In this chapter, we describe a classroom-based study that examined the ways striving readers in the fourth and fifth grades used the social interactions of discussions about literary texts to cultivate their literate experiences and higher level comprehension (Reninger, 2007). We also make suggestions about implementing discussions to promote higher level comprehension. We use the term striving reader to describe a student who has scored below grade level on state, district, and classroom reading assessments. Although the reading field has other terms to describe these readers, such as struggling reader, low-achieving reader, or at-risk reader, we use striving reader because the term implies these students are working toward acquiring strategic reading skills.

We describe eight striving fourth- and fifth-grade readers in this chapter. They all scored below their grade levels on state, district, and classroom reading assessments but did not score low enough, from the districts’ points of view, to qualify for extra reading support. With few exceptions, they were good word callers and fluent readers, yet they struggled to comprehend beyond basic recall and literal renderings of the grade-level texts in their classrooms.

**Background of the Study**

The aim of this study (Reninger, 2007) was to explore and describe intermediate-level students’ participation and talk during text discussions. The first author spent 30 consecutive weeks of the 2005–2006 school year as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980) in one fourth- and one fifth-grade classroom in two different medium-sized school districts in the midwestern United States.

*From Building Struggling Students’ Higher Level Literacy: Practical Ideas, Powerful Solutions edited by James L. Collins and Thomas G. Gunning. Copyright 2010 by the International Reading Association.*
Table 3.1. Study Participants and Data Sources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics of the Study</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of students</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of striving readers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of teachers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of classroom observations</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of recorded discussions</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of transcribed discussions</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of semistructured interviews</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each week in the classrooms, she video- or audiorecorded discussions about text, interviewed students and teachers about their discussion practices, and observed the discussion practices and the language arts blocks in which they were conducted. In all, she recorded and analyzed 62 peer- and teacher-led discussions that ranged in length from 15 to 35 minutes. Of the 62 discussions, she transcribed 22 discussions of average length (20–30 minutes) for deeper analyses. The focus of the analyses was on the interaction patterns and utterances of five fourth-grade striving readers and three fifth-grade striving readers and their peers during those discussions. The two teacher participants in the study, Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Pearson (all names are pseudonyms), were experienced teachers who were in their second year of integrating text-based discussions into their classroom practices. Table 3.1 summarizes these data.

Reading Comprehension: A Meaning-Making Process

Reading comprehension is an active and multidimensional process of meaning making (Duke, 2005) that leads to understanding and insight (Hatano & Inagaki, 1991). It has been conceptualized as a result of the interactions between several factors: the reader, the text, the activity (e.g., the purpose and process of reading), and the context (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). In an ideal reading situation, these factors interact in constructive ways to support the reader's understanding (RAND Reading Study Group, 2002). The following example is a hypothetical classroom-based reading event that portrays the kinds of interactions between the reader, text, activity, and context that promote comprehension.
Imagine a fifth-grade teacher and her class have just finished a unit in social studies about immigration in the United States. To extend student learning about this topic, the teacher designs an independent reading project. The students must choose and read a novel about an “immigrant experience.” The novels are historical fiction, a genre that the teacher had introduced earlier in the year, and the vocabulary of the novels is appropriate for fifth graders.

A male student, who describes himself as a good reader, chooses a novel about a 12-year-old Irish boy and recent immigrant to the United States. The student had done well on his immigration project in social studies, so he had acquired background knowledge about the topic. And, as indicated by an informal reading assessment, the student is a strategic reader.

In this example, the background and experience of the reader are a good fit with the text and the activity. The reader has strategic reading skills and adequate background knowledge, both of which would interact well with the content of the novel and with its familiar vocabulary and genre. In addition, the activity or purpose for reading is clear, so the student knows why and how he needs to read the text. Provided the student reads the novel, the reader, text, and activity factors in this scenario would interact in productive ways, likely supporting the student’s comprehension.

For many striving readers, the interactions between the reader, text, and activity are not always as productive, which means good comprehension is not always the outcome of a reading event. Sometimes striving readers lack or have yet to acquire the kinds of knowledge, skills, and dispositions that sustain comprehension of grade-level texts (e.g., motivation, metacognitive thinking, strategic reading skills, decoding skills). Likewise, text factors, such as the vocabulary load and text structure, may outweigh the reader factors, overwhelming the striving reader. And if the purpose of reading is unclear, striving readers may not know which strategies they should use to try to make sense of the text.

Now reimagine the fifth-grade scenario with a striving reader who has the motivation to read the novel and is a strong decoder of text, yet she has difficulty integrating her background knowledge with information from the story. She may comprehend the novel at a basic level but would likely struggle to comprehend the text in higher level ways. In other words, the interactions between reader and text are sometimes not sufficient for comprehension and this, along with other conditions such as poor instruction, poor assessment practices,
the increased complexity of reading tasks, can contribute to reading difficulties in the intermediate grades (Allington, 2001; Raphael & Au, 2005).

**Higher Level Reading Comprehension**

Comprehending at higher levels requires a repertoire of thinking skills such as problem solving, connecting personally to a text, and reflecting on one's reading. We define higher level comprehension as a way of thinking about text that goes beyond a literal understanding or clear-cut interpretation. Literal comprehension comprises an adequate, yet basic, understanding of what the author stated. This is a lower form of comprehension because it requires straightforward thinking about text. On the other hand, Resnick (1987) considers a “higher” form of thinking to be a process that involves “elaborating, adding complexity, and going beyond the given” (p. 42). As such, when readers distill the implicit meanings, check the plausibility of those meanings, and create connections between the text and their prior knowledge and personal experiences, they have gone beyond the given details, comprehending the text at a higher level. Other ways to think of higher level comprehension include, but are not limited to, reasoning about text, interpreting text, and evaluating text.

Our perspective of higher level comprehension is connected to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading framework for 2009 (National Assessment Governing Board, 2007). The framework identifies three “cognitive targets,” which are defined as “mental processes or kinds of thinking that underlie reading comprehension” (National Assessment Governing Board, 2007, p. 35). The first cognitive target is “locate and recall.” Readers engaged in this process are able to identify main ideas and major elements of the text, such as the story’s problem or the main character. The second cognitive target is “integrate and interpret,” which means readers think about the text in ways that include examining relationships, asking questions, making connections, and considering alternatives. The third cognitive target of reading is “critique and evaluate.” Within this process, readers consider the text critically and synthesize their views of the text with their experiences as well as with other texts. Together, the three cognitive targets define different levels of comprehension in which a reader may engage. For the purposes of this chapter, the kinds of thinking that go beyond locate and recall signify higher level comprehension.

Higher level comprehension is important for striving readers because intermediate-level educators expect their students to read more challenging texts. Curtiss, Estle, and Cardona, in their chapter “Helping Students Read Higher Level Texts: An Everyday Practitioner’s Toolkit,” discuss strategies for teaching students to think critically about text (p. 204). In short, the strategies for higher level comprehension include teaching students to think and talk about the text (p. 205), and to develop a rich background knowledge (p. 205).
texts, to read more often on their own, and to learn from their reading (Chall & Curtis, 2003). If students are to learn from their reading and to read challenging texts more often on their own, they indeed should be equipped to locate and recall main points of the text, but they should also be able to infer implicit meanings and to reason about new ideas that extend their thinking of the text. In short, the goals of intermediate-level reading need to be in line with the expectations we have of all readers. This means even if intermediate-level readers struggle with an aspect of their reading skills (e.g., decoding), they should still practice the thinking skills that undergird higher level comprehension of text (Fisher & Ivey, 2006).

The next several sections illustrate the important role discussions played for a group of striving readers and their classmates. The discussions provided an opportunity for them to engage in and practice forms of higher level thinking about text. For the striving readers in this study, this promoted their higher level comprehension.

**What Are Discussions About Text?**

Discussions about text are conversations during which participants ask and answer questions of one another and the text to construct meaning and comprehend the text in new and better ways. To do this, participants share ideas, put forth alternatives, and challenge ideas to provoke new ways of thinking and understanding. In general, participants in discussions about text learn about literacy and develop as readers because their social interactions “provide opportunities for the internalization and subsequent utilization of literate modes of thinking and communicating” (Chang-Wells & Wells, 1993, p. 87).

A defining feature of discussions in classroom contexts is the distinct pattern of exchanges between the students and the teacher (Almasi, 1996). If s stands for the student and t stands for the teacher, the pattern of who talks and when in a classroom discussion looks something like this: s-s-t-s-t-s-t-s-s-t-s-t-s. This kind of pattern is referred to as a discourse pattern, and in a genuine discussion, the pattern is open and inclusive, meaning students talk freely to one another without bidding for a turn from the teacher (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001). The teacher is a participant and facilitator during discussions, present and active, yet not the mediator of the students’ participation and thinking.

By contrast, a discourse pattern lacking the qualities of discussion looks something like this: t-s-t-s-t-s-t-s-t-s. This interaction pattern is known as
recitation (Cazden & Beck, 2003), and its significant feature is the heavy presence of the teacher whose role it is to mediate every student's turn. During recitations, the teacher asks almost all the questions and the students usually raise their hands and wait for the teacher to call on them before speaking. This means the teacher controls the topics of conversation and, often, uses the questions to lead the students toward a preconceived interpretation of the text. Because the teacher has a dominant role in recitations, students come to view the goal of the activity as to supply right answers (Dewey, 1916). As a result, students tend to become passive, letting a few classmates raise their hands to speak for the entire group (Nystrand, 1997; Worthy & Beck, 1995).

A genuine discussion encourages students to be active and responsive during the conversation, talking and listening to one another, asking and answering questions, and building upon one another's ideas (Chinn et al., 2001; Mercer, 2000; Nystrand, 1997). Consequently, students become facilitators of their own conversation, drawing on their interests in the text and their prior knowledge and personal experiences to ask questions, to solve problems, and to develop knowledge and understanding together (Almasi, 1996; Bridges, 1979; Langer, 1995; Nystrand, 1997). Because the students share control of the discussion with the teacher, they view the activity as a process in which they have a role in making meaning and learning to comprehend text as a result of their collective efforts (Nystrand, 1997).

The following dialogue is an example of a genuine discussion about text that took place in the fourth-grade classroom during a guided reading lesson. It is an excerpt of a transcript of Mrs. Ross and six students discussing Wasel (DeFelice, 1990). Mrs. Ross's instructional goal on that day was to discuss several chapters of the story to promote higher levels of comprehension. Wasel is a novel about two children trying to rescue their father from a hunting accident in Ohio in 1839. A theme of the story is the implications of land acquisition by white pioneers for Native American people and culture. In the excerpt, the teacher and the students take up an earlier question about the author's use of the term savage.

Mrs. Ross: Let's look on page 42 because the book has a word in there, when we talk about the word savage, and on this page, in the second paragraph down, um, let's read that part. Um, Christy, can you read [reads from text] "I thought about Wasel cutting out..." as we start that section right there? Can you read that for us?
Christy: [reads from text] “I thought about Weasel cutting out Ezra’s tongue and killing Indians and poor settlers and seemed to me has, he has, he was more a savage than anybody I’d ever heard of. Couldn’t white folks be savages, too?”

Thomas: I don’t think the Indians were savages in the first place.

Jack: Uh huh.

Thomas: [exclaiming] What is a savage?

Jack: Someone who kills somebody.

Brent: [simultaneous] That—

Ashley: [simultaneous] That’s, there’s different meanings to it because different people have opinions about what it means.

Thomas: But what about THIS meaning? What does this meaning mean that they’re savages?

Ashley: Um, it says—

Mrs. Ross.: [interrupts quietly] That’s a good idea, Thomas.

Ashley: I think that what it means in here, the savages, in here [taps book with hand], it means that someone is just so ruthless to kill someone and they don’t even think bad about it. And that, the Indians, they weren’t savages at all, even if it says so in this book. ‘Cause they use, they only killed what they needed.

Jack: [simultaneous] Yeah, the animals—

Thomas: [simultaneous] They didn’t use them over time.

Ashley: They didn’t stock up.

Jasmine: The Indians didn’t kill, they didn’t kill all—

Ashley: [interrupts] And if they did kill over what they needed, they used every single bit of it.

The students’ conversation is a discussion of the text for several reasons. First, the discourse pattern is open and inclusive (i.e., t-s-s-s-s-s-s-s-s). The students talked to one another, controlled their own turn-taking, asked questions of the text, and worked together, exchanging multiple views and interpretations. They created a collective understanding of the word savage. Likewise, Mrs. Ross’s comments in this episode are purposefully inconspicuous. Her comments positioned her as a facilitator who encourages looking back to the text for
information. These qualities illustrate how students work together in a discussion, constructing new understanding and improving their comprehension.

**Characteristics of Productive Talk During Discussions**

In this section, we review evidence-based features of talk that appear to be reliable indicators of students' higher level thinking and that might contribute to their higher level comprehension. Drawing from a large-scale research project on text-based discussion practices, Soter et al. (2008) identify several elements of productive talk during discussions about literary texts. When students and the teacher discuss text, there are features or elements of their talk that demonstrate that students are thinking in higher level ways about the text. And if they are thinking in higher level ways about text, the students are engaging in the kinds of thinking that we believe undergird their higher level comprehension of text.

Soter et al. (2008) argue that particular elements of talk could serve as proximal indices of student learning and higher level thinking because there is good theoretical warrant for believing the features are linked to higher level comprehension, and there is empirical research demonstrating such connections. According to Soter et al., the following elements of talk during discussions about text serve as indicators of student higher level thinking and comprehension: authentic questions and uptake (Nystrand, 1997); higher level thinking questions that elicit generalization, analysis, and speculation (Nystrand, 1997); elaborated explanations (Webb, 1992); reasoning words (Wegerif & Mercer, 1997); exploratory talk (Mercer, 2000); and questions that elicit extratextual connections (affective responses, intertextual connections, and references to previously shared knowledge). The first author added references to text (Anderson et al., 2001) as an additional connection during the study. In effect, these elements of talk characterize productive discussions about text in terms of what might need to be asked and said during discussions to facilitate higher level comprehension. Table 3.2 portrays these elements within two broad categories, questions teachers and students ask and what the questions elicit from students.

Table 3.3 shows an excerpt from a transcript of a peer-led, small-group discussion with coded indicators of higher level thinking. The excerpt is from a discussion by a group of four fifth graders (Erica is a striving reader) about “Victor” by James Howe (1995). “Victor” is a short story about Cody, a boy who
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3.2. Elements of Productive Talk During Discussion About Text</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elements of Productive Talk</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Questions (from teachers or students)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authentic question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uptake (follow-up question)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher level thinking question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responses and Comments (from students)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher level thinking (e.g., generalization, analysis, speculation)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intertextual response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared knowledge response</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference to text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborated explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exploratory talk</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(continued)
### Table 3.2. Elements of Productive Talk During Discussion About Text (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements of Productive Talk</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Exploratory talk            | Jack: If my sister died, I would have said something if nobody knew I was her brother.  
Trevor: Maybe he was his little brother and because usually little brother and little sisters get all the attention, so he didn’t care about him.  
Thomas: Didn’t what?  
Jack: Or maybe Ragweed and Rye never seen each other for a long time and they forgot about each other.  
Ben: What if they were best friends?  
Jack: But don’t you think he might have still said something? |
| Reasoning words (e.g., because, maybe, if, so, could, would, agree/disagree, I think, how) | I agree. Maybe he was his little brother and because usually little brother and little sisters get all the attention, so he didn’t care about him. |

Adapted from Soter et al., 2008.

is in the hospital and unconscious on his 13th birthday. Cody, inspired by the ceiling tiles above his bed, creates a world he refers to as “The Land Above.” However, the real story is about Victor, a mysterious person who visits Cody and gives him courage to pull through his illness.

The excerpt illustrates students’ talk in terms of the elements that indicate higher level thinking about the story. In addition, the excerpt shows how students might learn about higher level comprehension from one another in the context of a discussion. For example, Nicole’s responses in turns 7 and 9 reveal to the others how she made inferences about Victor’s identity, connecting details across the story. And in turn 10, Evan built on Nicole’s proposal, which characterizes the typical way the social interactions of discussions mediated the students’ thinking and extended their understanding of the stories. Likewise, the excerpt characterizes the cooperative efforts that emerge when the norms of productive talk are in place. There is a real sense in the excerpt that the students were working together, listening and responding to one another to coconstruct an understanding of the story.
Table 3.3. Excerpt of a Coded Transcript

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Turns From the Transcript</th>
<th>Indicators of Higher Level Thinking Coded in the Turn</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Nicole: Okay. Alright, first question...uhm. Who is Victor?</td>
<td>Authentic question; higher level thinking question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Erica: Uhm...</td>
<td>Generalization/analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Nicole: Go ahead.</td>
<td>Generalization/analysis; Speculation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Erica: Okay, I think Victor is a thing from the ceiling, I forget what that was called.</td>
<td>Generalization/analysis; Reference-to-text; Elaborated explanation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Alex: The Land Above.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Erica: Uhm... He used...yeah...he used his imagination for the ceiling people so maybe... he made up Victor...and it could be the old man who died and told him the stories...his spirit could change his name like...yeah... that's pretty much it.</td>
<td>Generalization/analysis; Reference-to-text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Nicole: Uhm...I thought Victor was God, and the Land Above was Heaven, because uhm... Victor...because...uhm...in the text it says he was old which you know, God...two thousand years...so the last time he visited Earth was 2006 years ago—</td>
<td>Generalization/analysis; Reference-to-text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Alex: [interrupts] Yeah, but even then he only partly visited Earth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Nicole: And um and so he's very old and he was strong but he didn't say...but it said he wasn't strong like “bodybuilding strong” he was strong like a strong man like he was...he was like—</td>
<td>Authentic question; higher level thinking question; generalization/analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Evan: You mean like in the heart and soul?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Striving Readers’ Higher Level Thinking During Discussions

To identify striving readers’ talk that indicated their higher level thinking, the first author used a coding scheme adapted from the work of Soter et al. (2008) on 22 transcripts of discussions in the research study (Reninger, 2007) described at the beginning of the chapter. The coding work confirmed that all of the striving readers thought in higher level ways about the texts during the discussions. For instance, Colin, a fourth-grade student reading at a second-grade level, made an important and thoughtful affective connection (a connection between the
text and his personal experiences) in relation to the main character of Weasel (DeFelice, 1990). He said,

Yeah, I did that once when I was putting this big earring in my ear once. And it all started to go black.

In another example of higher level thinking, Elena, a strong word caller but poor comprehender, made an inference in the Ruby Holler (Creech, 2002) discussion that showed generalization and analysis. She said,

I think that Z is Dallas's and Florida's father because he was married to their mom and he might know 'cause he hasn't told them [unclear].

These examples are representative of the kinds of comments that all of the striving readers made during the discussions. This suggests striving readers can and do think in higher level ways about text, and they indeed participate in discussions in ways that demonstrate their higher level thinking about text. But to what extent did the striving readers ask questions or make comments that were indicative of higher level thinking during the discussions? In a sample of eight typical discussions in each of the two classrooms, the first author calculated the frequency with which striving readers participated, asked questions, and made comments indicative of higher level thinking. Table 3.4 displays the number of turns (i.e., number of times students participated in the discussion), the number of authentic questions they asked during the discussions, and the incidence of the elements of their talk that indicated higher level thinking.

The data shown in the table suggest that discussions about text might provide meaningful instructional activities for striving readers because they provide students the opportunities to practice and engage in the kinds of thinking that undergird higher level comprehension. In two different classrooms, all of the striving readers asked genuine questions or made numerous comments that reflected higher level thinking about text (e.g., analyses, speculations, references to text) during these discussions. This is important because higher level thinking about text is necessary for enabling readers to move beyond a literal interpretation of text and to generate higher level comprehension. We do not yet know what is optimal in terms of the number of indicators of higher level thinking a student ought to make in a discussion. Likewise, we do not yet know which indicators of higher level thinking matter more for comprehension. These are areas for future research.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Table 3.4</th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Authentic questions</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculation</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective connection</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elaborated response</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Development of Comprehension:

The frequency of higher level thinking by striving readers during discussions about text, such as the discussions in this study, is not unusual, but during discussions, striving readers may not ask the kinds of questions necessary to generate higher level responses (Renzulli, 1981).

A Lion to Lie was read as a part of a unit on life in the country. The story is about a boy who is put into the care of a wealthy family who are initially hostile to him. The story was read aloud, a plan to use the whole-class discussion format was made, and the story was read below, Mrs. Robinson introduced the discussion:

Using Discussion
The Mediating Potential of Talk for Higher Level Comprehension

The frequency counts of higher level thinking comments demonstrate that striving readers can and do engage in higher level thinking during discussions about text. A more significant finding from the study, however, was the way the discussions transformed the striving readers' initial levels of comprehension. In discussions in both classrooms, the striving readers used the dialogue during discussions as a tool to improve their initial levels of understanding and to generate interpretations of the texts. A typical example of this phenomenon occurred in a fourth-grade discussion about the novel *A Lion to Guard Us* (Bulla, 1981).

*A Lion to Guard Us* is a story set in England during colonial times. A servant of a wealthy and unlikable homeowner dies and leaves her three children in the custody of the homeowner, Mistress Trippett. Amanda, the oldest child, devises a plan to use what little money her mother had to sail to Virginia. In the excerpt below, Mrs. Ross and the students in a guided reading group discuss a part of the story where Amanda asks Mistress Trippett for the money but gets thrown
out of the house for her daring request. Lucas, Elena, and Matthew are striving readers in the group.

During the discussion, Lucas used the dialogue to move beyond a literal understanding of the story. He built upon other students' responses and used the teacher's authentic question to construct a plausible interpretation of the story. Lucas's comments demonstrate the way the dialogue served as a vehicle for mediating his thinking and fostering his higher level comprehension:

1. Mrs. Ross: Who asked who for money?
3. Elena: Amanda asked Mrs. Trippet for the money.
4. Lucas: Amanda asked Mrs. Trippet for the money to get on the ship, but—
5. Matthew: And her son, um, kicked her out.
6. Lucas: But she, but she stole all the money from her purse.
7. Ben: Yeah, didn't the big fat chubby dude—
8. Lucas: Randall!
9. Ben: Randall, yeah, kick them out?
11. Lucas: Yeah, he picked them up and threw them out.
12. Mrs. Ross: But why?
13. Matthew: And then he—
14. Lucas: Because he's, he's because he said [paraphrasing the text], "How dare you make blah, blah," [indistinct] and then she fainted.
15. Ben: Yeah, didn't he say to NEVER show your face in here again?
16. Matthew: Yeah. [reads from text] "Get out, and don't ever show your face here again!"
17. Lucas: There! That's the problem. Randall has a very bad temper issue.

This excerpt shows the potential of discussions for striving readers' higher level comprehension. Lucas seemed to use the dialogue as a tool for his own thinking, allowing his classmates' comments to inform his emerging interpretation of the story. For example, Lucas and the other students in the group recalled the literal details of the story (turns 1–5) and then started to build
an interpretation when Mrs. Ross asked an authentic follow-up question, “But why?” (turn 12). This question led to further problem-solving (turns 14–16) and then to Lucas’s comment about Randall’s “bad temper issue.”

The proposition about Randall’s temper issue is a plausible and creative interpretation, likely based on this character’s angry and violent outbursts in the story, some of which Ben and Matthew reported in lines 15 and 16. It is Lucas’s reaction in line 17, when he said, “There!,” that implies Ben’s and Matthew’s comments had shaped his thinking. In other words, Lucas may have constructed his own, original interpretation of the story because of what the others had said during the discussion. This kind of evidence of the mediating potential of talk occurred often in the discussions in the study, supporting our argument that the talk contributed to striving readers’ higher level thinking and comprehension.

Many striving readers reported in interviews after discussions that the discussions helped them think better about the text, confirming what we noticed in the transcripts. For example, in small-group interviews with all the students toward the end of the school year, the first author asked students to reflect on their year spent discussing texts. In one of the group interviews, Derek, a striving reader, recalled a particular discussion event that helped him construct an understanding of James Howe’s (1995) “Victor”:

Kristin: Can you think of a time a discussion helped you understand something in school?

Derek: Yeah. Uh. The “Victor” thing.

Alex: It helped me understand that story a lot better.

Derek: It helped me understand who Victor was. Someone said the 80-year-old man in our group and someone said, uh, Cody, I don’t know why, but...um...I said that, I think I said that...[pause]. Well, at first I said Victor was the 80-year-old man but then they talked and they made me change my mind like just about the other question, like one opinion, then I had one, then they talked and they said it was Cody, and I agreed. Cody had this box and it was from Victor so it had to be him since he had a box already....

Kristin: So, you changed your mind?

Derek: Yeah. Big time...big, big, big, big time.
Derek’s words suggest the dialogue during the “Victor” discussion became a tool for improving his understanding of the story. When Derek said, “and then they talked,” he is recounting exactly how the dialogue transformed his thinking. Almost all of the striving readers reported similar experiences of their participation in discussions, suggesting that the discussions indeed became a tool for understanding the stories. In many cases, thinking manifested in the talk included interpretations and evaluations of the text, which is the kind of thinking that generates higher level comprehension.

Getting Started With Discussions

The model of discussion employed in the study and presented in this chapter is known as Quality Talk (Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010). Quality Talk comprises elements of discourse (discussed earlier in the chapter as productive features of talk), an instructional framework, a set of pedagogical principles, and suggestions for teacher modeling and scaffolding that promote productive talk about text (see www.quality-talk.org). Drawing on Mrs. Ross’s and Mrs. Pearson’s own implementations and interpretations of Quality Talk, we discuss three broad instructional techniques that will help you get discussions up and running in your classrooms:

1. Use ground rules to establish the norms of productive talk.
2. Use authentic questions and follow-up, uptake questions to give students opportunities to engage in productive talk.
3. Use informal assessment strategies during discussions, listening for evidence of the elements of talk that indicate higher level thinking.

Establishing the Norms of Productive Discussions

Students are more likely to talk productively about text and to engage actively in conversation if they understand the norms for productive discussions. One way to foster these norms is to explain, model, and practice a set of ground rules for discussion. The original ground rules described here come from the research of Mercer and his colleagues (e.g., Mercer, 1995, 2000; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999) and their efforts to motivate and improve classroom talk in British schools. Table 3.5 shows Mercer’s (1995) ground rules for exploratory talk juxtaposed with Mrs. Ross’s reframing of those ground rules in student-friendly language.

The ground rules are important because they become a set of “handles” that the students can reach for during discussions (Reninger & Rehark, 2009). For
Table 3.5. Two Versions of Ground Rules for Discussions and Examples of Students Using the Ground Rules

<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Proposals are stated. Evaluate proposals. Challenge ideas. Consider each other's views.</td>
<td>Provide reasons to back up claims and opinions. Give alternative opinions and ideas. If appropriate, participants ask each other for reasons. Seek agreement.</td>
</tr>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>How to Talk and Listen</th>
<th>It's okay to change your mind. Ask each other questions. Listen to each other so you can build on others' ideas. Look at the people in the group. “Jump in” the conversation, if there is a space. Invite others into the conversation.</th>
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<tr>
<td>Share your thinking (use words such as “I think,” “because,” “maybe,” “what if,” “I agree”). Backup your opinions with reasons and/or evidence from the text. It’s okay to challenge ideas or to disagree with an idea.</td>
<td>How to Talk and Listen: Share your thinking (use words such as “I think,” “because,” “maybe,” “what if,” “I agree”). Backup your opinions with reasons and/or evidence from the text. It’s okay to challenge ideas or to disagree with an idea.</td>
</tr>
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**Examples of Students Using the Ground Rules**

| Erica: | I do disagree with her [Share your thinking] ‘cause like, um, ‘cause like he said that he kind of didn’t want him there but then he did and then I think [Share your thinking] Victor would have mentioned something and wouldn’t come if he said he didn’t want him there but then he did.” |
| Nicole: | Um...I thought Victor was God, and the Land Above was Heaven, because um... Victor...because...um...in the text it says he was old which you know. [Backup your opinions with reasons and evidence from the text] God...two thousand years...so the last time he visited Earth was 2006 years ago. |
| Christy: | And he got in jail for playing it. [indistinct] and then they were putting cuffs on him, but then he knocked one of the police officers down, so he had to go to jail. |
| Lucas: | Yeah, he knocked one of the cops down, with his guitar. [Listen to each other so you can build on others' ideas] |
| Matthew: | Yeah, I sort of disagree with myself. [It’s okay to change your mind] |
| Teacher: | You do? |
| Matthew: | [overlapping] Yeah, ‘cause it— |
| Teacher: | [overlapping] Okay, you’re changing your mind, huh? |
| Matthew: | Yeah, because if it [she] was their mom— |
| Ashley: | That’s, there’s different meanings to it because different people have opinions— |
| Thomas: | But what about THIS meaning? What does this meaning mean that they’re savages? [Ask each other questions] |
| Jack: | I also agree with Thomas and I disagree with Trevor. Because if Rye probably would have said something if—it’s okay to challenge ideas or to disagree with an idea. |
example, by knowing that “share your thinking” and “ask questions” are ground rules for discussions, students are equipped and inclined to reach for phrases in their talk such as *I think* and *I agree,* or to ask questions such as Why do you think that? Also, knowing general conversation rules, such as “jump in when there’s a space” or “look at the person who is talking,” reminds students to wait for a turn to speak and to listen to their classmates.

Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Pearson both coached their students in these ground rules, modeling them in minilessons and reinforcing them during discussions. After some practice with the ground rules in the fall of the school year, the discussions in both classrooms resembled high-quality, thought-provoking conversations. The discussions were generally on topic, focused on the text, and adult-like in that the students often listened to and built upon one another’s comments. We believe that when students understand the ground rules and come to see them as part of their goals for talking, the discussions become instructive and supportive of collective and individual efforts to understand the text. As the norms and ground rules become routine, teachers can begin to focus on listening for the elements of productive talk that indicate higher level thinking and comprehension of the text.

**Asking Questions to Promote Higher Level Thinking During Discussions**

Teachers can get conversations going and begin to promote higher level thinking during discussions by asking certain kinds of questions (Nystrand, 1997; Soter et al., 2008). According to Nystrand (1997), by asking authentic questions and follow-up questions that incorporate students’ responses—a practice referred to as *uptake*—teachers convey to students that they have an important role to play as meaning makers. Authentic questions are questions that have multiple right ways to answer. As such, authentic questions create an open floor where students can jump in with their own thinking. For example, in the “Victor” discussion, “Who is Victor?” was an authentic question because the author made Victor’s character ambiguous. So the phrasing of the question presupposed lots of ways to respond. By contrast, a nonauthentic or test question (Nystrand, 1997) is asked or phrased in such a way as to suggest to students that there is one prespecified answer. For example, in the “Victor” discussion, if the teacher had asked, “Is Victor a mysterious person?” there would have been only one answer—“Yes.”

1. Lucas: Yeah...
2. Ben: Right...
3. Matthew: Yeah... I mean...
4. Lucas: Yeah...
5. Mrs. Ross: I mean...
6. Matthew: Yeah...
7. Lucas: Yeah...
8. Ben: Yeah...

The questions to promote higher level thinking need to be asked frequently, and not just at the beginning of discussions. As the students’ own thinking begins to take hold, the questions will continue to promote their thinking, for instance, that if the follow-up question...
According to Nystrand (1997), authentic questions draw out and sustain multiple student responses because they send a signal that what is valued in the discussion is good thinking, original thoughts, and personal interpretations. As a result of this perceived purpose, the students see themselves as meaning makers and interpreters of text. On this point, Nystrand wrote, “When teachers ask authentic questions—encouraging individual interpretation—they open the floor to student ideas for examination, elaboration, and revision” (p. 38). At the heart of these student ideas is the higher level thinking that includes generalizations, analyses, speculations, connections to other texts and personal experiences, and so on. In short, authentic questions have the potential to promote higher level thinking and to engage students in higher level comprehension of text.

How teachers reply to student responses is as important as asking authentic questions to promote good thinking. Nystrand (1997) identified uptake as a kind of follow-up question that builds on students’ responses. It is an intentional move in that the teacher is trying to validate students’ thinking or to extend their ideas. For instance, in the following excerpt from a discussion about A Lion to Guard Us (Bulla, 1981), notice the way Mrs. Ross, in turn 5, builds on the students’ responses with uptake and the way the uptake seems to push their thinking:

1. Lucas: Randall!
2. Ben: Randall, yeah, kick them out?
4. Lucas: Yeah, he picked them up and threw them out.
5. Mrs. Ross: But why?
6. Matthew: And then he—
7. Lucas: Because he’s, he’s because he said [paraphrasing the text], “How dare you make blah, blah,” [indistinct] and then she fainted.
8. Ben: Yeah, didn’t he say to NEVER show your face in here again?

The question “But why?” is an instance of uptake because it builds on a previous response (turn 4), pushing the students’ thinking further than if it had not been asked. In the dialogue after the teacher’s use of uptake, the students continued to probe the meaning of the story (turns 6–8). We can only speculate that if the follow-up question had not been asked, the students probably would...
not have continued to analyze Randall’s character traits. Uptake is a move a teacher (or a student) makes to “stir” the conversation, and it likely improves the quality of the dialogue by prompting more extended responses (Nystrand, 1997).

Using Informal Assessments to Improve the Quality of Discussions

After students are equipped to carry on productive discussions about text (i.e., they use the ground rules of discussion consistently), and they have an understanding that what they have to say is important and that using talk to think together is the goal, teachers can begin to fine-tune the discussions, coaching the elements of productive talk to ensure higher level thinking and comprehension. Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Pearson used informal, ongoing assessments of discussions to inform their instruction about and to improve the quality of the talk. For example, Mrs. Ross was able to listen for the use of the ground rules (see Table 3.5) and the elements of productive talk (see Table 3.2) as the students were talking. She made notes about what students were using and not using in their dialogues. Based on these observations and her analyses, she planned short minilessons for future discussions.

These minilessons were about a particular ground rule or an element of talk. Mrs. Ross wanted to encourage the students to incorporate in their dialogue. For instance, after listening to a discussion that lacked a lot of reasoning, Mrs. Ross decided to make explicit the idea of elaborated explanations, one of the elements of productive talk. An elaborated explanation is an extended response that incorporates reasons or evidence to support a claim (e.g., I think Victor is an angel because nobody saw him in the story except Cody and he tried to help Cody pull through his illness). To coach in this way of talking and thinking, Mrs. Ross began the reading groups with a short minilesson about elaborated explanations. She drew a picture of a chain on the board and asked the students what they thought a chain of reasons was. They discussed this idea for several minutes, and, as a class, they decided to define a chain of reasons as “linking ideas together so you show the people in your group your reasons and evidence.” In essence, Mrs. Ross introduced the idea of an elaborated explanation by scaffolding students’ understanding through a guided discussion of a relevant metaphor for giving an extended, reasoned response. During the discussions that day, she

Discussions

As teachers, we all know that rich discussions can lead to deep learning. Mrs. Ross knew that the students would benefit from discussions that were meaningful and thought-provoking. She asked questions that were open-ended and encouraged students to share their opinions and ideas. By doing this, she was able to motivate the students and encourage them to participate in the discussions.

At the end of the class, Mrs. Ross asked her students to share their views about the discussion. One student replied, “I learned a lot from the discussions because we were able to have a meaningful conversation.” Mrs. Ross nodded and said, “I’m glad you felt that way. Let’s continue to have thoughtful and productive discussions.”
reinforced students giving chains of reasons and encouraged them to build on and link ideas together.

**Discussions Are Tools to Support Striving Readers**

As teachers, we look for many ways to support striving readers in the classroom. One of those ways is by using discussions that give striving readers a rich, sophisticated context for talking and thinking about texts. Striving readers sometimes have difficulty with comprehension because what they bring to the text (e.g., their background knowledge and reading strategies) might not be enough to support their higher level comprehension. Through the dialogue of the discussions described in this chapter, however, the striving readers talked and thought in higher level ways about text, and they developed interpretations of text that promoted higher level comprehension. Could these students have done this on their own, reading independently at their seats? Maybe or maybe not, but by giving them an opportunity to engage in discussions with their peers, we were able to provide authentic, collaborative contexts that seemed to motivate their higher level thinking about text.

At the end of the study, the first author asked Mrs. Ross and Mrs. Pearson if their views about discussions "had changed at all during the year." Mrs. Pearson replied, "A lot!... I can now stand up at a faculty meeting and be an advocate for discussions. I could not have done that at the beginning of the year." At this, the first author asked, "What do you mean advocate?" Mrs. Pearson replied, "I mean tell other teachers in our building that they need to have discussions to let students become better thinkers." To the same question, Mrs. Ross responded, "I don't think I could have reading instruction without discussions anymore—discussions let students practice comprehension." In response to the first author's follow-up question, "Is there anything you would tell a new teacher about discussion?" Mrs. Ross replied, "I would tell every teacher to do discussion. It's too important. It's wrong not to allow kids to talk about ideas they have."
ACTION PLAN

It is important to remember that many students have not had many opportunities to use their talk to collaborate and to “think together” about text in highly productive ways. Their notions of discussion about text are often related to raising hands and answering the teacher’s questions about the story. This means you must practice genuine discussions about text with your students and then reflect with your students on the outcomes of those discussions. Before a practice session, it is important to choose a good text and to think of several authentic questions. When you practice, you should take time to model the ground rules of productive talk and to let students know the goals of their discussion; that is, use their talk to make meaning and to understand the story better. Also, let students know you will talk little and contribute only when you have something important to ask or to add, and remind the students that the discussion is theirs to create. This action plan assumes you and your students will be discussing texts in a new(er) way than you have done in the past, so you are learning the ground rules and using some of the elements of productive talk for the first time.

Planning the Practice Discussion

• Choose an interesting short story, such as “Victor” by James Howe (1995). Read the story at least twice. Knowing the story well will make thinking of authentic questions as well as facilitating the discussion easier.

• Anticipate areas of interest your students may have about the story and write three to four authentic questions; alternatively, have the students read the story and talk or write about what was interesting to them, and then plan your authentic questions. (Tip: To test the quality of a question, ask yourself if you would like personally to talk about the question. If you answer yes, then it is indeed a good question. If you answer no, rephrase the question or throw it out and start again with a new one.)

• Plan to ask follow-up questions (uptake) too, such as Why do you think that? What makes you say that? Is there evidence from the story to back up what you’re saying? Use uptake when students make claims or judgments about the story without giving reasons or evidence. (Tip: Think of your role in the discussion as that of a facilitator who sits back and...)

Modeling

• Organize the structure of the discussion. It is a good idea to set up a structure for the discussion, one that can be repeated with other stories. (Example: Open, summarize, review, ask questions.)

• Introduce the story. Explain the purpose of the practice session, the rules, and explain the good questions, the follow-up questions, the practice session itself, and the role of the facilitator.

• Give students a choice of completing the text. Have students read the story outside of the text session, and then you just introduce the text. This makes the students think about the story circle...
waits until it is time to stir the conversation. Use uptake as a way to do the stirring.)

- Have the students read or listen to the story in any way that makes sense for the story and your students (e.g., independent reading, shared reading, paired reading, read-aloud).

- Consider planning a short prediscussion activity, such as writing a short journal entry or having students write their comments and questions about the story on sticky notes and adhering them to the story itself while they read.

**Modeling the Practice Discussion**

- Organize a fishbowl modeling activity. Rearrange your room so there is a small group of desks or a table in the middle of a large circle made up of the rest of the desks. Inform the class that you and a small group of students (four or five students) will model a kind of discussion that you will use in your reading groups in order to talk about the texts they read. (Tip: When choosing the small group to model the discussion inside the circle, select students who seem willing to talk in front of others and who cooperate with you.)

- Introduce and review the ground rules with the whole class. You could do a couple of things here. You could coconstruct several ground rules with your students and discuss them, or you could write several ground rules (from this chapter) on the board and discuss them with the class, explaining them and emphasizing their significance for having really good conversations about the students' reading. (Tip: Begin with an explanation of four or five ground rules, and, in your subsequent practice sessions, add the other ground rules until the class is comfortable with and using all of them regularly).

- Give directions for the fishbowl activity. The group in the middle (with the teacher) will have a discussion about the story. The group on the outside of the circle will observe, listening for the ground rules that you just reviewed. You could have students on the outside of the circle make notes of the ground rules and other things they observe that they think are positive and productive. Tell the group on the outside of the circle that their comments will be used to talk about the discussion.
• Conduct a short 7- to 10-minute discussion with the small group in the middle of the fishbowl. Reiterate the goals of the discussion and the ground rules that they should try to practice, and remind students that if there is silence in the discussion, it is okay. Pose the best authentic question you thought of from the planning phase. (Tips: Sit back and let the students talk without interruption from you. If you have to, avert your eyes down a little, so students talk to each other. Find a place in the discussion to practice uptake.)

Practicing and Reflecting on the Outcomes of the Practice Discussions

• Stop the discussion after several minutes and begin a reflective discussion with the whole class on the outcomes related to the ground rules. Ask the group on the outside of the fishbowl to share their observations of the discussion. Use what students say to reinforce, encourage, coach, and explain the goals and ground rules. (Tips: Try to keep the practice discussion to fewer than 10 minutes. After 10 minutes or so, the group on the outside will begin to lose focus on their task. Once the discussions get going in your classroom, a more typical length will be roughly 20 minutes.)

• Break the class into small groups of four or five students and have them practice discussing the story using their new ground rules. Circulate during the discussions and listen for what students are doing or not doing. Ask yourself the following: Which ground rules are being used? Which ones are not being used and need more practice? Are students giving reasons? Do they refer to the text when talking? Use this information to form the explanations you use in your next practice session. (Tip: If there is time, give students a chance to reflect on the outcomes of their discussions.)

• Repeat this action plan a few times, each time encouraging and focusing on the ground rules for productive talk. After students know and enact the ground rules, you can begin to model and to practice elements of productive talk such as referring to the text or making chains of reasons and evidence to support a claim.

References


Using Discussion
QUESTIONS FOR STUDY AND REFLECTION

1. How would you characterize higher level comprehension in your own words?

2. Is there anything about the study described here that pulled your thinking in a certain direction?

3. Review Table 3.2. Which element of productive talk would you like to begin coaching in your students' talk right away, and why?

4. How would you compare the discussions about text in your classroom to the ones described here? Is there something you read that you want to try when facilitating discussions in your class?

REFERENCES


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