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ABSTRACT
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Children's Voices on Group Work:
A Playlet

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Abstract. *Children have much to teach us about the kinds of group work that enhance their social, emotional, and cognitive development. Using children's own words, this playlet juxtaposes third-grade and fifth/sixth-grade views of how group work helps and hinders their school experiences in literacy learning. Students in both age groups experienced similar benefits of group work including sharing ideas and the burdens of work, having access to help, and learning to cooperate, among others. Most of the differences between the two contexts related to problems of group work. The older students, particularly, experienced a tension between group membership and their own developing autonomy. The challenge of the teacher developing sense of self and individual identity are maintained while the values inherent in group work are nurtured.*

Introduction

* Two third-grade girls sit in their classrooms, legs intertwined, taking turns reading aloud to each other from a biography of Helen Keller.

* Outside in a courtyard several groups of sixth graders write skits about different countries they have researched.

* Several fifth- and sixth-grade children are gathered around a table, hands covered with clay, sculpting a model of the island they read about in *The Cay* (Taylor, 1969).

* Four 3rd graders sit at a table, each with a copy of *Miss Pickerell on the Moon* (MacGregor & Pantell, 1965), offering in rapid succession their predictions for the story's outcome.

These scenarios exemplify some of the interpersonal using in "group work" in the language arts that took shape in the classrooms of Dorothy Rice and Sally Thomas. Their students, Dorothy's third graders and Sally's fifth and sixth graders, had much to say about group work—how it helped and why it went wrong. In this paper, we compare and contrast the multiple voices of the children in these two classrooms as recorded by Jane West in

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Dorothy's class and Penny Oldfather in Sally's class. This look at group work across age levels highlights developmental and contextual issues that may be important to teachers considering students' needs and interests in relation to language arts learning in groups.

After reviewing a variety of conceptions of group work and clarifying how the students and teachers in these two classrooms defined group work, we describe the classrooms and present a playlet constructed from students' interview comments about group work. We hope that "hearing" these students' voices enables readers to expand their own ideas about how to make group work valuable in the classroom setting. After the playlet, we share the ways these students have helped us understand how children at different grade levels experience collaborative enterprises—feeling that they "do good stuff together" or realizing that "sometimes you get smarter when you're by yourself."

How This Dialogue Came to Be

We were each conducting separate classroom studies. Through informal conversations, we discovered that the studies had similar focuses, methods, and some converging findings. Oldfather's 8-month study addressed students' perceptions of their motivation in a whole language classroom (Oldfather, 1991, 1993), and West's studies spanning 2 academic years addressed students' perceptions of whole language (West, 1994a) and peer helping (West, 1994b). Students in both studies represented diversity of gender and ability. The 14 fifth and sixth graders in Oldfather's study included African-American, Mexican-American, Asian-American, and Caucasian children in a small academic community in Southern California. In West's studies, the 18 and 19 students, respectively, were all Caucasian and resided in a rural Southern community. The voices in this dialogue represent the variety of ideas of both groups of children, though not all are directly quoted. Interview segments quoted here were chosen because they most clearly illustrated categories found in data analysis. Both investigators explored students' perceptions through participant-observation and series of open-ended interviews analyzed through constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This collaboration for a cross-case comparison resulted from our informal sharing about our research processes. We discovered that we had very similar focuses, methods, and seemingly convergent findings in our separate research projects. We went back to our original interview data and identified all segments relating to students' views of group work. We extracted these from the complete data sets, printing the data from each study on contrasting colors of paper. As we read and re-read this newly pooled data set, common themes began to emerge. We cut up the interview segments and sorted them into piles according to emerging categories. The two colors of paper facilitated easy visual identification of the balance within each category of data representing the two groups of students.

The resulting emic categories included: (1) learning each other well; (2) sharing ideas; (3) sharing the load; (4) giving and receiving help; (5) learning to cooperate; (6) choosing groups; (7) making girls go with boys; (8) not

getting along; (9) disagreements; (10) having your own ideas; and (11) people who goof off and copy your work.

Working with one category at a time, we arranged and rearranged the data segments, juxtaposing third-grade and fifth/sixth-grade comments by taping them onto large pieces of paper. The result was a remarkably flowing and coherent conversation that became the basis for the playlet. As a result of this process, we found some striking similarities and telling differences between the ways the two groups of children perceived group work. The comparison of these studies, like the overlaying of one transparency on another, highlights both the unique and the commonality of students' experiences and allows us to understand each study more fully.

What is Group Work?

Researchers have devised a number of terms for what the teachers and children in these two classes call "group work" (e.g., Bruffee, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 1987; Slavin, 1985; Smith, 1988). Definitions proposed by Smith (1988) and Short (1990) most closely match the qualities of group work experienced by children in our studies. "Group enterprise," the term offered by Frank Smith (1988), most nearly describes what Dorothy and Sally were working toward. In *group enterprise*, grades are de-emphasized or eliminated, restrictions on time and group makeup are lifted, coercion by force or exclusion does not occur, and status of group members is equalized. "In such collaborative enterprises," writes Smith, "individuals help each other, and

the enterprises become self-sustaining" (1988, p. 78). Although student groups in Sally's and Dorothy's classrooms did not always have the characteristics proposed by Smith and rarely had *all* of them, Smith's description of group enterprise most closely resembles what these teachers hoped to accomplish. Groups in these two classrooms were fluid, were formed in different ways and for different purposes, and tended to have low levels of teacher direction.

"Collaborative community," the term used by Short (1990), denotes "shared responsibility for learning. Such a community is structured to encourage continuing conversations among individual voices and to support the learning of everyone in that community. Collaborative communities go beyond cooperating with someone else to learning from and with others" (p. 34). Learning with others, shared responsibility, and support were all encouraged by Dorothy and Sally in their classrooms.

Another, more common term for group work is "cooperative learning" that utilizes "structured, systematic instructional strategies capable of being used at any grade level and in most school subjects" (Slavin, 1985, p. 6). The teacher assigns students to small, heterogeneous groups with the following basic elements: a high degree of student-student interaction, individual accountability, purposeful development of interpersonal skills, and positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1987). Peers are seen as the primary resources for help, and students see to it that all members of their group learn what they are expected to learn; one group member cannot succeed unless other members also succeed (Johnson & Johnson, 1990).

"Collaboration," according to Bruffee (1984), is "a form of indirect teaching in which the teacher sets the problem and organizes students to work it out collaboratively" (p. 637). In collaborative learning, as opposed to more formally structured cooperative learning groups, there are no formally assigned roles. Such collaboration is termed "groupwork" by Cohen (1986), though her use of the term differs markedly from ours. Cohen defines *groupwork* as "students working together in a group small enough so that everyone can participate on a task that has been clearly assigned" (pp. 1-2). The description of the teacher as an "educational engineer" delegating part of his or her authority to students, who then carry out their assigned tasks, distinguishes Cohen's "groupwork" from the kind that is the focus of this paper.

Although some aspects of cooperative learning and collaborative learning defined above characterized the group work that Sally's and Dorothy's students did, their groups tended to be much less structured. The children most often organized themselves, decided how to approach a task or problem, and at times even set the problem and chose whether or not to participate in a group. Thus, we use the children's term *group work* and Smith's *group enterprise* interchangeably in describing the interpersonal learning that took place in these two classrooms.

The Value of Group Work

Many of the benefits of group work are summarized by Cohen (1986) as follows:

- effective conceptual learning

- creative problem solving

- oral language proficiency

- socialization of students for adult roles

- amelioration of many discipline problems

- accommodation of the needs of a diverse student population

- positive intergroup relations

The research reported in this article is based on the premise that these intergroup relations have intrinsic value apart from the many academic benefits documented by other researchers (Solomon, Watson, Schaps, Battistich, & Solomon, 1990). Students' perceptions in ours and others' studies supported this premise. In their collection of 30 profiles of children's voices on literacy, Hudson-Ross, Cleary, and Casey (1993) noted that one common thread running through the children's comments was the value the children placed on a supportive learning community composed of adults as well as other children.

According to Johnson and Johnson (1978), a key purpose of schooling is to help children learn "how to build and maintain positive relationships with other people" (p. 11). The "positive relationships" referred to by Johnson and Johnson are inherent in Nel Noddings' (1984) conceptualization of the importance of caring in schools:

The primary aim of every educational institution and of every educational effort must be maintenance and enhancement of caring. . . . If what we do instructionally achieves the instructional end—A learns X—we have succeeded instructionally, but if A hates X and his teacher as a result, we have failed educationally. (p. 174)

Because cooperation is such a fundamental aspect of human experience, children naturally collaborate with others in their learning (Smith, 1988). Children and adults learn continually by helping each other; the most effective learning often occurs first in interactions among children and then is internalized as "part of the child's independent achievement" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90). We depart from Vygotsky's notion that this interaction must occur "under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (1978, p. 86). Recent views represented in the work of Forman and Cazden (1985), Goodman and Goodman (1990), Pontecorvo and Zucchermaglio (1990), and Teberosky (1990) hold that *all* interaction, without respect to whether one participant is more capable, facilitates learning. For example, the act of teaching itself may result in learning on the part of the teacher (Peterson, Janicki, & Swing, 1981; Peterson, Wilkinson, Spinelli, & Swing, 1984; Swing & Peterson, 1982; Webb, 1985). In fact, according to Smith (1988),

> Collaboration is at the heart of learning in the world outside of school. There, children and adults attempt to do something together and the person with more experience helps the novice to succeed. Instead of instruction the beginner

receives assistance, which is a much more efficient means of learning than either hypothesis-testing or trial and error. The participation of a more experienced collaborator minimizes mistakes and wasted time. Learners who are helped to achieve a purpose are less likely to be in doubt about what they should do and less likely to acquire irrelevant knowledge and inappropriate behavior. (p. 64)

The Classrooms

Dorothy's third-grade children lived in a close-knit, rural, working-class Southern community. Most of them had known each other since kindergarten. Her primary goals for students were process-oriented and affective: "coming together as a unit" and learning to get along with each other and being "whole people" who felt good about themselves. Academic learning was important, but she wanted, above all, for them to learn how to learn, both together and alone, and she wanted them to enjoy school:

> Unfortunately, a lot of children come to school with negative attitudes because they always hear adults say things like, "I bet you can't wait until school's out" and "Did you get a mean teacher this year?" A lot of times the media presents school as a negative place, and I really want to make it positive. As the teacher, I have to create that positive environment by offering more. There has to be more there for them than just sitting in a desk doing the same old thing. (Dorothy Rice, in West, 1994a, p. 5)

The children seemed to feel Dorothy was successful in meeting that goal. During the year of Dorothy's first experiments with whole language, Kendra noted, "I didn't really like it the way it used to be [before whole language]. All you did was work. Now, you can pick whichever thing you want to, work with different people, pick your books. Everybody likes it." And during the following year, when the current study began, another child reported that "In Miss Rice's class, fun is everything."

The fifth- and sixth-grade students attended "Willow," a century-old school in Southern California that served a diverse community. Willow, known for its student-centered experiential curriculum, was in an open-enrollment district, and about half of the 350 students attending were from outside the school neighborhood. The teacher, Sally Thomas, was respected in her school district and in the state of California as an exemplary whole language teacher. Sally's students were actively engaged in literacy learning.

> The dominant goal in Sally's classroom was for learning rather than performance: Ultimately, it's meaning that counts, *your meaning*. The ultimate value in what you're doing is in the meaning of it which is really unrelated to the skills part, except the skills support being able to access the meaning. But there are a lot of ways . . . to access meaning. Dancers access it one way and musicians access it another. (Sally Thomas, in Oldfather, 1991, p. 60)

In keeping with the emphasis on meaning in this classroom, errors were seen as a part of learning. Paul, a sixth-grade student, shared his perceptions of the class:

> One of the things I love in school is that we're trying to learn—not just get the right answer. That's really good. You want to get the right answer, but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer.

Sally emphasized collaborative construction of meaning, and group work enhanced that goal. Rather than presenting herself as the sole possessor of knowledge, she established a climate of *honored voice* and "shared the ownership of knowing" (Oldfather, 1992).

The integrated thematic curriculum was responsive to students' interests, ideas, and needs, and students demonstrated high interest in reading and writing in a variety of subject areas throughout the day. Classroom activity structures included whole-class teacher-directed, independent, and small-group opportunities. A multitask approach (Bossert, 1977) enabled flexibility within clear structure and requirements accommodating a variety of interests and pacing needs. Students often—but not always—had a choice about group participation and membership.

Group structures were usually informal and student-centered, but occasionally were more structured and teacher-directed. Groups were formed by student selection, random methods, or teacher selection designated specifically for heterogeneous membership.

The emphasis was generally collaborative rather than competitive. Fifth- and sixth-grade students' desks were arranged in groups of four or five; third graders sat at tables of four or five. Seating in both classrooms was changed from time to time. Students talked freely among themselves except when the whole class was being addressed by the teacher or a student. Teachers expected the students to work together and encouraged them to seek help from peers.

The Playlet: An Imaginary Dialogue Among Real Children

In reporting our findings, we present the voices of third graders and of fifth and sixth graders who will describe group work in their respective classrooms. In this "interview profile" (Hudson-Ross, Cleary, & Casey, 1993; Seidman, 1991), the dialogue, with the exception of a few words added to ease transitions, was constructed from the very words of the children in our interviews. Similar techniques for reporting children's voices have been used by Terkel (1972) and Hudson-Ross, Cleary, and Casey (1993). Our purpose in selecting this format was to step aside so that the children could speak and readers could interpret the children's ideas for themselves. For flow and clarity, a mythical interviewer asks questions of the children—often the same questions we asked them in the actual interviews—with care to be faithful to the original context and students' intent. The result is an imaginary conversation composed of the words of two groups of children who never met each other but who have some common joys and concerns

about getting things done in groups. Headings interspersed in the dialogue represent key categories identified in data analysis and highlight topics under discussion. Sometimes the comments under a heading are dominated by one group; this reflects the differences in the perspectives of the two groups of students. Often one comment represents many similar comments made by the speaker's classmates.

On Learning Each Other Well

Interviewer: **I understand you really like reading and writing in small groups. Can you tell us why?**

Violet (3rd Grader): You get to meet people that way, like in the beginning [of school], you can meet a friend. . . . You learn to work together and to be nice and sort of connect. And you learn each other well. And you learn more about them. Like, if you didn't know their name, like that first day I come in, I didn't know anybody. But then I got working with Callie and Bethany and everybody was hollering my name!

On Sharing Ideas

Brian (6th Grader): [In groups] you share your opinions about what you think about something. If you're reading a story, you can point out things to other people—something's different here than it was over there. So it's kind of fun, but then you also get a lot out of it.

Joseph (3rd Grader): You can come up with more ideas. It's a lot easier because three or four brains is smarter than one. I like writing with

somebody because the other person gives me ideas.

Brian (6th Grader): That's kind of fun to do in a group 'cause you get about quadruple—or however many people are in your group—times the information. Well, maybe not, because more people remember different things. So you don't just get the information that one person knows. You get it from a bunch of people so it can contradict each other and get more things down.

Marcel (5th Grader): You get to share your answers with somebody else. . . . You get to share how *you* think it should be. Like if you're writing a story with somebody else, I think it's usually better, because you share ideas . . . you polish it. You say, "No, it should be *that* way . . . no, *that* way." And you just make it together and make it perfect.

On Sharing the Load

Interviewer: **So sharing ideas is helpful. Are there other ways groups are helpful?**

Lauren (5th Grader): It's sharing ideas *and* it's sharing the load. Because everybody's doing some of it. It takes longer for one person to do one thing than for a whole lot of people to do it.

Callie (3rd Grader): Because sometimes it could get faster, and you could get it done. Like me and Violet, we got halfway through our book that we were reading, and it was a hundred and something pages, and we're already on 90 something!

Lauren (5th Grader): If you get people in the group and they *actually work* then your group can get done easier.

David (3rd Grader): [Yeah], you know how to do it better when you have someone to help you. If you don't know a word or if you don't know something, the other person can tell you. Or if neither one of you know, you can figure it out together. I know Kathy and Terrie are pretty smart, and if I ever need any help, I can look to one of them.

Joseph (3rd Grader): [What we try to do] is to figure out an answer. If nobody [in your group] knows, go ask the teacher. That's what we usually do. But sometimes we just stay there and try and figure it out. And usually, the first one to figure it out is the one who's supposed to tell them if no one else got it.

Ricky (3rd Grader): If they're having a real, real, real hard time, you could just tell them the answer. But you've got to work together and read the sentences to each other and everything. And give them a little hint.

On Giving and Receiving Help

Interviewer: **What if somebody tells you the answer?**

Florencia (6th Grader): No, they should tell you how they did it first. Like help you do it and then you figure out the answer.

Julia (3rd Grader): Yeah, it was hard on that chart thing, and I couldn't figure out the answer, and I was having a really real hard

time, and Callie and Violet, they helped me. . . . [That's not cheating], that's what we're supposed to do.

Interviewer: **What are some other ways you get help in groups?**

Chrissy (3rd Grader): If you're stuck on one question . . . the other person might know it. If one person didn't know, I would go to another one. If the other person didn't know, I would go to the last person. If the last person did not know, I would go back to my seat and think as *hard* as I could, and when I got the answer, people might come to *me* and ask me. And I might say, "Go back to your seat, think as hard as you can. But if you don't want to do that, I'll give you an answer."

Andrew (6th Grader): Yeah, it is sometimes just so hard that you just have to go on and tell them what the answer is and then they'll sort of get it. I tell them the answer and have them tell me why that's the answer. . . . If they can't get the answer, then I'll tell them the answer, and then I'll give them a minute to think about it, and I'll say, "Do you know why that's the answer?"

Abigail (5th Grader): Everybody's working together. Some people are weak at some things, and some people are weak in others, and then it goes up and down so you have no blank spaces.

Nicki (6th Grader): There might be some people in the group that are really faster than you, or you're faster than them. And I know I've been faster than some people, and I don't get mad or anything. I like helping them, showing them what I know so that they can catch up—or just understand it better. That makes me feel

better. I know that when my dad helps me understand something real well, that makes me feel like I can do it, and it's not so frustrating.

Interviewer: **Do you think *you* learn anything from helping others in the group?**

Nicki (6th Grader): You learn how it might feel when somebody's [helping] *you*. When my dad's explaining things to me, I don't really realize maybe he's going, "Oh come on . . . can't she get it?" Because he might feel he is explaining it just perfectly. But I want to learn it in a different way. And so when I explain to people, then I know how it feels to have to be kind of waiting, "Come on . . . get it."

On Being Wanted

Interviewer: **So, being in a group helps you imagine how other people feel about their learning? How does it make *you* feel?**

Paul (6th Grader): Well, I'd say most teachers probably would think that if kids are going to be right next to each other, then they're going to start talking, and they're going to start not doing their work. Sometimes that happens, but whenever I'm in a group, I don't feel isolated. And I feel like I'm where I'm wanted. And it helps me do my work better.

Interviewer: **So you feel like you're wanted in a group. Are you always in a group with your *friends*?**

Tina (3rd Grader): No. Miss Rice chooses our partners because we always . . . same, same, same partners. Like Tom would choose Max every single time. Jeremy would choose Scott.

Mike (3rd Grader): It's fun when she lets us pick. But she's picking it because some people, they'll get a partner that they act up with. It's fun either way. Last time, me and Monica got to do it. 'Cause me and Monica do good stuff together because we don't get in trouble.

On Learning to Cooperate

Interviewer: **So far you're telling us that in groups you have fun, you share the load, and you feel wanted. What else do you like about reading and writing in groups?**

Lauren (5th Grader): We're learning to cooperate with all the other kids. 'Cause we're going to have to be with other people later in life. When we're in high school and we're doing a project, we're not going to be able to yell at each other. 'Cause they give us a week to do a project, and we have no time to waste. We learn here that it's important to have friends.

Carrie (3rd Grader): We gotta learn to work with everybody. . . . You don't have to like people. You just gotta learn to work with other people 'cause there might be a time in your life where you have to work with others.

Marcel (5th Grader): If you write one story, it's not like "*I'm* right, you can't change it." You shouldn't be like that. You should say, "Okay, let me use yours." And maybe combine the answers, or go with one.

Interviewer: **So you're learning how to cooperate. Sounds like you're really teaching each other. Are you pretty good teachers?**

Andrew (6th Grader): [The teacher] puts me with a lot of kids who aren't as smart as I am, and I don't know if I've helped them any but I don't know that I made them any *worse*.

Interviewer: **Wouldn't you rather be off on your own, learning more challenging things?**

Andrew (6th Grader): [This] *is* really a challenge for me. In fact, that's probably the most challenge that I have in groups: You have to learn to be with people your age who need some help. And if you want to teach them, you've really got to learn how to teach right. So that's always a challenge.

Interviewer: **So how *do* you teach each other?**

Andrew (6th Grader): There aren't really any techniques that I use. You might tell a couple jokes and then start out doing something so you get them in a good mood and then you start work. And then they seem to be able to work better.

On Choosing Groups

Andrew (6th Grader): Sometimes [Mrs. Thomas] will put a smart person with three not-so-smart people so that the smart person can help them learn and help teach them even. She also has to evaluate whether she thinks that some people are good teachers or not. If she thinks that they're good teachers, then she might put them with some people that they can help.

Bethany (3rd Grader): See, [Miss Rice'll] choose the right people for us. Like if somebody's not really a good drawer, she'll pick somebody who's a real good drawer . . . like me . . . and show the person how to draw real good.

Mike (3rd Grade): She won't choose Max and Louis together, though. See, she don't want us to get in trouble. So she just puts us in the group that we won't get in trouble. We like it because then we won't be hollered at.

Marcel (5th Grader): You have to have good friends together, so they understand each other. Opposites attract, it's true. But you don't want completely opposite because then you don't agree on anything.

On Making Girls Go with Boys

Interviewer: **What about boys and girls being in groups together?**

Joseph (3rd Grader): Oh, my God, no! They argue and they just can't get along very well. That's because they're different.

Chrissy (3rd Grader): I'm sort of glad I have all girls because I like girls a little bit better. But like, the nice boys, like James, Kyle, and Jason is real nice. And with the mean boys, I sort of mind being in that group. Sometimes they would fuss at you.

Blanche (3rd Grader): I like mine because it's all girls, and we're a lot alike. We like the same things. We all want to grow up and be writers and have a go-go club and an apartment where we can all live together.

Interviewer: **Does Miss Rice *let* you be in all-girl groups?**

Lisa (3rd Grader): Sometimes she makes girls go with boys that you don't like.

Monica (3rd Grader): [Working with boys] makes it a lot more easier 'cause they don't get in trouble. 'Cause boys you don't see [child mimics flapping mouth with hands] like when it's all girls.

On Not Getting Along

Interviewer: **Do boys and girls in your 5th- and 6th-grade class mind being in groups together?**

Abigail (5th Grader): [No. What matters is] *who* all the people are. If they get along, it's fine. But if they don't, it's not. 'Cause everybody fights, or they talk or laugh the whole time, if they don't know each other very well. But if everybody knows each other, they get right to work, usually.

Brian (6th Grader): Sometimes you get in arguments about something. Someone says *this* is true, and the other person says this is *not*. So you get in fights. Then you don't want to work with the other person. So that's kind of a problem. Maybe you don't like somebody now because they got in a big argument with you over something that really wasn't that big.

Julia (3rd Grader): Sometimes me, Callie, and Violet are working together, and I *want* to work with them. But I pull one [game] out, and they pull the other [game] out. Then I pull [the one they choose] out, and *they* move to another table.

Marcel (5th Grader): Sometimes you get stuck with the leftover people, when other people didn't want to get them in the group. It's just sort of depressing. And then you sort of start not wanting to work at all.

Interviewer: **That's too bad. Do you have advice for how many people should be in a reading or writing group?**

Josh (5th Grader): Well, it's easy with two people, but one thing that I don't like is a group of four. Usually one person will try to be in the same group as his friends. So if I am stuck with a group of three others that are all friends, there's like a majority rule, and my part is not that big.

On Disagreements: Carefulness, Taking Your Time, Being Told the Answers

Nicki (6th Grader): Some kids just want to get the assignment done. They just want to write it and then say, "Okay, it's done." But I [think] it has to do with enjoying it more than wanting to get it done. Putting extra work into it, like putting more time in it, more carefulness.

Abigail (5th Grader): And in 4th grade I did a group thing that was on Indians. I don't know where they're from. And it wasn't very good. We had just a little bit of information 'cause we didn't have enough time. We made this thing in this box, this diorama, and we put little figures in it, and they fell off, and they fell apart, and the whole thing was smushed, and it looked like a ball of dirt. The other kids weren't very interested in it 'cause it was just like a blob.

Interviewer: **Not having enough time or information causes a problem, and going at different speeds causes a problem?**

Marcel (5th Grader): Sometimes people are ahead of you, and you don't understand it. You want to be working, but they give you all the answers

. . . . And you just write it down like that because you hear it like that. So *fine*, it's the answer!

Lauren (5th Grader): I think you learn more as an individual because you have to keep up with the group whenever you're in the group. But you can read it over and kind of let it sink into your brain when you're alone. You can take as much time as you need if you don't have to keep up.

On Having Your Own Ideas

Interviewer: **So there are times you like to read and write together and times you'd rather work alone?**

Nicki (6th Grader): If your group is assigned to do a story together, then you have to write it together and put all your different ideas in it. And that's really neat. But on the other hand, it can be worse for some people because they like writing on their own and having their *own* ideas. . . . Maybe they feel more comfortable in writing first by themselves.

Chrissy (3rd Grader): I would like to write with someone else, but I wouldn't want to be *copying* their work. But sometimes I would like to write *my* story by myself because I was afraid that I might be copying somebody's other piece, not mine.

Abigail (5th Grader): Everybody has different kinds of writing. Some people just have just plain sentences like, "Look—over—there." And some people like to make it funny a little bit. And some people like a lot of narrating kind of thing. And sometimes people might be in the middle—just straight out with the information.

And [in groups] one writer gets to choose how they're going to write, and so it's not very fair. It's fun to work by yourself because you can get your own choice of what kind of writing it is—not the subject but the *way* you write.

Interviewer: **So, expressing your own ideas in your own way is really important.**

Marcel (5th Grader): [What's important is] doing it yourself and understanding it more.

On People Who Goof Off and Copy Your Work

Interviewer: **Are there times when people don't *want* to do it for themselves?**

Florencia (6th Grader): They might be doing something else, like homework that they haven't done. And then if you've just read something and then you ask them what they think about it, they wouldn't know 'cause they weren't listening.

Lauren (5th Grader): They won't do their share, and so your whole group gets behind because they're not behaving.

Max (3rd Grader): When [the others] aren't really trying and they're making noise and goofing off instead of doing their work, I'd rather do it myself. In writing, they bother you when you're trying to write. It's hard. Sometimes I don't like to work with Ricky because he plays around.

Tanya (3rd Grader): [Sometimes] Julia and Violet don't do their work [either]. They count on me to sit there and do it all. When they grow up, they'll start working like at a laundrymat [sic]

or at the dump or somewhere like that. Because they won't have a good education. If you depend on a friend to do it always, when you grow up you're going to be dumb, and you'll say, "Well, this *friend* got me *this* education." When you go to college, you're not going to know anything if you depended on a friend in third grade to do everything for you. Sometimes you get smarter when you're by yourself.

Callie (3rd Grader): Like, me and Violet and Julia's writing, and [Julia] copies down everything I put. And I asked her to stop it and she said, "No." And I said, "Well, I'm going to move." I didn't know it, [but] she kept doing it. . . . See, you're not getting any credit. . . . But it's different if somebody's writing *with* you. But if nobody's writing *with* you, then it's not fair because you're not getting the credit you should be, and the other person is.

Interviewer: **How do you feel when you do the work and someone else gets credit?**

Joseph (3rd Grader): That's something that aggravates me there! My [old] group never read anything. I was the only one that read it, and had to tell them the answer. . . . For one minute there I thought, "Well, if I'm going to have to read it by myself, I ain't going to help them." [But] I knew I wasn't going to be nice if I don't [tell them], so I just went ahead and done it. That wasn't cheating, that was being out of hand. Unpolite.

Paul (6th Grader): But mainly in groups they don't cheat. Because automatically if you sat in a desk that was 5 feet away from each other—your first reaction would be that it's going to be boring. And then you don't feel that confi-

dent about yourself. If you're going to be isolated, you're going to start thinking that you're not going to do it. And if someone's sitting like real close, you could cheat if you wanted to. But most everybody subconsciously thinks that it's not that great to cheat and that they *can* do [things] because they are friends and they feel inspired, and that they can do a lot of things because they're not scared to be alone.

Callie (3rd Grader): I don't think they cheat much [either]. You can't cheat [in reading] because it's all the same. There's no cheating in reading.

Paul (6th Grader): If you're far away from each other, [cheating] is going to run through your head a lot more [because] you feel like you're alone and that you're not going to get it right. When you're close to each other you feel like you're more confident.

And Overall

Interviewer: It sounds like there are some problems with your groups. Is it worth the hard work you have to do to learn how to work together?

Tanya (3rd Grader): [Of course! Like I said before], we gotta learn to work with everybody. . . . You don't have to like people. You just gotta learn to work with other people 'cause there *might* be a time in your life where you have to work with others.

What the Cross-Grade Comparison Taught Us

Students in both contexts agreed about how group work enhanced their learning pro-

cesses: they got to know classmates better, had more fun, shared their ideas as well as the burdens of work, had ready access to help, and learned to cooperate. The older students also noted that they felt emotional support from their group members.

Most of the areas of difference between the two contexts arose in relation to *problems* involved with group enterprises. In trying to make sense of those differences, one might consider the two classroom contexts and goal orientations; the cultures in which the students live; and the cognitive, social, and emotional development of the children.

Although we are not assuming casual relationships, there appear to be patterns that provide clues for understanding how children perceive their involvement in group enterprises. The differences highlighted by the comparison include issues of egocentrism, gender, and autonomy. As the playlet demonstrates, the younger students' comments were generally concrete—in relation to specific events and specific classmates—while the older students were likely to speak in more abstract terms.

The younger students were more likely to address the issues of group endeavors in light of more egocentric perspectives by asking, "What does this mean for me?" Although this was true of many of the comments of the older students, they were also inclined to consider the problems or benefits to the whole group by asking, "What does this mean for us?" Younger students also preferred not to work in mixed gender groups, while choice of group members for older students related to considerations other than gender.

The older students talked a great deal about allowing for individual differences within group frameworks—for different pacing needs; conflicting academic standards; and unique styles, ideas, and opinions. For third graders, the benefit of having the security of the group seemed to outweigh any concern for losing their own voices or not having certain individual needs met. However, a few of the third-graders' comments indicated a growing tension between group membership and autonomy.

It seems that most of these fifth- and sixth-grade children were fully aware of their need for autonomy and demanded it; the third-grade children, however, may have been just realizing their own potential as autonomous thinkers and not yet so protective of this aspect of their learning. Such a possibility is supported by Piaget's (1950) assertion that learners become less and less egocentric as they develop and by Vygotsky's (1978) conclusion that what initially takes place socially eventually becomes internalized and can be accomplished by the individual.

Being told the answers was another source of difference between the two grade levels. Some older children did not like being given an answer if it interfered with their understanding. Third graders, on the other hand, had less concern about having their understanding preempted and clearly *expected* other members of their group to share ideas, information, and answers. If they were in the same group, giving answers was seen as an obligation. If, however, the information holder was in a different group, telling the answer was seen as cheating. They were "supposed" to help the others in their groups and to be helped by them.

This contrast might be seen as a reflection of the different goal orientations in the two classrooms. Although there were common aspects of the goals of the teachers, each had a particular emphasis. Both classroom teachers made efforts to establish caring classroom climates. Both teachers articulated clearly that they valued cooperative endeavors. Dorothy emphasized processes and cooperation as the dominant goals. Although those were certainly valued by Sally, she placed a heavy emphasis on the collaborative construction of meaning—on understanding things together. Therefore, it might be expected that the third graders would be less bothered by being told answers than would the fifth- and sixth-graders.

Though not necessarily related to development, a further implication of our analysis is that when a group is involved in a closed-ended task, the dynamics of collaboration change. Being told or searching for one "right" answer can encourage competition, preempt the search for understanding, and create pacing conflicts. Open-ended enterprises, on the other hand, diminish competition, facilitate the search for understanding, and accommodate different pacing needs.

Facilitating Worthwhile Group Work

The nature and quality of readers' and writers' group experiences depended to a large extent on the individuals involved and the classroom culture in which these experiences occurred. We recognize that the demarcations of grade levels are blurred by individual differences. There may be some fifth graders who resemble the third graders represented here and

vice versa. Teachers at *any* level might consider the implications of this study by using the following questions related to communicating goal orientations, helping children learn to work in groups, selecting appropriate tasks, providing options, and listening to children. In this way, teachers can examine their classroom practices regarding group work, applying contextual, developmental, and cultural lenses appropriate to their own situations.

Communicating Goal Orientations

What do I value about group work? How do I communicate those values to children? When I discuss an enterprise with children, do I facilitate their thinking about its possible learning values and how those values might be enhanced by a group structure? Do they understand my rationale for making particular decisions about group process and curriculum?

Helping Children Learn to Work in Groups

How am I helping my students learn to resolve conflicts, to allow for autonomy and differences, to honor each other's voices? Am I modeling ways to meet diverse group members' needs? What ways of organizing groups have I shared with them? How am I helping them learn to share the load?

Selecting Appropriate Tasks

Do groups engage in a variety of enterprises? Is there ample opportunity to participate in open-ended enterprises such as reading and writing together? Does the group work offer appropriate levels of challenge? Do I emphasize products and performance or process and understanding? Is the task worth the children's time and energy?

Providing Options

How are groups in my classroom selected? What choices do the children about collaborators? Are the time frames for group projects flexible enough to allow for the different pacing needs of individuals within the groups? Do the children have options about whether to be in groups at all? Who determines how group work will be carried out? Are children sometimes allowed to maintain autonomy when they feel the need for it?

Listening to Children

What avenues for communication have my children and I created for sharing ideas and feelings? Do I listen to and learn from them or merely tolerate their talk? Is my planning determined primarily by tables of contents, scope and sequence charts, or state curricular objectives—or, do I also consider what my children tell me? Do children feel safe in expressing their opinions and personal styles within the framework of their groups?

Final Thoughts

Further explorations are needed to extend our understanding of students' perceptions of group enterprise. The two studies represented here are only a beginning; similar inquiries with children in other grade levels and contexts

are needed. This cross-case comparison came about after the interviews were conducted; therefore, exploration of some of these issues is incomplete. For example, the third graders did not talk about learning how to teach each other. We have no data demonstrating whether or not this is an issue of concern to them; further interviews may provide that information. Additionally, we have not performed analysis by gender. Such analysis might prove helpful in light of other studies indicating that some females are more likely to learn in connection with others (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Finally, the study of interactive processes is inherently complex, given their ever-shifting and contextual nature.

As we read and reread the children's words to make sense of what they've told us, we detect an almost tangible tension between intimacy and interdependence, between autonomy and independence. This tension was noted by Short (1990) as a paradox resulting when "individuality and 'groupness' are both highlighted at the same time" (p. 39). *Working alone does not guarantee autonomy; nor does being in a group require sacrificing it.* For example, students may perceive lack of autonomy when working independently in teacher-centered classrooms; groups may be able to collaborate and also to honor individual voices. Indeed, the additional "air time" created when teachers decentralize learning structures creates greater opportunity for students to be heard, for their voices to be honored by others. The task of the teacher is to allow enough autonomy within group frameworks that the child's developing sense of self and individual identity are

maintained while the values inherent in group work are nurtured.

In attempting to be sensitive to the cultures of these two groups of children, we have tried to listen to them, learn from them, and present their ideas in the most direct way we can. This research experience affirms our belief that it is important to continue to go directly to the children to learn from them about how we can create classroom contexts that enhance meaningful language learning so that all our students can "do good stuff together."

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