texts eventually led to a five-site, multicase study in which students' perspectives on how they were experiencing such talk became the focus of inquiry. In placing students' experiences at the center of our research, my colleagues and I (Alvermann, et al., in press) were trying to interrupt the more common practice of studying classroom talk from the teacher's perspective or teacher-student dyad. Although the teacher's perspective is valuable, it cannot capture what students are experiencing in their daily encounters with each other and the curriculum. Like Erickson and Shultz (1992), I believe that "on the topic of student experience, students themselves are the ultimate insiders and experts" (p. 480).

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to explore three middle school students' insider

perspectives on weekly discussions that took place over a six-month period during their language arts class at Halford Middle School[1]. One of five schools involved in the multicase study, Halford serves a heterogeneous population of 850 students in a small, southern town. The three students who are the focus of this paper, Lisa, Annette, and Brad, had been identified as gifted; hence, by state mandate they were part of an accelerated, differentiated curriculum for language arts. In drawing from their three case narratives, I will highlight issues related to student voice, interruption, and empowerment. I will conclude with an analysis of the three students' perceptions of each other as members of the same discussion group and the implications of this analysis for pedagogical response.

Thumbnail Sketches of the Three Students

At the beginning of the study, Lisa, Annette, and Brad were members of different small groups that the teacher formed for the purpose of encouraging students to discuss among themselves the stories, poems, and plays that were part of the accelerated language arts curriculum for gifted eighth graders. Later, as members of the class grew more vocal about what they liked and disliked about peer-led discussion groups, the teacher invited them to suggest how they would form their own groups. One suggestion that came from the students was to form "talk-alike" groups. Students saw an advantage in separating the outspoken members of their class from the more quiet members.[2] It was this student-initiated suggestion that led to Lisa, Annette, and Brad becoming members of the same group. They, along with Petra and Zeke, became the five-member group known for its outspokenness.

Lisa

Despite her reputation for being outspoken, Lisa claimed to like teacher-led discussions better than peer-led discussions because, in her words, she could "just sit back, watch, and not be a part." As the year progressed, Lisa's tendency to withdraw from small group discussions became increasingly more pronounced. Her self-imposed silences reminded me in many ways of the work that Annie Rogers (1993) and others (e.g., Gilligan, Lyons, & Hanmer, 1990) have done on girls' loss of voice, resiliency, and self-esteem as they approach adolescence. In the following segment from an audio taped interview with Lisa and four of her peers after they had viewed a video tape of an earlier discussion, I asked Lisa to comment on her role in the group.

Interviewer: What about you, Lisa? I think we have heard from everybody but you.

Lisa: Hmmm...

Peers: (in undertone and in unison) She likes talking.

Lisa: Um, I think I used to like talking. I don't like it as much anymore because it is like I have gotten to the point that I get tired of people telling me how I talk or when I am wrong and stuff like that....So I just don't like to talk as much anymore.

Interviewer: You are worried about what other people say?

Lisa: No, it's just like people don't let me talk as much anymore, you know. Because I could usually like, talk--like I can talk to my mom a

lot. Because we, we pretty much agree on stuff, and--like in class and stuff, people don't always agree and they don't, I mean--

Zeke: (interrupting) There is more criticism.

Lisa: Right. There is more criticism and--

Zeke: (interrupting) Your mom is not going to disagree.

Lisa: Your mom is not going to say,"Golly! How could you say something like that," you know. I think your peers are lots more critical. I mean it's always like that.

Brad: They don't know you as well either. I mean you have known your mom for a long time. (An undertone of laughter is heard in the group.)

Lisa: This is true. I mean I have known--

Brad: (interrupting) Your mom understands you better.

Petra: And your mom wouldn't put you down, either.

Lisa: Really! She wouldn't say, "you're stupid."

Like the twelve- and thirteen-year-old girls whom Rogers (1993) and her colleagues at Harvard studied, Lisa is learning that "speaking about what one knows as a girl or a woman is not simple" (p. 274). What is ordinary and acceptable in talk involving her mother and herself has become threatening to her classmates. In choosing to silence her own voice, Lisa is discovering how to protect against what Rogers calls "the death of the 'true I'" (p. 289). Viewed from this perspective, Lisa may be preparing to enter (without

disrupting) a public world that Rogers claims all too often conspires to silence women's knowledge. According to Rogers, the tragedy of deliberately choosing not to speak about what one knows, while at first a strategy for self-preservation, "slips over into a psychological resistance--the disconnection of one's own experience from consciousness" (p. 289).

I think it is also worth noting that the three times Lisa was interrupted, the break came as a result of the two males in her group overlapping with her talk. Although interruptions are viewed typically as attempts to dominate, Deborah Tannen (1993) makes a distinction between interrupting and overlapping. She bases her argument on earlier work (Tannen, 1984) that demonstrated the need to analyze the probable intention of the person who breaks into another person's speech. If the overlap in talk shows support for the speaker, Tannen (1993) views it as cooperative overlap; if it contradicts or changes the topic of conversation, it is seen as a negative and power-laden attempt to dominate. In the dialogue involving Lisa and her two male peers, the breaks appear to result from cooperative overlaps. However, as Tannen (1993) goes on to note, "If one speaker repeatedly overlaps and another repeatedly gives way, the resulting communication is asymmetrical, and the effect (though not necessarily the intent) is domination" (p. 176).

Annette

Annette was an avid reader. She sometimes walked into class reading from a paperback, completely engaged and removed from the usual chatter and pre-class socializing that surrounded her. Although not unfriendly, Annette kept a noticeable distance between herself and her peers. She seemed a bit more mature than the other girls

in her class, a factor that may have permitted her outspokenness to go unchallenged for the most part. The few times that she was challenged by members of her group occurred after she gave away the plot of a story the teacher had assigned them to read in a fixed order and a few chapters a night. While others in her group accused her of deliberately reading ahead so that she could be the "all-knowing" discussant, Annette claimed that she had read the material much earlier, perhaps at another grade level, and that she couldn't separate what she knew from the earlier reading from what the teacher had assigned the group to read for that day's discussion.

Later, during a whole class discussion in which the students were asked to reflect on the problems encountered when small-group discussions turned into arguing sessions, several members of the class wondered if certain students simply saw themselves as "arguers" while other students saw different roles for themselves. Annette thought that was too simplistic an explanation. She believed that individuals assumed different roles depending on the situation:

Annette: I think it depends on everything. Because, say, I'm an arguer; I have three people around me who just listen, then what do I have to argue about? Okay? When I have maybe three people with me who are arguers, and I have something to argue about, then I'm an arguer. I mean, it just depends on time, place, the story, the person. I think it depends on all of that. And I don't think you can categorize all that.

Teacher: You really can't categorize it very well. All right, Brad, and then Helene.

Brad: But, one thing, what I'm saying is, I think arguers are always arguers, because a true arguer can argue about anything....

Helene: So how do you put certain persons into groups? It depends on who they're with and what they are.

Annette's understanding that situations change and that a student who argues in one situation may not argue in another reflects her maturity. It also reflects the notion of a self, or subjectivity, that is perpetually changing and often contradictory. In fact, Chris Weedon (1987), writing from a poststructuralist view on subjectivity, maintains that an individual's ways of thinking about and understanding her or his relation to the world is always in process and constantly being reconstituted.

Brad

Popular with both the girls and the boys in his class, Brad was able to carry on a discussion on almost any topic. He said he liked to read and discuss, although he conceded on occasion that the assignments in his language arts class were long and difficult to comprehend. His teacher encouraged his talkativeness because she believed that he was one of two or three leaders in the class and that his proclivity to talk was acceptable to his peers. Interviews involving several of Brad's peers early in the school year seemed to corroborate the teacher's view. For example, Annette described Brad this way: "I think he just likes to talk. I mean, I understand, like I think he just likes to talk all the time in the discussions. He just likes to talk." Zeke added, "Brad always puts in his two cents; he is pretty open minded."

Although Brad thought of himself as a talker--someone who liked to speak out so

that his classmates knew where he stood--he said he thought in general "talking [was] something we're pretty deprived of at school." In a written response to my question, "What is it about you that makes you want more opportunities to participate in discussions?", Brad wrote:

> I love to talk and discuss things. When something comes up, and we get a chance to talk about it, I always do. I love to participate. This is because I feel you get a lot more out of learning when you get into the topic rather than mope around in the corner.

But less than halfway into the school year several of Brad's classmates began to resent his voluble nature. They showed signs of being less tolerant of him and his opinions, and a few times they even shut him out of a discussion. For example, when Brad attempted to add to a peer's interpretation of The Fall of the House of Usher during a whole class sharing of three smaller groups' discussions, this exchange occurred:

> Holly: We thought it was really neat--born together, died together. When the last two members of the family died so did the house. The house had a soul.
>
> Brad: (Begins to add to the interpretation that Holly's group shared)
>
> Holly: Hey! (in a move to silence Brad)
>
> Holly: Either the girl or the house was symbol.
>
> Brad: I forgot about that.
>
> Mark: (Protests to the teacher that Brad is butting in)
>
> Brad: I was just adding like she (motioning towards the teacher) said to do.

By blaming his teacher for encouraging him to make his voice heard in class

discussions, Brad seemed to be pointing a finger at the person whom he believed had enfranchised him as a speaker. In fact, a characteristic common to most political connotations of voice is the notion of enfranchisement. However, as Mimi Orner (1992) has argued, calls for students to speak their minds may not be as empowering as liberatory educators would have us believe, primarily because as educators we have not fully examined the power relations that exist between ourselves and our students and among students themselves. That these power relations are rarely played out on neutral terrain is significant (Brodkey, 1992) and is central to understanding the role of student subjectivity in discourses on student voice, a point I will return to in the implications section of this paper.

An Analysis of the Students' Perceptions of Each Other

In separate interviews with Lisa, Annette, and Brad that I conducted three times over the course of the six months I was a weekly observer participant in their language arts classroom, I heard a continuing concern about the argumentative nature of their small group discussions. I also observed, first hand, numerous arguments as I sat with their group and took field notes each week. Their perceptions of each other's contributing roles in these arguments are illustrated in the following Table, where I have quoted directly from the students' narratives. In brief, Lisa gives Annette the benefit of the doubt by noting that Annette really doesn't want to start arguments but manages to do so anyway in her zeal to get her point across. Reciprocally, Annette believes that Lisa likes to get her own point across. Both Annette and Brad say that when Lisa is unsuccessful in making her point, she gets mad. Interestingly, neither of the two girls fault Brad for arguing, and he himself says

that he tries to avoid getting involved in their arguments.

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What I find more interesting for the purposes of this paper, however, is how the students' insider perspectives reveal their gendered positionings of each other. For instance, Brad believes that Lisa whines and is prone to "desperate pouts" when her ideas fail to prevail. He also associates Lisa's quarrelsomeness with her wanting "to be the first woman president," which he claims does not present a problem for him. However, the contrasts Brad draws between Lisa and Annette are informative on this point. He thinks Annette "argues in a cheerful way" and is willing to retreat from arguments when she sees others "are getting too mad" while Lisa just "likes a fight." Although Brad attributes both Lisa's and Annette's quarrelsome demeanor to their liberal leanings, he makes a distinction between the degree to which they are liberal. He believes that "Lisa is more liberal [because] she thinks women should play football [whereas] Annette is more of a liberal in the nature side, like rain forests and whales and stuff like that." Viewed broadly from the added contexts I have as a result of being present for many of this group's contentious discussions, women who want to invade the manly sport of football are far more threatening than women who sympathize with the Green Peace Movement.

It is important to note that Brad was not the only member of this trio of students to engage in gendered positioning. When Lisa and Annette talked about their perceptions of Brad, they described him as a leader, as someone who could get a discussion going or back

on track once it was derailed. However, Annette qualified her perceptions of Brad's leadership capabilities by stating that he could also play the class clown or joker. Lisa noted that Brad had gotten better at letting other people talk; she attributed this improvement to the fact that she and the other three students in the group had coerced him into letting them talk. Although Lisa said, "*we* (italics added) kind of force him to let us talk," my field notes suggest that it was Lisa more than the other students who constrained Brad's talkativeness.

Finally, I think it is revealing that the statement "Nobody really silences me....I silence myself" came from a male student. Although Brad was not privy to what Lisa thought about the group's influence on his behavior, it is doubtful that he would have altered his perceptions of himself had he known. In general, Brad believed he was in control. When he didn't feel like talking, or when he felt his anger would show forth, he stopped himself from saying things. This self-restraining behavior probably resulted from his mother's influence as a psychologist, as he stated (see Table with excerpts from Brad's case narrative). However, as Tannen (1993) has pointed out in her discussion of Sattel's (1983) work, "taciturnity itself can be an instrument of power" (p. 177).

Implications for Pedagogical Response

I originally interpreted Brad's perception that he and his classmates were talk deprived to mean that he believed teachers dominate classroom interactions. Although I have no reason to doubt that Brad was speaking primarily about teachers, in retrospect, I wonder how much of his frustration may have been tied to the fact his classmates were beginning to silence him. Granted, Brad claimed nobody silences him--he silences himself,

but I wonder about the degree to which this is so.

Implications for pedagogical response are many, but one that concerns me most is the danger inherent in teachers' calls for students' voices in discussions where the multiple subjectivities of teachers and students are constantly shifting and at times even contradictory. Indeed, Jennifer Gore (1993) has cautioned educators to be wary of engaging in discursive practices that attempt to enfranchise or empower students simply by providing a forum in which their voices can be heard. She has refuted the notion that power is a commodity that can be transferred to others. Drawing on the Foucauldian argument that power is exercised or practiced, rather than possessed, Gore (1992) writes:

> When the agent of empowerment [in this case the teacher] assumes to be already empowered, and so apart from those who are to be empowered, arrogance can underlie claims of "what we can do for you"....In attempts to empower others we need to acknowledge that our agency has limits, that we might "get it wrong" in assuming we know what would be empowering for others, and that no matter what our aims or how we go about "empowering", our efforts will be partial and inconsistent. (pp. 61, 63).

In summary, there are surely many young adolescents in our middle schools who, like Lisa and Brad, are beginning to experience some of the not-so-empowering aspects of speaking their minds. At the same time, there are surely others, like Annette, who sense that one's self (and others' selves) are perpetually changing, and that it is this changing nature of classroom relations that makes it necessary to size up situations before jumping headlong into them. It behooves us as teachers, therefore, to acknowledge that our agency

is limited and that good intentions may go awry. Like Orner (1992), I think we need to look inwardly at our own voices and ask ourselves, "Whose interests are served when students speak?"

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Footnotes

[1]Pseudonyms are used for the school and the students.

[2]Interestingly, this notion of "talk-alike" groups surfaced independently among students in two other middle school teachers' classes in a study I am presently conducting on gender issues and discussion.

	LISA ON:	ANNETTE ON:	BRAD ON:
LISA	"I think I used to like talking. I don't like it as much anymore because it is like I have gotten to the point that I get tired of people telling me how I talk or when I am wrong, or when I tell them that they are wrong and stuff like that. So I just don't like to talk as much anymore."	"Lisa is very to the point and she likes to get her point across. She is very argumentative. So when...she doesn't have everyone agree with her, she kind of gets mad. She likes to be in control, and so maybe it is that she is not in control if people don't agree with her."	"Lisa is really outgoing and she is a nice girl, but she argues a lot. Her way always has to be right. I mean, nobody else can even dare oppose her or anything. I mean she always has her idea, and if it is not her idea, then she just goes into this desperate pout....I mean she whines....And so it just, I don't know, I think she likes a fight. I mean she wants to be the first woman president. I don't have any problem with that. I mean that's just the way she is. She just, I mean I guess she is pretty liberal I would say, and she argues about a lot of stuff."
ANNETTE	"Well, Annette, she reads the stories before, so she knows a lot more about the stories before everybody else does. And she's ready to argue, but she doesn't want to start an argument, you know....But, um, she tries to get the point across and just says, 'Well, did you understand this? Because I understood it this way.' And she kind of says she's right and if we didn't understand it that way, then how could we not understand it that way?"	"Well I have noticed that sometimes when I am talking to someone I usually, if someone doesn't understand what I am saying...I just kind of like keep on explaining to them until they understand what I am saying. And, so maybe I like to argue. We certainly did a lot of that in my group."	"Annette, I don't know, she argues in a cheerful way. And she, I have actually seen her do this, she goes, 'Okay, well, you are getting too mad so I will stop this.' But she can get pretty annoying sometimes. I guess everybody can. I don't know, it's just sometimes, sometimes she does it because she is pretty liberal, too....I think Lisa is more liberal [because] she thinks women should play football. And Annette is more of a liberal in the nature side, like rain forests and whales and stuff like that.
BRAD	"When we are in a big group together in class or whatever, Brad will talk. [But] in this [small] group [with Annette and me], he's like humbled, or whatever, because he's, um, like in the first place he was asking questions to get the discussion going.... He is good at getting it going, but sometimes he won't let other people talk. But I mean he has gotten better at that since he's been in our group because we kind of force him to let us talk."	"Brad is usually kind of like the joker or the class clown. So usually, um, he is just joking through a lot of the discussion. But he is also a leader, kind of, so he sort of gets us back on track. Like on the video, he was saying,'Hold on, let's get back to the subject '"	"Nobody really silences me. It is just like, I silence myself when I don't feel like talking, when I don't want to get, I mean, I guess my Mom has taught me to control my anger because she is a psychologist. I just, I find that I get really angry when people say stuff. And I try to stop myself from saying stuff because I don't want to, I mean an argument with two people who love to argue is pretty bad....I mean...we have two other people in our group, and we have to think about them, too "