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Teaching Children How to Discuss What They Read

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Teaching Children How to Discuss What They Read

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Abstract

After the children had silently read the selection assigned, the teacher launched them into a discussion. For a while it seemed that things would go well as the teacher began asking questions to guide the discussion, but only for a few moments. The ebb and flow of the discussion soon became more ebb than flow. The tide had turned and what originally promised to be smooth sailing turned into another voyage of the ill-fated craft—the discussion. The teacher, unnerved by the experience, abruptly ended the activity, deciding that discussions are hardly worth the effort. The teacher was tempted to try other activities, such as having the children write answers to written comprehension questions because they seem to require more thought and effort from children and do not involve the anxiety and discomfort of discussion.



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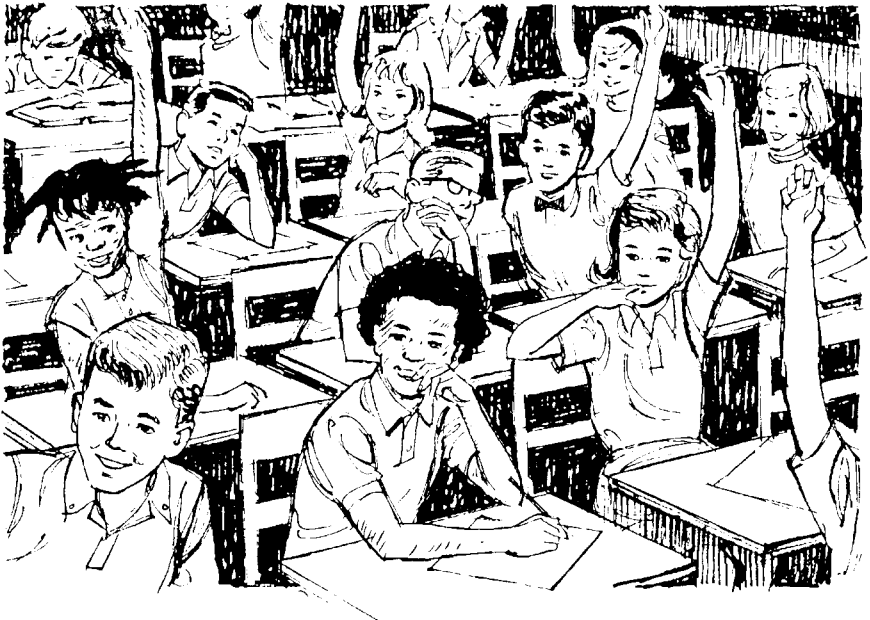
What went wrong? What happened during the discussion to make the teacher feel this way? Several children simply did not say anything. They seemed to "clam up" or not respond at all to the teacher's questions or to what other children were saying. Then there were children who seemed to answer each question with a single word, or who gave trivial answers to the teacher's questions. There was also a high incidence of cliches and a low number of original comments. Some children appeared inhibited and self-conscious. When they made a contribution, they did not voice their true feelings and opinions. The discussion was also dominated by a few members of the group. These students monopolized the discussion, crowding out other children who might have something to contribute. And, some of the children were apparently not listening to what others were

saying, for their comments were unrelated to the point made by the previous speakers.

Why Discussions Are Important

Children first begin discussing things with others in small, informal family interactions at meals and other times. As they grow and experience wider social contexts, greater discussion skills are demanded. Pinnell (1984) believes these discussion skills will be required in almost all subject matter learning in elementary and secondary schools. She makes the point that beyond subject matter, there is embedded within each subject a "hidden curriculum," in which language itself is being taught. Children learn a subject and, in the process, they learn how to talk about a subject.

Classroom discussions also provide the opportunity for children to develop what May (1967) calls a listening attitude--that is, an attitude in which one is open to the ideas of others. Children learn not to tune out other children who express ideas that differ from their own. Discussions also provide for what Barnes (1976) calls "exploratory language" with an "intimate audience" as opposed to a "formal presentation" to a "distant audience." In a small group, children are working with peers whom they know



and trust. Language, therefore, can be less guarded and ideas can be expressed more freely. Moffet and Wagner (1983) emphasize the value of discussions in developing thinking and oral skills children will need for reading and writing. They believe discussions do this by requiring children to face the challenge of defining, clarifying, qualifying, elaborating, analyzing, and ordering experiences, concepts, opinions, and ideas. The direct value of discussions in promoting reading comprehension has also been suggested. Bruton (1977), for example, believes that discussing a reading selection fosters reading comprehension by reinforcing memory and teaching children to think about what they read in new and productive ways.

The ability to engage in discussions becomes even more important after schooling. According to Pinnell (1984), success in social, civic, and professional groups depends partly on the ability to speak in informal and formal settings. Skill in presenting ideas, backing them up with information, linking them to others' ideas, turning the discussion to a new topic, and persuading others are important for success in most of the professions and in business and industry.

Teacher Preparation for Success

How can teachers be prepared for this important classroom process? Teachers must develop a pattern of oral interchange, through questioning techniques, which engages children's minds and imaginations. The reading selection must be read prior to the discussion and questions must be prepared to stimulate children's thinking. The questions teachers formulate must help children operate on all levels of thought. Gallagher (1965) offers a useful questioning scheme with two categories of questions: narrow and broad.

Narrow questions are text-bound; their answers are always in the text. Gallagher identifies two types of narrow questions: cognitive-memory and convergent. Cognitive-memory questions require children to recall, identify, answer yes or no, define, name and designate information. They often begin with "Who," "What," "Where," or "When." Convergent questions are text-bound, but their answers require children to use information from different parts of the text and to explain, state relationships, compare, and contrast. They often begin with the words "Why," "How,"

"Explain," "Compare," and "Contrast."

Broad questions are reader-bound; the answers begin in the text, but end in the mind of the reader. Gallagher also identifies two types of broad questions: divergent and evaluative. Divergent questions require children to predict, hypothesize, infer, reconstruct, solve problems, and trace alternatives. They often begin with phrases and words like "What if," "Suppose," "How do you know," "How many ways," and "Predict." Evaluative questions require children to give and support an opinion, make and justify a choice, defend a position, or place a value. They often begin with phrases such as "What do you think," "Do you agree," "Can you support," or "How do you feel about."

Preparing Children for Discussions

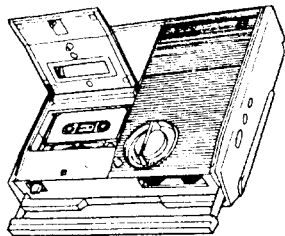
How can teachers prepare children to engage in effective classroom discussions? Teachers must understand that a discussion is not a simple collection of listening and speaking skills, but a dynamic event which requires children to orchestrate simultaneously a number of language skills. Children must have a thorough knowledge of the reading selection, say what they think about it, listen to what others say about it, respond to what others say about it, and stick to the subject. These skills or conditions need to be stated and taught to children as rules. Several language educators (see Burns and Broman, 1983; Moffet and Wagner, 1983; and Temple and Gillet, 1984) suggest having a small group of children demonstrate through role playing effective discussion behavior.

There are three steps involved in using role playing to teach discussion skills. The first step calls for the teacher to select five or six children who are good at role playing and who have good discussion skills. The children are asked to demonstrate through role playing an ineffective discussion of a reading selection. After reading a short selection, the children are asked to model poor listening, the interrupting of others, irrelevant comments, single, one-word responses to teacher questions, monopolizing the discussion, and a lack of response to the teachers's questions or to the comments of other group members. After demonstrating a poor discussion, the same children are asked to demonstrate an effective discussion. The children will need coaching in effective discussion behavior. The following discussion rules adapted from Moffet and Wagner (1983) can be used:

1. Read the selection to be discussed.
2. Understand it: Tell yourself what it means.
3. Contribute: Give your own ideas.
4. Listen: Try to understand what someone else is saying.
5. Say "Excuse me" or "Pardon me" if you interrupt someone .
6. Be relevant: Stick to the subject.
7. Respond: Comment on what others have said.

In the next step, the teacher asks the class to compare the two discussions demonstrated through role-playing. Through teacher questioning, the class is helped to identify the differences between effective and ineffective discussions. The children will then generate their own rules for effective discussions. The teacher should write the student-generated discussion rules on the chalkboard. It is important to remember that these discussion rules come from students and not the teacher. The teacher's role is one of facilitator and recorder of the student rules for discussing selections.

The final step calls for the teacher to provide structured opportunities for children to apply what they have learned about discussions. The teacher conducts practice discussions with children. After each practice session, children evaluate their performance. The discussion rules generated by the children can be duplicated for use as criteria for evaluating discussions. The teacher should also give children feedback on their performance during the practice sessions. For children who need additional work in developing discussion skills, teachers can use a tape recorder to play back a discussion or to play an earlier discussion with a more recent one to point out needed areas of improvement.



As the teacher's experience in this article shows very vividly, good discussions do not happen automatically. Leading a group discussion is not easy. But discussions do not have to be abandoned. Teachers will, however, have to be prepared and also prepare children for this important classroom process. The suggestions in this article can help teachers accomplish this goal.

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