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Cynthia H. Brock

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Exploring an English Language Learner's Literacy Learning Opportunities

A Collaborative Case Study Analysis

Cynthia H. Brock
University of Reno, Nevada

This investigation is an ethnographic case study of the literacy learning opportunities of a fifth-grade Hmong child (pseudonym Deng) who came to the United States from Laos via Thailand at the very end of his third-grade year in school. Deng was one of 25 students in a mainstream urban classroom in the Midwest during his fifth grade in school when this investigation took place. Because Deng had only been in the United States for a little more than a year at the time this investigation began and because English was a relatively new language for him, I was concerned about his opportunities for literacy learning in a classroom where English was the medium of instruction. Deng and I worked collaboratively to explore his literacy learning opportunities in the context of a trade book unit pertaining to the text *Maniac Magee*.

Keywords: *opportunity to learn; English learners; literacy; elementary level*

Deng Moua, Deng's mother (Mrs. Moua), Vue, and I sat in the front room of Deng's apartment in an urban Midwest United States community. Vue, a high school senior fluent in Hmong and English, translated as Deng's mother spoke in her native language of Hmong to describe the Moua family's escape from Laos just 7 years earlier. In an effort to avoid communist government soldiers, Deng, his mother, his three younger siblings, and their grandparents traveled at night for a week to get to the Mekong River and reach their intermediate destination—Ban Vinai, a refugee camp in Thailand. Deng was 6 when his family left Laos and made it to the safety of Thailand where they lived in three different refugee camps over a period of 4 years

Author's Note: Please address correspondence to Cynthia H. Brock, The University of Nevada–Reno Department of Educational Specialties, Mail Stop 299, Reno, NV 89557-0214; phone: (775) 682-7872.

before immigrating to the United States. Deng arrived in the United States and attended the last 30 days of school in a third-grade classroom. I met Deng for the first time when he was beginning fifth grade—a little more than a year after he arrived in the United States.

Deng reminded me of many children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds that I taught during the 9 years I was a classroom teacher in the United States. Unfortunately, I was ill prepared as a teacher to meet the academic needs of the many different students in my classroom from places such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Mexico, Central and South America, and the Caribbean. My personal teaching experiences with learners from diverse backgrounds are part of a larger trend across the United States; there is a large and growing number of students in America who do not speak English as their first language (August & Hakuta, 1997; Howard, 1999). Moreover, although the number of English language learners in American schools is increasing rapidly, there is a shortage of teachers with the necessary academic preparation to teach students from diverse linguistic, cultural, and social backgrounds (Nieto, 1999; Thomas & Collier, 2004).

My experiences teaching students from diverse backgrounds kindled my interest in exploring ways that we, as an educational community, can meet effectively the educational needs of all students in U.S. classrooms. My interests prompted me, as an educational researcher, to explore in depth, with Deng, his literacy learning opportunities in his fifth-grade English-speaking classroom. I chose to focus this collaborative analysis with Deng on literacy because it is my academic area of interest. In particular, Deng and I worked collaboratively to explore and interpret what it meant for him to engage in literacy learning in his English-speaking classroom community from his perspective as a participant in his classroom community (Geertz, 1973).

Background

A clear paradox exists between the actual documented performance of children from ethnically and linguistically diverse backgrounds in American schools and many American educators' conceptions of educational opportunity in this country. Wong-Fillmore and Meyer (1992) contend that many Americans have a utopian vision of America as the "land of opportunity" (p. 653). Americans tend to "believe that our schools offer every child, without regard for race or economic background, the means to rise without limit." Unfortunately, that utopian vision is not realistic. Many scholars maintain that the American educational community often fails in its efforts to provide

quality educational opportunities for all students in its schools—especially those from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds (Fitzgerald, 1995; Garcia, 1992; Gee, 2003; Howard, 1999; Nieto, 1999; Trueba, 1989; Walker-Moffat, 1995). This failure is evidenced in a multiplicity of ways, such as (a) lower test scores for nonmainstream students on standardized tests of reading and writing, (b) higher school dropout rates for students from diverse backgrounds (Cummins, 1994), and (c) overrepresentation of students from diverse backgrounds in remedial programs and lower academic tracks in school systems (Au, 1993; Rose, 1989).

Scholars (Alton-Lee, Nuthall, & Patrick, 1993; Erickson & Shultz, 1992; Pearson, 1997) assert that a central reason educators have failed to address the problem of unequal learning opportunities for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in American schools is that students' perceptions of their learning experiences have largely been neglected in the research literature. They assert that we must look to the students and their actual experiences in specific school contexts if we ever hope to be able to understand their access or lack of access to school learning opportunities. Thus far, according to Erickson and Shultz (1992), "student experience has been treated in partial and incidental ways, as researchers, teacher educators, and policy analysts consider relatively thin slices of classroom life, usually from a single perspectival angle. *None of these slices has been multidimensional enough to capture students' subjective worlds as whole phenomena*" (p. 466, emphasis added).

This investigation focuses on a close analysis of Deng's learning experiences during a series of literacy lessons pertaining to a children's book entitled *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990) examining the general question: What literacy learning opportunities did Deng, his classmates, and his teacher construct in the context of the literacy lessons based on the text *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990)? To understand Deng's literacy learning, and his perspectives about his literacy learning, I addressed two more focused analytic questions: (1) How were literacy lessons constructed in Deng's classroom in terms of conceptual content addressed and the rules/norms of engagement during the lessons? and (2) Did Deng have/display access to those rules/norms and the conceptual content of the lessons? If so, how and why? If not, why not?

I explored Deng's literacy learning opportunities with him from an interpretative perspective, taking into account the multiple dimensions of culture, history, and immediate contexts (Gee, 2003). A central component of my work is an analysis of the classroom discourse that occurred during the target set of lessons (Gee, 1996). I drew on the long-standing and well established work of scholars in sociolinguistics and communicative competence as the

foundation for my classroom-based research. For example, Cazden (1988) suggests that classroom-based research can help us "see how life in classrooms is experienced by our students . . . and make us [teachers] more reflective about our behavior as well as theirs" (p. 151). Well over twenty years ago, Gumperz (1986) called for classroom studies that can give us "a better understanding of the role of language in educational achievement" (p. 51). Furthermore, he suggested that understanding the "subtleties" of classroom social organization can help us, as educators, help our students gain access to learning opportunities in classrooms. Finally, John-Steiner (1985) has long stressed the importance of attending to the role that the classroom social environment can play in fostering educational opportunities for English language learners. This work adds an important dimension to the study of classroom social organization: the perspective of an English language learner within the classroom. I contextualize and interpret the close analysis of discourse within the context of a series of literacy lessons in Deng's classroom against a broader backdrop of Deng's classroom experiences across the academic year, his earlier school experiences, his membership in Hmong culture, and his experiences as an immigrant to the United States.

In the following section, I articulate the sociocultural theoretical perspective that I drew on to design and interpret this case study. Then I present the research methods used in the investigation. The findings of this study reveal both my perspective as an educational researcher and my sense of Deng's perspective as a classroom participant in whole-group lessons and small-group activities within the focus series of lessons. I discuss the results of this investigation in terms of their relevance for understanding the literacy learning opportunities that were constructed during the focus lessons and their implications for the literacy education of English language learners in English-speaking classrooms.

Theoretical Framework: Sociocultural Conceptions of Learning and Literacy

I drew on a sociocultural theoretical perspective (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978) to frame and interpret this investigation of Deng's literacy learning opportunities in the context of a series of literacy lessons in his fifth grade classroom. An important strength of this theoretical perspective is that it grounds issues in social, cultural, and historical contexts. Thus, framing the case study from this perspective enabled me to take into account Deng's social, cultural, and historical situatedness when studying the ways he and his peers and teacher constructed literacy learning opportunities during the focus literacy lessons.

According to Wertsch (1985, 1991, 1998), there are three major lines of thought in a Vygotskian sociocultural theoretical perspective. First, to understand a psychological phenomenon such as literacy learning, it is necessary to understand the origin of the phenomenon and the processes by which it is acquired. Vygotsky (1978) referred to this as genetic or developmental analysis. Second, for Vygotsky, mind is social in nature. That is, mind is constituted through language-based social interactions with others. Third, human action is mediated by signs and tools—primarily psychological tools such as language. In the following sections I discuss each of these three lines of thought with respect to the study at hand.

Vygotsky suggested that there are four different lenses through which we must consider genetic analyses: microgenesis, ontogenesis, cultural history, and phylogenesis (Wertsch, 1985). Ontogeny refers to the development of the individual across time, cultural history refers to the developmental shifts or changes that occur within the human species in particular contexts across time, and phylogeny refers to the development of humans as a species and the subsequent distinctions between the human species and other species (Vygotsky 1978). Microgenesis (the narrowest angle lens) refers to “the short-term formation of a psychological process” within an individual or group of individuals (Wertsch 1985, p. 55). This investigation focuses on microgenesis and, in particular, on Deng’s literacy learning opportunities over a relatively short span of time within the context of 18 lessons as Deng’s class read the children’s literature text entitled *Maniac Magee*. According to Erickson (1992), analyses at the microgenetic level should be couched in broader social and cultural contexts. Thus, I couch my analyses of Deng’s learning in the broader contextual information that I discovered through interviews with Deng and his mother about Deng’s overall school learning in Thailand and the United States, my interactions with Deng and his family over a 2-year period, my readings about the history and culture of the Hmong, and my developing understandings about the Hmong as a result of visiting Thailand and Laos and talking with individuals associated with Hmong refugees and Hmong refugee resettlement to the United States. Although these latter readings, interviews, and interactions are not the focus of this investigation, they do give me a broader and deeper contextual base to draw on as I interpret Deng’s school learning experiences over a relatively short period of time.

The second major line of thought refers to Vygotsky’s notion that mind originates through social interactions (Wertsch, 1985, 1991, 1998). Vygotsky (1978) posited that higher psychological processes, such as those involved in reading and writing, take place interpsychologically (i.e., within social interactions) and then, over time, take place intrapsychologically (i.e., are

appropriated within the individual). For Vygotsky, “. . . every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people (*interpsychological*), and then *inside* the child (*intrapsychological*)” (1978, p. 57). Thus, with respect to this study, Deng's literacy learning opportunities were shaped by the nature of his social interactions with others.

The third major line of thought refers to semiotic mediation, or the ways in which semiotic tools, such as language, are used to mediate thinking. With respect to this study, it is important to note that norms for speaking and writing can vary significantly across different communities and cultures (Gee, 2003; Heath, 1991; Scollon & Scollon, 1995). Often these conversational norms are invisible to the members within cultures and incomprehensible to members of different cultures (Philips, 1983). Articulating these norms and making them explicit can facilitate communication between people within and across different communities and cultures. For example, because Deng's language and cultural background differed from that of his American teacher and peers, the conversational norms around classroom language use undoubtedly differed as well. Making classroom conversational norms explicit and exploring ways for Deng to gain access to those conversational norms could facilitate his literacy learning (Gee, 2003).

Viewed from the sociocultural perspective I drew on to frame and interpret this study, literacy is complex, dynamic, and socially and culturally situated (Gee, 1996, 2003; Scribner, 1984). Ferdman (1990, p. 186) suggests that it can be “easy to think of literacy simply in terms of specific skills and activities,” but doing so makes literacy appear to be a characteristic inherent in an individual. According to Ferdman, the problem with a skills-based, individualistic perspective of literacy is that it can blind us to the fact that literacy “involves facility in manipulating the symbols that codify and represent the values, beliefs, and norms of the culture—the same symbols that incorporate the culture's representations of reality” (1990, p. 187). Ferdman's admonitions about the complex social and cultural situatedness of literacy remind us that literacy is not solely an attribute of an individual; rather, membership in different cultural groups must be taken into account when interpreting students' literate behaviors.

Like Ferdman (1990), Freire (1993) underscores the complex social and cultural aspects of literacy. Freire emphasizes that literacy in general and reading in particular involves much more than merely decoding words; rather, readers must understand the underlying significance of the words they read and their relationships to the world. Freire argues against reductionist conceptions of literacy and learning:

Mechanically memorizing the description of an object does not constitute knowing the object. That is why reading a text as pure description of an object (like a syntactical rule), and undertaking to memorize the description, is neither real reading nor does it result in knowledge of the object to which the text refers. (1993, p. 24)

Thus, for Freire, reading involves attending to specific contexts and being open for critique and analysis, for “reading always involves critical perception, interpretation, and rewriting of what is read” (1993, p. 26).

Context and Method

This study was situated at Oakland Elementary School in an urban Midwestern community. Approximately one half of the 400 students in the school were Caucasian, one fourth were African American and the remaining one fourth were Hispanic and Asian. At the time of the study, slightly under two thirds of the school population received free lunch.

I met Deng’s fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. Weber, when we were both participants in a literacy assessment project through a local university. I visited Mrs. Weber’s classroom and took field notes on a weekly basis during literacy lessons across Deng’s entire fifth-grade year. While working in Mrs. Weber’s classroom, I met Deng and became interested in exploring his literacy learning with him. I asked Deng if he would be interested in working with me to study his literacy learning. He agreed. I told Mrs. Weber that I would be interested in looking in depth at Deng’s learning during her literacy instruction. She suggested that I focus on Deng’s learning during the literacy lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee*. She said that this was one of her favorite children’s texts and that her students in past classes had responded well to it. Moreover, because the text deals with issues of racial diversity, and because Deng was a recent immigrant to the United States whose racial background was different from everyone else in class, Mrs. Weber felt that Deng would find the text particularly interesting.

Researcher Role

My interest in the topic of this study stems from my personal experience as a public school teacher for 9 years. I am a Euro-American female educator from a lower-middle-class background. My background mirrors the backgrounds of the majority of the teaching force in the United States—almost 90% of U.S. teachers are Euro-American women from middle- to

lower-middle-class backgrounds (Thomas & Collier, 2004). As far back as the early 1980s, I had students in my elementary classroom from a host of different countries speaking many first languages other than English (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Spanish, etc.). Ill-prepared to teach students whose backgrounds differed from mine, I struggled to provide meaningful instruction to my students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Much of my research and scholarship has focused on exploring ways to provide meaningful literacy instruction to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds in mainstream classrooms (e.g., Boyd, Brock, & Rozendal, 2004; Brock & Raphael, 2005).

Study Participants and Classroom Context

Deng's teacher, Mrs. Weber, had been a teacher with the district for 30 years. According to her principal, she had a reputation for being an outstanding teacher in her school and in her district. She earned a master's degree in literacy at a nearby university in the course of her teaching career, she regularly attended workshops and additional university classes, and she had participated in several university-based research projects such as the assessment project where I met her. Mrs. Weber's classroom literacy program included alternating the use of the district-adopted basal reading texts for her grade level and doing literature study with her students using trade books such as *Maniac Magee*. Typically, she had her students engage in four to six literature studies across a school year.

There were 23 students in Mrs. Weber's fifth-grade classroom. Twenty-one of the students participated in *Maniac Magee* reading lessons; two students were pulled out daily for special education services during reading time. The reading class was fairly evenly divided between boys and girls and the ethnic makeup of the class paralleled that of the school. Approximately one half of the students in class were Euro-American, one fourth of the students were African American and the remaining students were Latino and Asian. Deng was the only Hmong child in the classroom.

Deng, the primary participant, lived with his mother, a younger brother, and two younger sisters. According to Deng's mother, she and Deng's father are divorced and he lives in central California. No one in Deng's family spoke English prior to coming to the United States, and Hmong is the family's first language. As mentioned in the opening vignette, Deng was born in Laos, fled Laos with his family at the age of six, and lived in three different refugee camps in Thailand prior to moving to the Midwest. Deng attended school sporadically while living in refugee camps in Thailand. Instruction in refugee

camp schools was in Thai. Deng reports that he speaks the following languages: Hmong, Lao, Thai, and English.

Deng arrived at Oakland School 30 days before the end of his third-grade year in school. He attended an English-speaking class part of the day during his fourth-grade year and an ESL pullout program for the remainder of each day. At his mother's request (she was very concerned that Deng become fluent in English quickly), Deng remained in his English-speaking classroom all day during his fifth-grade year. Bilingual education in Hmong was not an option for Deng and his family because there was no Hmong bilingual education program in Deng's school district.

Mrs. Weber described Deng as capable and hard working, but she said that he often experienced difficulty with class assignments because he was not fluent in English. Thus, even though Deng was struggling to learn English, he was a very diligent student. He always turned in his homework on time and regularly solicited the help of Mrs. Weber or his peers when he did not understand assignments.

Vue was a high school senior in Deng's school district. Vue and his family are Hmong and they had also emigrated from Laos by way of Thailand; they had lived in the United States for 8 years at the time this study was undertaken. Vue was fluent in both Hmong and English. I met Vue and his family through a mutual American friend who had known them for many years. I explained my study to Vue and he agreed to work with me as a translator when I went to Deng's house to talk with him about his literacy learning.

During the 18 lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee*, the students in Mrs. Weber's classroom sat in small groups of three to five at one of seven large tables. The class met daily in a large group for *Maniac Magee* reading lessons. For all whole-group reading lessons the students took their chairs to an area in the front of the room and made a semicircle around the teacher. In addition to participating in the 18 large group Maniac lessons, students worked in small groups of three to four students six times during the lessons.

Data Sources, Procedures, and Data Analysis

Data sources included audio- and videotapes of whole-class literacy instruction and events during the lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee*; field notes; the teacher's detailed lesson plans; all of Deng's written work pertaining to the lessons (e.g., journals entries, assignments, etc.); audio- and videotaped conversations of the peer collaboration that occurred between Deng and the peers who worked with him in small groups during the lessons; notes and audio taped recordings of visits made to Deng's home whereby I weekly

tutored Deng in all academic subjects; interviews (both formal and informal) conducted with Deng, his mother, and Mrs. Weber; and videotapes of viewing sessions (Erickson & Shultz, 1982) of *Maniac Magee* whole-group lessons and small-group activities conducted with Deng, Vue, and me in Deng's home.

I began informal data analysis as I collected and catalogued data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Once all data for the *Maniac Magee* lessons were collected, I watched the entire corpus of 18 40-min videotaped lessons pertaining to the *Maniac Magee*, keeping my research questions in mind as I took ongoing analytic field notes. Next, I systematically studied all field notes taken during the lessons. Teacher interviews and all tutoring sessions in Deng's home were professionally transcribed, and I studied them relative to my research questions.

Using the procedures above, I began to address my first analytic research question: What were the apparent "rules" which governed what it was possible to talk and write about and how it was possible to do so in the context of Deng's literacy lessons? Although I had a general sense of the interactions that occurred during lessons, I wanted to look more specifically at the nature of those interactions because of the central role that those interactions play in student learning opportunities. According to Florio-Ruane (1989), by carefully attending to the organization and patterns of classroom talk, "researchers find that the classroom's hidden curriculum or normative nature is intimately entwined with academic learning" (p. 2).

I chose a subset of 5 of the 18 videotaped lessons to examine closely with respect to the participants who contributed to the classroom conversations, how they contributed, and the patterns of interaction that occurred during conversations. I chose the five focus videotaped lessons to represent a range of factors: time (i.e., from the beginning, middle, and end of the series of lessons), type of lesson (i.e., three whole-class and two small-group), and instructional activities (i.e., teacher-led lessons and discussions, student-led discussions, and cooperative student-led activities such as creating character maps).

I analyzed the classroom talk during the five focus lessons in the following manner. First, I transcribed the audiotapes of the five lessons. Next, I ascertained the number of conversational turns each conversant took during the lessons. A conversational turn is defined by who assumed the conversational floor at any given point for any length of time. Third, I analyzed the shifts in topics discussed during the five focus lessons. Fourth, I analyzed the manner in which conversants engaged in the conversations during the lessons in terms of who had access to the conversation, who influenced the ongoing discussion, and how the ongoing discussion was influenced.

Also, after studying my available data sources, it became clear to me that it would not be possible to thoughtfully address my second analytic research question, Deng's access to classroom literacy content and practices and his perceptions of his literacy learning, given the data sources I had already collected. First, Deng never once voluntarily commented during any of the 18 whole-group reading lessons. Second, Deng and his classmates produced little actual written work during the course of the lessons. Thus, because Deng did little actual writing or talking during the lessons, the data I had collected did not give me a window into Deng's thinking about and understandings during the lessons or the discursive practices associated with them.

Additionally, during the focus lessons, I observed Deng in interactions during two primary settings: the whole-class discussions led by Mrs. Weber and the small-group discussions during which students worked cooperatively without direct teacher guidance. While watching the videotapes of the lessons, I noticed that Deng interacted in very different ways in these two settings. In the large group, Deng never voluntarily spoke, whereas in the small group he raised questions, talked with his peers, and in general, seemed to participate in more obvious, observable ways. Because of these overt differences in participation, I became interested in understanding the nature of interactions in each of these two contexts and the manner in which these two contexts supported, facilitated, or possibly inhibited opportunities for Deng to learn during the lessons. To engage in this analysis, I turned to an important analytic tool: the viewing session (see Erickson & Schultz, 1982, for detailed description of this method of analysis).

Erickson and Schultz (1982) suggest that a carefully and thoughtfully conducted viewing session provides an important means for analyzing a set of data from both the insider's (i.e., Deng's) and outsider's (i.e., my) perspective. In effect, the participants in the original activities being viewed become researchers too by joining with the researcher to analyze and interpret the data. These viewing sessions are not "simulated recalls." The insiders are not asked to try to remember what they were thinking or feeling or to remember the impact of particular events. Instead, the insiders are asked to describe what they see on the tapes—to stop the tapes at any points where they sense confusion, conflict, tension, or points of interest and to discuss what they think is happening at these points. This analytic device provided a source of insight into the videotaped lessons from the insider whose voice I was most interested in throughout the research: Deng's.

To help ensure that Deng would be comfortable talking during the viewing sessions and to make sure that language itself would not preclude his involvement in the data analysis, I enlisted the assistance of Vue, a Hmong

high school senior who was fluent in both Hmong and in English. Vue agreed to help bridge the language and culture gap that Deng and I sometimes experienced. Vue was not related to Deng. I met Vue through a mutual Euro-American friend who had worked with Hmong immigrants in this city for the past decade.

Each viewing session was conducted at Deng's house. Prior to showing a tape of a lesson, I told Deng that he was in control of the manner in which we viewed the lesson. I started the lesson and told him that he could stop the tape at any point during the lesson that he chose. My goal with the viewing sessions was to understand how Deng interpreted classroom practices and literacy activities and why he chose to stop the tape at the points he selected. Deng was invited to speak in English or Hmong during these sessions. Hmong comments were translated by Vue during the ongoing discussion.

Findings: Interpreting Deng's Literacy Learning Opportunities in Whole-Group Lessons and Small-Group Activities

In this investigation, I worked with Deng to analyze his literacy learning experiences in three whole-group lessons and two small-group activities during a series of 18 literacy lessons based on the text *Maniac Magee* (Spinelli, 1990). In the first part of this section, I present an overview analysis of the three target whole-group lessons with respect to the general literacy content covered and the rules and norms for engagement during the lessons. Then I present my interpretation of Deng's analysis of the same whole-group lessons.

In the second part of this section, I present an overview analysis of the nature of the interactions in two small-group activities. Then I present my interpretation of Deng's analysis of the same small-group activities. I begin each of the first two subsections with a vignette from Deng's classroom to help paint a visual picture of what occurred during typical literacy lessons in Deng's classroom.

The Whole-Group Focus Lessons: My Perspective

On May 22, as was done every day while reading the *Maniac Magee* text, the students in Mrs. Weber's class were seated on chairs in a semicircle around her in the front of the room. The class had been reading the text together for 5 days. They had already read that Maniac (a Euro-American

boy) moved in with his feuding aunt and uncle when he was 3 after his parents died in a train wreck. Later, Maniac ran away from his aunt and uncle's home at the age of 12 when he could no longer endure their fighting, making his way to a town called Two-Mills, Pennsylvania. While in Two-Mills, Maniac bumped into Amanda Beale (an African American girl about his age) and was invited to live with her family when her parents found out that he was homeless.

The 40-min lesson on May 22 was typical of most whole-group lessons. As lessons began, Mrs. Weber either reminded the students about a key topic or issue they had discussed the previous day, or she prompted them to consider a theme-related issue such as homelessness, loneliness, and prejudice. Furthermore, she sometimes identified curricular goals, such as comprehension strategies or literary elements that she planned to discuss for the day. On May 22, Mrs. Weber began the lesson by indicating three foci for the day: (1) contrasts and conflicts in the story, (2) figures of speech used by the author, and (3) tall tales. She then read aloud from the text as students followed along, turning their pages in unison with her.

Mrs. Weber read about Maniac diligently helping Mrs. Beale with household chores such as doing the dishes, mowing the lawn, walking the dog, cleaning his room, and so forth. After reading several paragraphs, Mrs. Weber stopped reading and asked, "Are those all things that kids have to do within a household?" Several students responded in unison, "Nooo," and the class began a 4- to 5-min discussion about doing chores at home. During this conversation, two students made comments about their chores at home, and Mrs. Weber asked each of them a short series of questions that extended and clarified their initial comments. Additionally, Mrs. Weber talked about the importance of students assuming responsibilities around their homes, telling a personal story about doing household chores as a child. This pattern of reading and discussing the story continued throughout the lesson: Mrs. Weber, or a child she selected, read an excerpt from the story; the class discussed the excerpt for several minutes, usually relating the text to their own life experiences in some way; and then Mrs. Weber suggested that they continue reading the story.

As the brief vignette above illustrates, whole-group lessons involved a series of ongoing miniconversations about the story; however, it reveals little about the tacit rules and norms for engagement during the whole-group lessons. For example, 10 of the 21 students present in class on May 22 contributed individual responses to the conversation. Table 1 shows the number of turns taken by each child, the teacher, and the number of group responses (where the students answered one of the teacher's questions in unison) during the lesson for May 22 as well as the two other focus whole-group lessons.

Table 1
Number of Turns Taken by Participants During
Three Focus Whole-Group Lessons

Category	Name	Number of Turns May 10	Number of Turns May 22	Number of Turns June 5
Girls	1. Sally	28*	48*	27*
	2. Lisa	11	0	5
	3. Rashiya	7	absent	absent
	4. Shondra	1	0	0
	5. Reshaun	1	2	3
	6. Yesenia	1	0	0
	7. Kelly	0	1	0
	8. LeShon	0	2	2
	9. Lakisha	0	0	4
	10. Maria	0	0	0
	11. Larissa	0	0	4
	12. Dan	45*	22*	15*
Boys	13. Bill	17*	10*	4*
	14. Chris	7*	18*	16*
	15. Miguel	7	3	4
	16. Cam	5	0	15
	17. Tran	5	1	7
	18. Don	1	absent	absent
	19. Ron	1	5	1
	20. Dusty	0	1	1
	21. Timothy	1	0	5
	22. Deng	0	0	14
Teacher	23. Mrs. Weber	149*	127*	158*
Group responses	24. Multiple students	29*	19*	39*

Note: A version of Table 1 is published in Brock and Raphael (2005).

* Denotes a particularly high number of turns.

As indicated by the columns labeled "Number of Turns," Sally, Dan, Chris, and Mrs. Weber contributed most to the conversations across the three lessons. Note that Mrs. Weber consistently took the most turns—approximately half of the speaking turns during all three whole-group lessons. Moreover, the conversational turns taken by Sally, Dan, Bill, Chris, and Mrs. Weber accounted for more than three fourths of all comments across the three lessons. Additionally, although the class was ethnically diverse, all of the primary contributors to the conversation were Euro-American. Whereas Table 1 does give an indication of who did the most talking during the focus whole-group

lessons I analyzed in detail, it does not reveal the nature of the participants' contributions to the conversation. In the remainder of this subsection, I examine what the participants discussed and how they engaged in conversations.

As indicated in the previous discussion about household chores, the class engaged in a series of miniconversations about the story during their daily reading. These miniconversations focused on different topics related to segments of the text. Consequently, I call these miniconversations topic-centered episodes. The class engaged in 12 topic-centered episodes on May 10, 11 topic-centered episodes on May 22, and 13 topic-centered episodes on June 5. Although the episodes varied in terms of topics discussed, length of exchanges, and nature of activities that accompanied them, there were a number of striking similarities across them. First, in 31 of 36 topic-centered episodes across the three lessons, Mrs. Weber both initiated the episodes and brought them to a close. Second, episodes were typically brought to a close with the teacher reading on in the story or choosing a child to read. Third, discussions during the topic-centered episodes tended to follow the typical I-R-E (initiate-respond-evaluate) pattern (Cazden, 1988). That is, the teacher initiated conversation with a comment or question, a student(s) responded, and the teacher evaluated the student's response. Finally, when the teacher initiated discussions, she typically asked general questions or made general comments that were not directed to any particular child in the class, thus giving the impression that the "conversational floor" was open for anyone in class to assume. I present a specific excerpt from a topic-centered episode to illustrate key features of these episodes.

I use the excerpt below to illustrate the manner in which conversants normally participated in whole-group lessons. It also illustrates common themes that class discussed relative to the story. This excerpt is taken from the final 6-min topic-centered episode during the May 22 lesson whereby the class was in the process of constructing two charts together; on one chart the students identified the conflicts that had occurred in the story to that point, and on the other chart they identified different contrasts in the story. Mrs. Weber led the discussion and wrote the students' suggestions on the charts during the discussion. The students had just mentioned that the author contrasted "black" and "white." Mrs. Weber wrote "black vs. white" on the chart, and the discussion proceeded as follows:

Mrs. Weber: I don't know why I put versus. I guess because one opposes the other or one is on the opposite end of the other. What else did we see contrasted in the story? What was he [i.e., Maniac] without for so long?

Sally: House.

Bill: (laughing) Chicken pox.

Bill's comment was not aligned with the ongoing conversation and was ignored by everyone, including the teacher. The teacher followed up on Sally's comment.

Mrs. Weber: *Home versus*, what's the opposite of having a home?

Unison response: Homeless, *homelessness*

Dan: He was without parents for a while.

Mrs. Weber: Okay.

Sally: Still, I mean they're [referring to the Beale family] still not his real parents but

Dan: But they're [i.e., Mr. and Mrs. Beale] like parents.

Mrs. Weber: so we could have *parents*. . .

Chris: Legal, not legal, but guardians.

Mrs. Weber: . . . *and none*. What are some of the other contrasts that you saw in the story? Let's start bringing some of these out. This story is a combination of two types of "genre." (Excerpt taken from Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997, pp. 196, 201)

Several features of this conversation both make it typical and illustrate the manner in which discussions proceeded during whole-group *Maniac Magee* lessons. First, the usual contributors (i.e., Sally, Dan, Chris, and Mrs. Weber) spoke during this segment. Second, Mrs. Weber asked questions to the student audience in general rather than addressing her questions to any particular child. Thus, the conversational floor was seemingly open to anyone who might like to respond. Furthermore, no one raised her or his hand to be called on by the teacher during this excerpt; instead, the usual contributors took turns making and building on one another's comments. As was also typical, Sally responded to Mrs. Weber's first query and the students responded in unison to Mrs. Weber's second query.

A particularly interesting feature of this excerpt is that there appears to be at least two levels of conversation occurring at the same time. On one level, the teacher's goal was to get the students to identify various different contrasts so that she could list them on the charts. While this event was occurring, Dan, Chris, and Sally carried on a second level of conversation—a more in-depth discussion about homelessness and parents as these concepts applied directly to *Maniac*. That is, Dan suggested that *Maniac* was without parents for a while. Sally emphasized that the Beales (the African American family that "adopted" *Maniac*) were not his real parents, but Dan argued that they were *like* parents. Chris began to suggest that the Beales were legal guardians, but caught himself, and asserted instead that they were just guardians, because they had not legally adopted *Maniac*.

Mrs. Weber drew two contrasts (e.g., home/homelessness and parents/no parents) from the students' second level of conversation, which illustrated their rather sophisticated understanding of the nuances of character relationships in the story. Like the rest of the lesson, this conversational segment flowed smoothly as participants contributed to and built on others' ideas. Clearly, the students who engaged in this exchange knew at least two important kinds of information to participate effectively in the conversation. First, they understood *what* was going on in the story. They knew about the characters and their relationships and they could "step back" and discern broad categories of contrasts in the story. Additionally, the students knew *how* to engage in a conversation in this classroom. They knew that when their teacher asked general questions it was okay (and perhaps even expected) that students "jump in to" the conversation to offer their ideas. Finally, these contributors were undoubtedly comfortable contributing to the conversation during the lesson as evidenced by the large number of turns they took during the lesson.

From the perspective of an outside observer, this lesson segment may appear to be an important opportunity to promote student learning and understanding about the theme of contrasts in *Maniac Magee*. However, because most students did not talk during this lesson segment or engage in some type of individual writing activity, it is difficult to know how most students made sense of this and other parts of this lesson and the other focus lessons. In fact, understanding how Deng made sense of *Maniac* lessons was especially problematic because he never once volunteered a comment during the 18 large-group *Maniac* lessons, and he and his peers only wrote in journals four times over the course of the unit.¹

Because I did not have a clear sense of Deng's thinking and understanding during this lesson or other large-group lessons across the unit pertaining to *Maniac Magee*, Deng, Vue, and I engaged in a series of viewing sessions as described in the methods section of this manuscript. In the following section, I present a more in-depth look at the viewing session episode that pertains to the "Contrast" episode discussed above during the May 22 lesson. Additionally, I present overview analyses of the viewing sessions pertaining to this lesson as well as all three target lessons.

Viewing Session Analyses: Interpreting Deng's Perspective on Whole-Group Lessons

Deng, Vue, and I sat in Deng's living room and watched a video tape of the *Maniac Magee* lesson from May 22. When the class began the final discussion segment of the lesson on May 22, which involved constructing

large contrast/conflict charts as a group, Deng stopped the video tape of the lesson slightly *before* the conversational segment that is described in the previous subsection and *after* the class had already generated several contrasts which the teacher had listed on the chart. He asked, "What are they say?" I responded that I wasn't sure what Deng was referring to and asked Deng if he would like us to rewind the tape so that I could try to discern what he was asking. We rewound the tape, and I heard Mrs. Weber saying, "Are there any other contrasts that we've run across?" Then I said:

Cindy: Oh, contrasts? Do you know what contrasts are? (Vue, not Deng, responded to my question.)

Vue: Contractions or contrasts?

Cindy: (Carefully enunciating) Contrast. (Looking at Deng) Do you, do you know what a contrast is?

Deng: (Speaking in Hmong to Vue.)

Vue: He said, he said, like a race or something?

Cindy: (Confused) Like a race?

Vue: Yeah.

Cindy: You mean like trying to run fast or something? Oh, oh, oh contests!

Deng: Yeah. (Deng begins talking in Hmong to Vue.)

Vue: Not contests, contrasts.

Cindy: (To Deng) You thought she said contests?

Deng: Yeah.

Cindy: Oh, okay. (Raphael, Brock, & Wallace, 1997, p. 201)

After the excerpt above occurred, Deng then asked if a *contrast* is something you sign your name to. I said that I suspected he was referring to a *contract*. We talked about the definition of contract, and I mentioned that the word contract is different from contrast. Then we discussed the definition of the word contrast and talked about how Mrs. Weber used the word in class. The excerpt above illustrates that Deng was very confused about the word contrast—which was one of the central concepts discussed throughout the entire lesson. First, Deng thought that "contrasts" referred to races (i.e., contests). Then he thought that "contrasts" referred to legal documents (i.e., contracts). It was only by giving Deng an opportunity to express his concerns and confusions, as we did in the viewing sessions, and taking time to discuss them that Deng was able to make sense of the important underlying concepts and themes that were being discussed during the whole-group lesson.

It turns out, in fact, that Deng was confused about much of the lesson on May 22. We stopped the 40-min video taped lesson 28 times the evening we watched it at Deng's house. Vue stopped the lesson three times, I stopped it

Table 2
Overview of Times That the Videotaped Lesson
for May 22, 1995 Was Stopped

Number of Stop	Request by	Topic or Issue Discussed	Code
1.	Deng	Procedural question	P
2.	Deng	discussed story event	U
3.	Vue	Vue checks Deng's understanding	Cw
4.	Vue	Vue checks Deng's understanding	U
5.	Deng	Deng answers teacher's question	Ce
6.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cd
7.	Vue	Vue checks Deng's understanding	Ca
8.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cd
9.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cd
10.	Deng	Deng confused about a word	Cw
11.	Deng	Procedural question	P
12.	Deng	Deng confused about a word	Cw
13.	Deng	Procedural comment	P
14.	Deng	Comment about story discussion	U
15.	Deng	Deng confused about story event	Ce
16.	Deng	Comment about story discussion	U
17.	Deng	Deng confused about activity	Ca
18.	Deng	Deng confused about activity	Ca
19.	Deng	Procedural question	P
20.	Deng	Procedural question	P
21.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cd
22.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cc
23.	Deng	Deng confused about word	Cw
24.	Cindy	Cindy checks Deng's understanding	Cw
25.	Deng	Deng confused about discussion	Cd
26.	Deng	Deng comments about confusion	Cd
27.	Deng	Deng confused about character	Cc
28.	Deng	Deng confused about character	Cc

Note: Code key: P = *Procedural* question/comment; U = Something Deng *understood*, remembered, related to or did; Ca = Deng *confused* about a class *activity*; Cc = Deng *confused* about a *character* in the story; Cd = Deng *confused* about the class *discussion*; Ce = Deng *confused* about an *event* in the story; Cw = Deng *confused* about a particular *word*. Highlighting in the last two columns indicates when Deng is confused about something.

once and Deng stopped it 24 times. Deng was confused about something 19 of the times he stopped the tape. The topics of his confusion included: (a) activities the class engaged in, (b) characters in the story, (c) the class discussion, (d) events in the story, and/or (e) particular words—used either in the story or the class discussion. Table 2 provides a visual overview of

the extreme extent of Deng's confusion during the whole-group lesson. It provides times and reasons the May 22 video-taped lesson was stopped during the viewing session.

These patterns of Deng's confusion as revealed in Table 2 were consistent across all three target whole-group lessons. Deng was confused 16 times during the 40-min videotaped lesson for May 10. Deng, Vue, and I were only able to watch 20 mins of the 40-min lesson for June 5, yet, he stopped the 20-min segment of the lesson we watched eight times to express his confusion about something. The categories of Deng's confusion as mentioned above remained consistent across all three whole-group lessons. The patterns in Deng's interpretation of the whole-group lessons are striking and disturbing. Deng's interpretation of whole-group lessons reveals that he experienced ongoing confusion during most of the 40-min whole group lessons in which he participated. Why did Deng experience whole-group lessons in this manner? Could anything have been done by the teacher and/or Deng's peers to change the way in which he experienced whole-group lessons? Did he interpret his experiences in small-group lessons in similar ways? Beginning with the latter question, I address these questions in the remainder of this manuscript.

Two Small-Group Activities: My Perspective

Deng's level of engagement in the two focus small-group activities differed markedly from his participation in large-group lessons where he never voluntarily spoke. I describe briefly each focus small-group activity, and then present an analysis of the talk that occurred there.

The first small-group activity, entitled "The Character Map Activity," was structured very differently from the whole-group lessons described earlier. For the first 2 to 3 mins of the 25-min activity, Mrs. Weber described the students' task for the day. They were to design a character map of Greyson, a character recently introduced into the story. In the story, Maniac had just left the Beale household because the Beales were being vandalized for allowing a White boy to live with them in their Black neighborhood; Maniac loved the Beales too much to see anything bad happen to them, so he ran away. After living alone at the local city zoo for a while, Maniac was "adopted" by an old man named Greyson who worked at a local baseball park.

After modeling what she wanted the students to do by drawing a beginning sketch of a character map on the chalkboard, Mrs. Weber asked the students to include five adjectives on their character maps to describe Greyson's personality. The students were instructed to find at least two pieces of evidence from the story to support their choice of adjectives. The students

worked in groups of three or four. Deng worked with two other boys, Tran and Chris.²

The second small-group activity, entitled “The Discussion Activity,” occurred on June 9, which was the last day of the school year. The class had just finished reading the *Maniac Magee* story on June 8. Prior to beginning “The Discussion Activity,” Mrs. Weber told the students that she wanted them to have a chance to think about, reflect on, and talk about the story they had just finished. Consequently, this final small-group activity was a chance for the students to summarize and evaluate their experiences with the story. Mrs. Weber gave the students the following directions for their small-group discussions:

When you get together and discuss in your small groups today, these are the areas that I want you to discuss. You will have to decide, and each of you needs to talk about it. *Talk about the homelessness in the book.* Talk about what the homelessness did for Maniac. Did it help him to become what he was? *Talk about the racism in the book.* Why do you think Jerry Spinelli wanted us to see racism presented in this way? What was the racism? *Think about loneliness.* How does that relate to your life? How did it relate to Maniac’s life? And how did it help him become what he was? . . . *And I want you to think about the contrasts.* Very lastly . . . *tell about what you think were the most important parts of Maniac.* What did you like about it? What was your favorite part?

Mrs. Weber wrote the key issues she wanted the students to discuss on the chalkboard. (These key issues are underlined in the excerpt above.) As usual, in this unit, Deng worked in the same small group with Tran and Chris. The teacher gave the students approximately 34 mins to engage in the summary discussions. Analysis of the talk during the two small-group activities revealed patterns relative to who spoke during the activities, what they talked about, and the nature of their engagement with one another.

Table 3 gives an overview of who spoke during the two small-group activities. I determined the number of speaking turns by counting the number of times each person made comments during each small-group activity. Table 3 does not reveal information about the nature or complexity of the comments made, but it does reveal some interesting patterns about the number of contributions made by each conversant. First, predictably, the three boys in the group contributed more than did either adult present in the classroom. Mrs. Weber contributed a bit on both days, while I made a few contributions during the second activity. Mrs. Weber circulated around the classroom during small-group time to offer support and guidance to each group as well as to monitor behavior.

Table 3
Number of Turns Taken by Participants During
Two Small-Group Activities

Category	Name	Number of Turns "Character Map Activity"	Number of Turns "Discussion Activity"	Total
Boys	1. Tran	76	149	225
	2. Chris	52	103	155
	3. Deng	23	67	90
Adults	4. Mrs. Weber	8	2	10
	5. Cindy	0	3	3

Note: A version of Table 3 is published in Brock and Raphael (2005).

Averages across both small group activities reveal that Tran spoke almost 50% of the time, Chris spoke just over 30% of the time, and Deng spoke just under 20% of the time. Interestingly, patterns for the amount of contributions varied considerably for each child when compared to their number of contributions during large-group lessons. (Refer to Table 1 for an overview of number of contributions during whole-group lessons.) For example, Tran rarely, if ever, spoke during whole-group lessons, but contributed most during small-group activities. Chris, one of the four students in the large group who consistently contributed the most during whole-group lessons, contributed considerably less than Tran did during small-group activities. Deng rarely spoke, and never voluntarily, during whole-group lessons, but he took almost 20% of the speaking turns during small-group activities.

I use an excerpt from "The Character Map Activity" on May 30 to serve as an example of both what the boys talked about and how they tended to interact during small-group discussions. At the point in the discussion from which this excerpt is drawn, the boys had already decided on the words caring and sharing to describe Grayson, an important character in the story. Chris then suggested the word energetic, but Tran convinced the boys that they should use the word hermit instead. The boys wrote the word hermit on their character maps and the following discussion took place:

Tran: Okay, come on and give me evidence. Okay, he lived by himself and didn't talk to people.

Chris: He lives by himself.

Tran: You should write he lived, because he doesn't any more.

Chris: Yes he does, huh? (Note that Tran corrected Chris's use of the word "lives" by suggesting that Chris should write "lived" because the situation occurred in the past. At this point in the discussion a girl from a nearby group accused the boys of copying, so Tran's comment below is directed at her, not to the members of his own group.)

Tran: I'm not copying; I've got a word you don't even know. Jeez! (Chris continued with the discussion about lives and explained why he thought the word should be "lives" instead of "lived.")

Chris: He lives by him, he still lives by himself because of Maniac, Maniac lives in baseball room.

Tran: I know but. . .

Chris: Whatever, it looks right.

There is about an eight second pause as the boys write on their character maps, and then Chris says:

Chris: Greyson lived by himself.

Tran: Uh hum.

Deng (Showing his character map to Tran): Is that right?

Tran: Yeah, that's good, Deng.

Apparently, Chris decided to take Tran's suggestion and change "lives" to "lived" as he mentioned "lived" in his comment above and he wrote a "d" over the "s" he had written on his character map. Also, in the last line of the excerpt, Deng showed his work to Tran and asked for his approval.

Tran assumed the leadership role in the discussion. He convinced the boys that they should use the word "hermit" even though Chris had suggested a different word. Furthermore, Tran corrected Chris's use of the word "lives," and even though Chris tried to justify his use of lives, eventually he decided to follow Tran's suggestion. Finally, Deng showed Tran his work for Tran's approval to which Tran responded, "Yeah, that's good, Deng."

The above excerpt also sheds light on the nature of Chris's participation in the conversation. Chris often offered suggestions to the small group. Sometimes the boys took his suggestions; however, oftentimes, as with the examples above, they did not. Additionally, Chris did not just passively accept Tran's suggestions; he often challenged Tran's critiques of his ideas and he sometimes questioned ideas Tran presented to the group for consideration.

Finally, although Deng spoke the least above, his appeal for approval was common. About one fifth of Deng's contributions to the overall conversation involved asking Tran for help, clarification, or approval. Deng's remaining contributions were fairly evenly distributed between making suggestions,

agreeing with or confirming someone else's ideas and saying one or two words in an attempt to gain the floor in the conversation. Deng's request for approval reflected another common interactional pattern in which most of his comments during the conversation were directed specifically to Tran. In fact, even the boys' locations at their table reflected the manner in which they tended to interact. They sat at a hexagonal-shaped table with Chris on one side of the table and Tran and Deng side-by-side on the other side of the table. Clearly, analysis of the small-group interactions reveals very different conversational norms when compared with the whole-group activities. What was Deng's interpretation of interactions in the small groups in which he participated?

Viewing Sessions for the Two Small-Group Activities: Interpreting Deng's Perspective

I began these two viewing sessions like I started all viewing sessions by telling Deng that he was in control of the manner in which we viewed the video tapes of the activities; he could choose to stop the tapes at any point he wanted to make comments and ask questions about what he was seeing on the tapes. Deng started playing the 24-min May 30 taped activity, and he only requested that the lesson be stopped once. The tape was stopped a total of five times, because Vue wanted to stop the tape three times and I wanted to stop it once. I was perplexed as to why Deng only stopped the 24-min small-group lesson tape once when he had stopped the May 22, 40-min whole-group lesson tape 24 times the previous week. So, as soon as the tape was over I asked Deng about this issue:

Cindy (to Deng): Could I ask you some questions?

Deng: Yeah.

Cindy: Now, I noticed that, um, remember last time you watched a video, the one with the hands in it? Do you remember that?

Deng: Yeah.

Cindy: Um, it seems like you were asking me or your brother to stop the video a lot, but this time you didn't. Can you tell me why you didn't? Why did you want to stop a lot the other time but not this time?

Deng: Because the other time, I don't understand.

Cindy: The other time you didn't understand?

Deng: Yeah.

Cindy: Oh, you were asking us to stop because you didn't understand?

Deng: Yeah.

Cindy: But what happened this time?

Deng: This time I understand. (Excerpt taken from Brock & Raphael, 2005, p. 57.)

As Deng's comments illustrate, his reading of this small-group video taped activity for May 30 was very different from his reading of the whole-group lesson the week before. In the viewing session pertaining to the small-group activity, he felt that he understood the text he was reading. In other words, he said—and demonstrated by the manner in which he chose to control the viewing sessions—that he understood what was happening in the small group activity. Conversely, there was much that he was confused about in the whole-group May 22 lesson the week before. I was curious as to why *he* felt that he understood the small-group lesson so much better than the whole-group lessons in which he participated. In the remainder of this section, I present an overview of our 13-min discussion during which he talked about his rationale for why he felt that he understood the small-group activities better than the whole-group lessons.

Deng's comments about the differences in his understanding between the small-group activity and the whole-group lesson fell into three categories. He talked about what occurred in the small group that he found to be helpful; he emphasized what was problematic in whole-group interactions; and finally, he talked about some personal characteristics that made interacting in the large group difficult for him.

Most of Deng's comments related to what he found helpful about the small group. He emphasized several times that the small group was helpful because he, Tran, and Chris had a chance to talk. That is, they all three actively participated in the activity rather than mostly listening. Additionally, the boys told him what was happening in the story, and they further explained the assignment to him as they worked on it. He emphasized that if someone in the group did not understand something, they could rely on their peers for help. Finally, he talked about the helpful manner in which they interacted. Chris and Tran did not talk fast or use "hard" words. Moreover, the boys were his friends and he felt comfortable interacting with them. In the whole group, on the other hand, Deng said that the teacher often talked too fast and used words he didn't understand. Furthermore, he felt uncomfortable making comments in the large group because he felt that he did not know English very well and he also described himself as shy with others.

The viewing session pertaining to the small-group discussion activity was conducted like all the others and revealed a pattern similar to the other small-group activity (i.e., the "Character Map Activity"). The actual small-group discussion activity for June 9 was approximately 34 mins long; however, we only watched slightly more than half of the activity because the Moua family's pastor came to visit, so we turned off the video tape and packed all the equipment. Thus, we watched approximately 18 mins of the discussion

activity. Interestingly, Deng watched this additional small-group activity in much the same manner as the first small-group activity. He only stopped the 18 mins of tape we watched three times to express confusion about the work that the boys were doing together.

Discussion

What literacy learning opportunities did Deng, his classmates, and his teacher construct during the lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee*? Very different opportunities were constructed amongst participants in the whole-group lessons and small-group activities with respect to (a) Deng's knowledge of and access to conversational norms in the classroom and (b) the role that social mediation played in facilitating Deng's knowledge of and access to conversational norms in the classroom.

Clearly, Deng felt that he had different literacy learning opportunities in the whole-group lessons and small-group activities just described. Deng felt that he knew what was going on in the small-group activities, but he was often confused about what was happening in the large-group lessons. He also indicated that he felt as if he had more access to the lesson activities in the small group. He was more comfortable talking and interacting with his small group of peers than when he was in a whole-class setting.

Deng's perceptions about his knowledge of and access to conversational norms have important implications for educators. Sometimes it may *appear* as if students are actively and meaningfully engaged in learning activities when, in fact, this may not be the case (Bloome, 1986). For example, at first glance, the "compare/contrast" episode that occurred during the whole-group lesson on May 22 may appear to be a powerful activity to facilitate understanding of similarities and differences across themes relative to the story *Maniac Magee*; however, it wasn't a powerful learning experience for Deng. Without talking to Deng or reading something he had written about the activity, it could easily be assumed that Deng both understood the purpose of the activity and learned from it. Analysis of the video tape of the whole-group lesson for that day revealed that Deng appeared to be engaged in the lesson. He followed along in the book and maintained eye contact with the different individuals speaking during the topic-centered episodes. However, his comments during the viewing session pertaining to the compare/contrast episode of the lesson made it clear that his interpretation of that episode differed markedly from the teacher's learning goals for the lesson. Thus, seemingly rich literature-based class discussions can be deceptive when educators make

inferences about the learning of English language learners without actually getting a window into their thinking through writing and/or talking.

Although it was clear from Deng's comments during viewing sessions that he did not understand much of what occurred during the whole-group lessons, it isn't clear from Deng's comments why he participated as he did. That is, why did he remain silent and "appear" to be following along in the face of almost total confusion during whole-group lessons? Rymes and Pash (2001) offer a possible interpretation for Deng's behaviors in whole groups. Rymes and Pash studied the learning of a second-grade English language learner named Rene in a mainstream classroom and found that he was engaged in conflicting "language games" during literacy lessons whereby he was "adept at passing as knowing, but that achieved this identity-preserving expertise at the expense of an understanding of classroom lessons" (2001, p. 276). Thus, in explicating the case of Rene, Rymes and Pash illustrate the tension that English language learners (and other students for that matter) may face between the development of identity and cognition. Both the case of Rene and the case of Deng illustrate the need for educators to be aware of such tensions and construct conversational norms in classrooms that mitigate against such tensions. In Deng's case, for example, small-group norms differed such that he did have access to knowledge construction in this context. A question worth pondering in Deng's case is the following: What was different about small- and whole-group contexts that made a difference for Deng?

Undoubtedly, one reason that small-group lessons benefited Deng was because Mrs. Weber spent considerable time and effort teaching her students to participate effectively in small groups. Also, Tran actively and overtly worked as Deng's advocate during the small-group lesson as he asked Deng's opinions and offered him help and suggestions while they worked. Thus, merely putting Deng in a small group was not a viable answer for facilitating his learning. It was the nature of the students' interactions within the small group that facilitated Deng's understanding of the conversations that occurred there.

Deng made it quite clear that he felt he understood much more about what was going on during the small-group activities than the whole-group lessons. An important question, however, might be this: What does Deng mean when he says he understands something? In other words, what does Deng think it means to "understand," and further, how does his conception of understanding relate to his teacher's conception of understanding? Barnes (1976) distinguishes between the notion of students "hav[ing] ideas of their own or only remember[ing] what they have been told" (cited in Florio-Ruane, 1989, p. 13). In his small group, Deng seemed to have the

opportunity to “take part in the formulating of knowledge” as opposed to acting mainly as a receiver of knowledge (Barnes, 1976, pp. 14–15, cited in Florio-Ruane, 1989, p. 13–14). In his large group, however, Deng could not even act as a receiver of knowledge because he was so frequently confused about the ideas being discussed in that context.

According to Deng, social mediation played a crucial role in his learning. He understood when he had a chance to interact and ask questions of his peers in his small group. This is not to say that there is anything inherently good or bad about small groups or large groups; rather, it is the nature of the language-based interactions that occur within the groups that shapes what gets talked about, thought about, and subsequently learned. In fact, the large group *was* an effective context for learning for some students like Dan, Sally, and Chris. Thus, I am not arguing here that English language learners should only (or primarily) have opportunities to learn in small groups. I suggest, rather, that educators, students, and researchers must carefully and continually examine, monitor, and adjust the nature of interactions that occur in all the various participation structures used in the classroom throughout the day with respect to the specific students that are being served in the classrooms. Florio-Ruane (1989) argues that teachers “do have direct influence on the social contexts of instruction in their classrooms. Teachers and students communicate with one another within the temporal, spatial, normative, and material boundaries of the classroom. How they organize that communication greatly determines the learning which takes place in school” (p. 10).

Conclusion

Findings from this investigation suggest that Deng's literacy learning opportunities were related to the extent to which he could gain knowledge of and access to conversational practices in his classroom. His ability to gain access to the conversations varied greatly depending on the nature of interactions that occurred within the different lessons, including whole-group teacher-guided instruction and small groups that were orchestrated by the students themselves, but—and this is essential—the teacher had played a central role in scaffolding the nature of the students' interactions in small groups.

The whole-group instruction model dominated the lessons pertaining to *Maniac Magee*. Deng made it clear that he had difficulty gaining access to the conversation during whole-group lessons as they were enacted in his classroom. For example, the pace of lessons was often quick and the teacher and

students often used vocabulary that was unfamiliar to Deng. Additionally, the unspoken norm in whole-group lessons was that conversants assumed the conversational floor to display knowledge. The viewing sessions revealed that Deng was often confused during whole-group lessons. Thus, Deng rarely had the requisite knowledge to display. This whole-group conversational norm coupled with Deng's earlier school experiences in Thailand whereby students were physically punished for giving a wrong answer coupled with the possibility that Deng sought to construct a classroom identity to "fit in" made it unlikely that Deng would ever choose to speak up in the whole group. So, although whole-group lessons were effective for some students like Sally, Dan, and Chris, they were not effective for Deng.

It is interesting to speculate what impact different whole-group conversational norms might have had on Deng's involvement and participation in whole-group lessons. For example, what if Mrs. Weber had made it a point to call on a wide variety of different students during each whole-group lesson? This could have introduced a variety of different voices and topics into ongoing conversations so that whole-group lessons were not primarily conversations between Sally, Dan, Chris, and Mrs. Weber. Moreover, what if Mrs. Weber set out to establish a conversational norm that the conversational floor was a place where students were encouraged to express confusion and uncertainty rather than merely to display knowledge? If Mrs. Weber worked with the students to create this conversational norm, then perhaps Deng would have learned from the questions expressed by others and perhaps, with encouragement from the teacher, he might even have shared some of his own questions and confusions in the larger group. Finally, it was crucial that Mrs. Weber had more opportunities to gain a window into students' thinking. A daily journal writing time after whole-group lessons may have helped Mrs. Weber to have a better understanding of Deng's thinking and confusions across the unit. More opportunities for meaningful interactions with peers would also have been useful for Deng so that he could discuss his ongoing thinking, learning, and confusions with others.

This investigation sheds light on the central role that the nature of interactions within classroom activities can play in fostering literacy learning opportunities for English language learners like Deng. In particular, the nature of conversational norms within whole groups and small groups can afford different opportunities for engaging in interactions that may promote or inhibit learning. Second, this investigation confirms the crucial role of meaningful situated language use in the construction of literacy learning opportunities for English language learners like Deng. In order for Deng to make sense of classroom events, he needed to be able to interact on an

ongoing basis with others, such as Tran, who served the role of mediator with respect to classroom practices. Third, this study suggests that literacy learning opportunities are complex and highly contextualized for specific students. Clearly, interactional styles within the different activities provided markedly different opportunities for various students in Deng's classroom. Literacy learning opportunities must be conceptualized for specific students in specific contexts. Finally, in this manuscript, I argued that educators' lack of ability to address effectively the issue of unequal literacy learning opportunities for the diverse students in our schools has much to do with the fact that we have not carefully listened to students describe their school learning experiences. Scholars (e.g., McCarty & Lomawaima, 2001) have called for work that reflects "an interdisciplinary 'meeting place' where academics, ethnographers, teachers, students, practitioners, parents—readers and writers of all kinds—can share their perspectives, experience, research, and thoughts" (p. 264). Clearly, the voices of students—especially those from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are traditionally marginalized in U.S. schools—should weigh in heavily in scholarly conversations pertaining to teaching and learning. Deng's discussion of the lessons in which he engaged shed light on his literacy learning in his American fifth-grade classroom. Perhaps by listening carefully to children like Deng we may arrive at more helpful answers to the complex and important issues surrounding educational opportunities for students from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds in our public schools.

Notes

1. The final column in Table 1 shows that Deng had 14 conversational turns during the whole-group lesson on June 5. A brief explanation is in order. On this day, Mrs. Weber had asked Deng to read aloud. As he read aloud, the 14 conversational turns involved a pattern of Deng reading several words, Mrs. Weber correcting his pronunciation of words, Deng reading aloud, Mrs. Weber correcting his pronunciation, and so forth, for the duration of Deng's reading.

2. Tran was a Korean American boy who had been adopted by Euro-American parents when he was a baby. Although he was born in Korea, he had lived in the United States almost all of his life. He only spoke English. Chris was a Euro-American boy who only spoke English.

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Cynthia Brock is an associate professor in literacy studies in the Department of Educational Specialties at the University of Nevada–Reno. Her primary teaching interests include literacy instruction for children in the middle and upper-elementary grades, literacy and diversity, and qualitative methods. She studies the literacy learning of upper-elementary children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. She also explores how to work with preservice and inservice teachers to foster the literacy learning of children from diverse backgrounds at the upper-elementary level.