Markers of an “Inclusive” Reading Classroom: Peers Facilitating Inclusion at the Margins of a Fourth Grade Reading Workshop

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Markers of an Inclusive Reading Classroom: Peers Facilitating Inclusion at the Margins of a Fourth-Grade Reading Workshop

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Abstract

What are indicators, or markers, of inclusive reading classrooms? As elementary school teachers across the United States are increasingly required to teach reading to diverse, heterogeneous groups of students within the same classroom space, practitioners and researchers seek to identify what constitutes inclusion in reading instruction. This study explores how two fourth-grade friends—one labeled “struggling” and one labeled “average” by normative reading assessments—transgress classroom expectations around quiet, leveled reading behaviors while also facilitating one another’s inclusion in the classroom reading community. Combining ethnographic methods and discourse analysis, this study explores the dominant cultural Discourses that circulate, and shape local meanings of reading and ability created by the students and teacher. Taking notice of the students’ engagement with texts and each other, the focal teacher builds official curricula inspired by their “clandestine” and “transgressive” interactions. Implications from the data suggest that practitioner research, where teachers study students’ discourse, could help teachers design more inclusive opportunities for literate engagement.

KEYWORDS: reading instruction, inclusive education, partner reading, teacher/practitioner inquiry

Many U.S elementary schools include children of varied reading abilities in the same heterogeneously grouped classrooms, yet what it means to effectively include children in varying classroom contexts remains elusive (Slee, 2008). Often, researchers have looked at students’ test scores and to published literacy curricula to identify inclusive practices in the teaching of reading (Hart et al., 2007; Sharpe et al., 1997; Zindler, 2009). However, the ways children interact together informally around texts when their teacher is otherwise engaged can enhance their competency with reading skills and strategies, as well as provide rich opportunities for interactive, nuanced, and multivoiced interpretations of texts (Kliwer, 2008; Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Sterponi, 2007). One possible indicator of inclusivity in the reading portion of the school day for instance, is the degree to which students engage with texts together informally as allies and interpretive collaborators.
(Dyson, 2015; Naraian, 2010). When students respond to and engage with texts in ways that position each other as able, valued, and insightful, a more inclusive social space can be produced, which contrasts with competitive leveling and labeling discourse that stratifies students socially and academically (Christianakis, 2010; Kontovourki, 2012).

This article reports on how three fourth-grade students engaged with each other around reading during independent reading time in a fourth-grade inclusive classroom. Two of these boys, Jorge and Daniel, interacted in such a way as to enhance each other’s engagement and comprehension of the texts they were reading (names of students, teacher, and school are all pseudonyms). Another boy, Alex, who sat nearby, sometimes tried to police their conversations, reminding them to conform to rules around quiet reading and reading only certain leveled books. The boys’ interactions demonstrated the complexity of ways that children include and exclude each other from opportunities to be capable and insightful readers in different moments, even without the teacher’s physical presence.

D/discourses Shaping Students’ Educational Opportunities

Discourses of literacy and ability circulate in classrooms through talk, texts, gesture, and writing, what Gee (2005) refers to as language-in-practice, or discourse (small d). These discourses help students learn purposes for reading and possible identities as competent or incompetent. Classroom discourse reflects Discourses (big D), dominant cultural understandings of what it means to be a good reader or an able learner. For example, by asking a student whether he is proud to be a level L reader, a teacher evokes and (re)produces a positivist Discourse of literacy. Positivism has also been called a mechanistic paradigm and a rational/technical paradigm, among other names—all of which build on an assumption of the existence of objectivity, causality, and certainty of knowledge (Heshusius, 1989). Thus, a positivist Discourse of literacy assumes that reading is a series of skills that can be quantified in graded values, levels, or discrete stages such as high-, middle-, and low-level readers. On the other hand, by discussing relevant purposes for reading that connect school learning and students’ worlds, and describing “learning as an adventure to which everybody is invited” (Hart et al., 2008, p. 502), a teacher evokes and (re)produces a more sociocultural Discourse of literacy, wherein learning is contextual and occurs through social relationships.

Specifically, the discourse used to teach and assess reading has consequences for students as they engage in reading and self-identify as particular kinds of readers and learners in various contexts. Whether or not classrooms are tracked or labeled “inclusive,” the curriculum varies for students depending on how the teacher perceives their abilities as readers and the Discourses of reading and ability available to them (Hart et al., 2007). The possible ways for students to be readers in general education classrooms can be quite narrow if there is an intense focus on levels and labels, and inclusive classrooms also sometimes retain narrow meanings of reading and limited possibilities for what it can mean to be a reader. Teacher and student talk produces opportunities for students to learn Discourses around reading and ability and to work towards defining and enacting inclusive reading classrooms (Hart et al., 2007; Johnston, 2004).

Sorting and Labeling in U.S. Schools

Historically, the ways schools have sorted students into tracks according to their scores and levels is a product of positivist Discourses. Tracking practices, where students are grouped by their abilities, are built on the assumption that students’ abilities can be known with enough accuracy to label them objectively and accurately through testing (Oakes, 1985). Tracking practices also assume that children are easier for teachers to teach
when they are homogeneously grouped by ability, and that students learn more easily in ability-segregated contexts without peers who challenge them or slow their progress (Barr & Dreeben, 1991; Shannon, 2007). One example of tracking is within-class ability grouping, a practice that has been widely used in United States elementary school reading classrooms. Historically, teachers have labeled ability-based reading groups with names like the Robins and Bluebirds, or, as was the case in Rist’s (1970) study, Tigers for the “fast” and “high-performing” group and Clowns for the “slow” and “low-performing” learners. These value-laden names, sometimes describing students’ abilities in disrespectful ways, served to define and shape the experiences and performances of students as readers. Each word and label spoken or used in a classroom space shapes the opportunities children have for engaging with the curriculum.

Researchers have called into question assumptions about the benefits of static ability grouping and tracking practices, noting that students gain particularly limited knowledge about reading and their capacities as readers as they participate in these same groups over time (Allington, 2005; Berliner, 2009; Heshusius, 1989; Rist, 1970). Students segregated in this way grow to understand their identity as readers as defined by a level or rank in competition with other students. This positioning often teaches students, specifically those labeled as “low,” to self-identify according to perceived limited potential rather than potential for success (Johnston, 1997; McCarthey, 2001; McDermott & Aron, 1978). Once ability groups are assigned to children in their early elementary years, they often stay in similar ability-based tracks throughout their schooling careers (Jones, Clarke, & Enriquez, 2009; Rist, 1970).

Labels as Heteroglossic Signs: Learning Through Discourse

The talk, symbols, and gestures that make up discourse about reading used by students and teachers within the classroom—in this case, a classroom labeled by the school and teacher as “inclusive”—can be understood as vehicles which mediate understanding between speakers and listeners (Bakhtin, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978). The speaker may have conscious intentions, or find certain discourse “internally persuasive” to their own values and belief systems (Bakhtin, 1981). Such “internally persuasive” discourse may be in tension with or in alignment with “externally persuasive” dominant cultural norms. For example, ideologies, or Discourses, about why reading is (and has been) important, what readers do (and have done), how readers should act (and have acted), and what kinds of identities readers have (and have had and can have) are reflected and refracted by words through talk. Bakhtin (1981) wrote about the simultaneous “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forces at work in discourse, where authoritative meanings circulate with more internally persuasive meanings or interpretations. For example, district mandates and classroom rules constitute authoritatively accepted ways of being in the classroom, yet teachers and students might elude these rules if they are internally persuaded to do so. Metaphorically, the authoritative discourses spin inward, toward a definitive, dominant rule around reading as an independent activity; meanwhile, internally persuasive discourses spin outward, away from the central, normative rules around reading practices, to produce varying situated meanings and purposes.

Inclusive Education as a Social, Discursive Process

Educators working to teach inclusively are attempting to change the sorting, segregating, and excluding effects that are proliferated by tracking, ability grouping, special education, and other discursive practices that shape students’ schooling experiences (Souto-Manning & Martell, 2016; Tregaskis, 2006). One might say they are channeling
their internally persuasive understandings of inclusion into the dominant or mainstream discourse. Researchers and educators who resist a narrow definition of inclusive education as pertaining only to the proximity of students with disabilities to those without disabilities draw on theories from Disability Studies in Education (DSE) to conceptualize ability, disability, and inclusive processes as socially produced through relationships in contexts (Connor et al., 2015, Ware, 2010). DSE scholars argue that the impairment is not an individual deficit, but rather a failure of society and schools to recognize and accommodate individuals’ needs (Hart, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2007). From a DSE perspective on inclusive education, inclusion is a social, discursive process, requiring teachers to engage students in creating a community that affirms all individuals, provides challenging and engaging academic experiences, and interrogates assumptions around ability, competence, and stereotypes (Kluth, 2007).

My perspective on inclusion and dis/ability is aligned with such a DSE perspective. The conception of inclusive education as a discursive process rather than a physical designation draws on a social model for conceptualizing ability and disability, and aims to address and mitigate the ways schools produce exclusion on the basis of race, ethnicity, social class, dis/ability, gender, nationality, sexuality, language, and other identity markers (Connor et al., 2015; Taylor, 2006). Through this discursive lens, inclusive education requires working toward including all students, not simply those who have been labeled as “disabled.” However, some schools continue to call classrooms “inclusive” if they simply have students with and without disabilities on the same roster, attending the same physical space every day. What students are “included into” within various contexts remains a question (Slee, 2008). Is it that students with varying abilities are physically included in the classroom space, or are they included in a social space, comprised of relationships where they “count” as competent? A sociocultural vision of inclusivity has proven difficult to work towards in a policy climate in which accountability measures are treated as the indicator for educational equity and standardized testing shapes wide areas of the curricula (Dyson, 2015; Hart et al, 2007; Zindler, 2009).

The Study

This case study examines the way that two fourth-grade boys, Jorge and Daniel, enacted their relationship as “valued allies” during the independent reading portion of Reading Workshop, creating enhanced spaces for each other’s engagement. Another student, Alex, sometimes participated in these interactions around reading, reminding Jorge and Daniel about classroom norms, quieting their talk, and eliciting Jorge’s resistance to continuing to read. Although constraining and competitive peer relationships complicated the discursive space of the reading classroom, the teacher’s flexible responses to Jorge’s and Daniel’s clandestine social interactions also seemed to support their engagement with reading.

Methods

The data I draw on in this paper derives from a yearlong ethnographic case study that examined how one fourth-grade teacher, Kathy, and focal students in a New York, NY, public school classroom labeled as “inclusive” talked about reading and how talk shaped curricular opportunities and available identities for readers.

The specific research questions that shape this report included:

1) How do the focal students engage in informal reading during Reading Workshop?

2) How does their talk enable their participation as competent readers?
The study draws on the lens of sociocultural theory, which assumes that learning occurs through social relationships and that meanings for dis/ability are produced through discourse in social contexts, not inherent in individuals (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2005; Siebers, 2008; Vygotsky, 1978).

Contexts

The school. This study took place at the Inquiry School, a K–5 public school in a high-poverty, large-city neighborhood in the Northeast. The sampling for this study was purposeful (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In the year prior to the study, I worked with several teachers at the Inquiry School who hosted literacy interns from the university where I was employed as a field-based supervisor. I spent days in the school, observing and coaching the literacy interns and also meeting with teachers about their grade-level inquiries. I chose the Inquiry School because I learned that the teachers at the school were engaging in a school-wide inquiry about how to better support their students’ identities as readers.

Over the academic year of the study (2011–2012), the school site served approximately 500 students, enrolled in pre-Kindergarten through Grade 5. At the time, among its 500 students, 71% were Latino/a, 22% Black (African American or recent African immigrants), 2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 1% White, 1% Asian, and 2% students of other ethnicities (DOE, 2012). Ninety-five percent of the student body was eligible for free and reduced lunch, while 22% received special education services, and 17% were English language learners (DOE, 2012). Eighty percent of students with individualized education plans (IEPs) were educated alongside their nondisabled peers for most of the day in what was considered the least restrictive environment. Twenty percent of the students with IEPs were educated in more restrictive environments in self-contained classrooms.

The classroom. After hearing about my study, fourth-grade teacher Kathy Topaz expressed an interest and agreed to participate as the focal teacher. She was also independently engaged in a year-long study of how to teach reading inclusively to her diverse group of students, some of whom demonstrated resistance to reading and were reading at very low levels according to Fountas and Pinnell’s guided reading assessments. Her goals and interests aligned with the focus of my research. Because there was some turnover throughout the school year, in Kathy’s class there were anywhere from 16 to 19 students. The class mirrored the school’s demography in terms of ethnicities, language, and socioeconomic status.

Reading workshop curriculum. Kathy followed a workshop model for teaching both reading and writing, rooted in the belief that the teacher supports students in building knowledge about reading and knowledge from reading through social interactions with her and with each other and by mastering reading skills and strategies. This workshop model of instruction was also mandated in her district. Kathy and the students embarked on a new unit of study in reading workshop and writing workshop each month. These units of study were centered on a central question or focus, including reading and writing habits, strategies, and various genres.

Kathy guided most of the talk about reading during the minilessons in whole- and small-group instruction, and students had a bit more freedom to initiate talk during independent work time. Students were supposed to read their leveled books during this independent time and practice the strategies Kathy had taught them. On occasion they had the freedom to choose books of interest that weren’t on their level, and sometimes they engaged in informal, quiet conversations together.
Participants

First, I present portraits of the two friends: Jorge and Daniel. Then, I introduce another student, Alex who sat nearby, and the teacher, Kathy.

Introducing Jorge. With curly black hair, round cheeks, and a stocky build, Jorge exuded a gentle energy. He drew on many interests, preferences, and experiences during school hours, including an interest in basketball and football, a love of his family, and a fascination with comics, animals, and natural disasters. During Reading Workshop, Jorge often spread comics out on his desk along with his assigned leveled books. During transition moments and during independent reading time, he would sometimes read the comics, even when he was supposed to be reading his leveled reading books. He rarely participated during whole-class meetings, and seemed to carefully consider each word he spoke to anyone.

At the beginning of the year, Kathy assessed Jorge as a Level C reader in the Fountas and Pinnell Guided Reading system (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996), and he progressed to reading Level F books by the end of the year. Level C designated his reading abilities as on par with a Kindergarten level. In comparison to most other fourth-grade students’ books, Jorge’s assigned books were small and thin, with few words on a page, and he did not always seem so interested in reading them. His eyes wandered, and he would turn his body sideways in his seat to look around, or rest his head on his elbow. He rarely disrupted other students’ reading, but his focus seemed to be on his thoughts and the happenings in the classroom rather than on the books. Kathy often reminded him, “Jorge, eyes on the page, buddy!” or “Keep reading! Remember, the only way to get better at reading is to read!” Kathy had also assigned him to practice reading sight words on index cards attached to a key ring. Kathy would remind him, “Are you practicing your ‘word-ring’ words?” Jorge lost his word-ring several times over the course of the year, and he rarely voluntarily took out the word ring to practice reading them. He did not seem eager to engage with his word-ring words, perhaps because he was the only student who had one. Jorge seemed to be protesting the “low” reader status that the word ring may have signified in the classroom.

Introducing Daniel. Daniel’s eyes would sparkle enthusiastically as he shared information about animals, history, or current events with his peers, his teacher, or me. He wore dark-rimmed glasses, and was a little bit shorter than many of the students in the room, with a thin, athletic body type. He had tan skin and wavy black hair that curled past his ears, and often wore his hood or a baseball cap until his teacher asked him to remove it. He adored writing and spent much of his free time writing adventure and science fiction tales about robots and monsters, filling in composition notebooks to their completion before many of his peers. He was considered an average reader by the teacher’s assessments and especially enjoyed reading Goosebumps and Captain Underpants series books. He read at a Level M at the beginning of the school year and progressed to a Level P by the end (Fountas & Pinnell, 1996).

Daniel was eligible to receive extended time on tests, which was a designation he had held since the second grade, when his teacher and mother observed that he was working slowly on assignments and had difficulty finishing them within allotted timeframes. Kathy told me that she did not think he demonstrated a need for extended time during fourth grade, as he did not seem to be working overly slowly compared with other students, but that as long as he had the accommodation, she thought he should use it because extra time might help any student on the test. She told me that she regarded accommodations like extended time on tests as pragmatic support for almost all of her students, not simply those labeled with disabilities.
**Introducing Alex.** Tall for his age, with tan skin and a short haircut, Alex often carried a drawing notebook and colored pencils. He folded his drawings of people, pets, and his favorite cartoon characters, tucking them into his pockets, backpack, or books. His desk was so crowded with drawings that he often could not find his schoolwork. Yet, Kathy celebrated his artwork, hanging pictures that he gave her by her desk and calling on her “resident artist” to illustrate key scenes from Read Aloud books.

Like many students, Alex often “ventriloquiated” (Bakhtin, 1981) the teacher; in other words, he emulated the words and phrases that she used, reinscribing the classroom norms. For example, he would “shush” his classmates when the rule was that no one was supposed to be talking during independent reading. He would tell his classmates to “get on the rug” when they were not following Kathy’s directions promptly.

Alex began the year as a “low” reader according to the Fountas and Pinnell (1995) assessments, scoring a level F, and moving up to a level L by the end of the year. He and Jorge were sometimes assigned to work together as partners because they were both “low” readers as compared with their classmates, yet they complained about working with each other and did not seem to get along.

**Introducing Kathy, the focal teacher.** Tall, with brown eyes, tan skin, and long, dark brown hair, Kathy could be described as White and middle-class. She lived in a different borough from her students and commuted about 45 minutes to an hour by train to get to the Inquiry School. She was vivacious, friendly, and revered by her students. Kathy. In her seventh year of teaching, she was considered an excellent fourth-grade teacher and leader by the administrator and other teachers. As teachers often must be, Kathy was a “dilemma manager,” navigating the messiness of teaching and learning with many energetic young people, curricular pressures, and her own “internally persuasive” values and goals for being a “good” teacher (Lampert, 1985).

Kathy conceptualized teaching inclusively as a process of creating a classroom community where all students felt they were valued members, and where students engaged in learning through supportive interaction with each other. Kathy told me that, “first and foremost, I want students to feel like they belong here, and they can be successful. I want them to help each other enjoy learning, to address bullying and community issues, and reflect on what it means to be kind. Reading is key in all of those goals” (Interview, November 18, 2011). Kathy’s conception of inclusion focused on the social processes of teachers and all students.

**Data Sources and Analysis**

I visited Kathy’s classroom two or three times a week, for about four hours at a time, for the entire school year, from September to June. During my time in the classroom, I observed the participants and their interactions, focusing on opportunities for engagement with reading, teacher and student talk about reading within these contexts, and data that gives me insight into students’ identities as readers. I aimed to be present in the classroom often enough that children perceived me as a “regular, nonjudgmental, attentive classroom participant” (Dyson & Genishi, 2005). I recorded field notes, audio-recorded classroom talk, collected lesson plans, and interviewed the teacher and children four times each over the course of the year (Heath & Street, 2008; Maxwell, 1996).

Drawing on sociocultural and discursive theories, I interpreted my observations, interviews, and transcriptions of conversations using D/discourse analysis (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2005). During data collection, I was especially interested in when and how Jorge, a
student labeled as a “struggling reader” by Kathy, himself, and his peers, seemed especially interested in and engaged with reading. Thus, I focused on the processes whereby Jorge seemed to seek out or resist engagement with reading. This focus required an examination of Discourse as produced through classroom discourse and assumed that “language has meaning only in and through social practices” (Gee, 1999, p.8).

For my D/discourse analysis, I transcribed short portions of text, which I called “speech events” (Gee, 2005), and divided each speech event into short “idea units,” one per line (Gee, 2005). Next, I drew on Gee’s “building task” questions in order to think about how the participants used language within the literacy event and specific speech events. These building tasks are grounded in the assumption that language shapes how people understand the world, including the social contexts in which they interact (Gee, 2005). I focused on the following “building task” questions: “How is this piece of language being used to make certain things significant or not and in what ways?” and “What identity or identities is this piece of language being used to enact? (Gee, 2005, pp. 11–12). I drew on Bakhtin’s (1981) conceptions of internally and externally persuasive discourse as well, to understand how the focal students and the teacher navigated their engagement around reading.

Findings

In this section, I present an analysis of data portraying Jorge, Daniel, and Alex’s typical interactions during the Reading Workshop portion of the school day. I zoom in on one “speech event” because it is representative of the kinds of talk and interaction the focal students engaged in during “informal” reading time. The two themes I will explore in this report include 1) Clandestine reading: Engaging together with a robot book; 2) Norms for classroom talk: Creating and constraining spaces for reading.

Clandestine Reading: Engaging Together with a Robot Book

As I mentioned in the portraits of the individual students, Daniel and Jorge shared a love of comics and science and often shared books in these genres. While they had the chance during in-between moments of the day when the teacher allowed chatting, or when she was otherwise occupied, they also talked about T.V. shows they both had watched, including Extreme Encounters on the Animal Planet channel and Dragon Ball Z. In the following speech event, Daniel and Jorge interact with each other and the content of the book, and Alex chimes in. I begin with a description of the scene.

Reading Workshop had started a few minutes ago, and everyone was reading their books, writing post-it notes, or writing in their reading response journals, at their own seats. The room was quiet except for the low sounds of a few students reading out loud under their breath, shifting, and flipping pages back and forth. Daniel rose out of his seat and walked over to Jorge. Jorge was reading his level C book about various kinds of balls (basketballs, beach balls, tennis balls, etc.). When he saw Daniel walking over to him, he put away this book under a pile of two comics. Daniel was holding a book called Robot (Bridgeman, 2004) as he approached Jorge.
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Idea Unit

1 Daniel: Did you see the robots in this book? (showing picture to Jorge)
2 I would like to have a robot dog.
3 I am robot dog. Woof! (said in a monotone, robot-like voice)
4 Jorge: Tick, tick, tick (said while moving his arms jerkily, like a robot)
5 Daniel: Look at this one. It is a spider robot.
6 Jorge: Whoa! (looked at picture, then toward his teacher)
7 Shhh! (he opened his Dragon Ball Z comic, and leaned over it to read)
8 Daniel: Can I borrow that one later? (he walked back to his desk)
9 Alex: Jorge, Ms. Topaz said you have to read your level books.
10 Jorge: Shhh
11 Alex: You can’t read only choice books.
12 Jorge: Shut up. (Looked at his teacher across the room, and opened up his leveled book)

(Field Notes, November 10, 2011)

Figure 1. Speech event: Daniel and Jorge look at a book about robots

In this event, it is significant that Daniel stood up from his seat in the middle of quiet, independent reading time. Typically, students were expected to stay at their seats during this time, unless they needed a particular supply, like more post-its or a pencil from the writing center. The students were expected to remain quiet so that everyone could concentrate better, and this was an official “rule” for independent reading time. Yet Kathy sometimes let quiet conversations go without reprimand, responding flexibly in different contexts. While she seemed to notice that Daniel was walking over to Jorge, she continued working with another student. I later asked her during an interview, “How do you decide when to refocus students?” She told me that, in the case of Jorge and Daniel, “I just really want Jorge to have a positive experience with reading, and his connection with Daniel seems to be one of the times he really enjoys looking at books” (interview, March 18, 2012). Kathy’s decision not to stop Daniel’s movement or his conversation with Jorge provided a context in which the two boys could engage with reading together.

In line 1, Daniel’s use of the verb see showed that he was interested in the pictures in his book and in sharing the experience of the pictures with Jorge. Because he did not take his eyes off the picture as he stood up and walked over to Jorge, he appeared to be in a state of concentration that would be enriched by engaging with a peer. Showing the picture to a friend allowed him to share the wonder of the picture, and assumed that Jorge, as his audience, would appreciate the picture as well. This “reading” of pictures constituted a strategy for engaging with the text that allowed for complex translations of meaning between sign systems, or transmediation (Siegel, 1995).

Next, in lines 2 and 3, Daniel engaged in playful talk around the content of the book, telling Jorge that he would like to have a robot dog and to be a robot dog. By performing a robot dog for his friend, including the words a robot dog would say (“woof”), and the gestures he might make (robotic arms), Daniel responded to the text through embodiment, or dramatic play. They were engaged in reading through gesture, play, and engagement with art, all of which are not verbocentric (Kliwer, 2008; Siegel, 1995).
In line 4, again, Daniel asked Jorge to look at the spider robot. It is significant that looking at the pictures was a compelling way for him to “read” the text, and the entry point for learning. The shared experience of reading, in this case, was centered around engagement with and appreciation of pictures. Because Jorge would have found the written text challenging to read quickly, if at all, at this point in the year, engaging with the content of the book through the pictures allowed him access to nonfiction reading.

It seems that having someone to share the reading experience was integral to helping both boys comprehend the text, and therefore access the curriculum and identities as successful readers. In the days following this interaction, Jorge flipped through the book on robots on three different occasions, and he worked with me on decoding some of the written text in the captions for the pictures. He seemed motivated and interested to read this book, in part because of the interactions with Daniel.

When Daniel showed Jorge the picture of the spider robot, Jorge responded with an enthusiastic “whoa” but then immediately looked around the room to find his teacher, because he seemed aware that he was not supposed to be talking (line 5). Even though she did not stop them, he understood the classroom expectations for when it was appropriate to talk or when silence was the norm. The authoritative discourse of the rules seemed to have become internalized, and it manifested in his self-monitoring behavior (Bakhtin, 1981). In an effort to conform to the quiet norm for successful reading during independent reading time, Jorge decided to tell Daniel, “shhh” (line 7) but also took out a comic, which was not one of his leveled reading books. Although Kathy did allow students to read “choice books” sometimes, she had recently reminded Jorge that in order to improve at reading, he would need to spend more time reading his “just-right” books. Taking out the comic was an elision of the rules around reading leveled books, and it showed that the authoritative discourse, in this case, was trumped by his internally persuasive discourse around the appeal of comics and his desire to connect with his friend over this comic. By taking out his comic, he positioned himself as a member of a group who enjoys—and is expert in—the Dragon Ball Z series. He repositioned himself away from his status as a “low” reader, reading level C texts, towards being an avid—and capable—reader of complex, popular, multimodal Dragon Ball Z texts.

In line 8, Daniel said, “Can I borrow that one later?” when he saw Jorge’s comic. Daniel, too, positioned himself as part of their group of people who enjoyed and were expert in comics. His speech also indicated that the two have a history of sharing comics and talking about them. Daniel did not appear to take offense to Jorge telling him to “shhh,” and he cooperated by leaving Jorge’s space to go back to his seat. I observed a pattern of talk in the classroom between students where many students would get upset if another child asked them to be quiet, resisting the disciplining discourse of a peer. But Daniel’s sole interest seemed to be in sharing learning and information with Jorge, and he did not seem upset by Jorge’s “shhh.” His reference to the future when he used the word later (line 8) indicated that he hoped to continue interacting with Jorge later and that he thought it was okay to be quiet now. The boys were navigating the internally persuasive pull to read books of interest with a friend with the more externally persuasive classroom norms and rules.

**Norms for Classroom Talk: Creating and Constraining Spaces for Reading**

Another student in this speech event, Alex, had been listening in on Daniel and Jorge’s exchange about the robot book, which we see as he interjects in Line 9. Alex tried to discipline Jorge by reminding him that, “Ms. Topaz said you have to read your level books” (line 9). His talk here reflected Kathy’s usual talk about classroom rules, as he
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assumed the role of disciplining his fellow student by evoking the authoritative discourse around reading “just-right” books. In effect, Alex used this disciplining discourse to try to limit the ways Jorge was engaging with reading so that he complied with what Alex had internalized as the classroom norms around reading leveled texts. Jorge replied to Alex with shhh, telling him both to stop talking, and to stop reprimanding him. By telling Alex to shhh, as when he told Daniel to shhh, Jorge was appropriating the word used by Kathy and other students when instructing others to be quiet while reading. He was also attempting to stop Alex from “bossing him around,” which he told me that Alex often did (Informal Conversation, December 22, 2011). Jorge pushed back on the authoritative Discourse of reading leveled texts by resisting Alex’s “bossing” of him. So for Jorge, here, talking about reading involved silencing of others because the norm in the classroom was to be quiet during reading. Also, he did not appreciate Alex’s reminding him of the teacher’s instructions. The shut up he says in line 12 seemed to reflect Jorge’s frustration, and perhaps anger or shame, about the leveling Discourse wherein he was a level C reader and Alex was at a level F. Alex’s reproduction of a positivist Discourse of literacy seemed to try to limit the possible ways Jorge could engage with reading. This interaction had emotional repercussions for Jorge, as I believe shut up conveyed. However, after he said shut up, Jorge did go back to reading his leveled book even though he had resisted Alex’s instructions. He was commanded by his own internal persuasion to conform to classroom norms, which had perhaps been strengthened by Alex’s reminders.

Although Jorge seemed to disengage during much of the reading work that Kathy assigned for him, in other moments, especially when talking with Daniel, he exerted his agency to seek out engagement with reading that was internally persuasive to him (Bakhtin, 1981). Thus, sometimes supported by Kathy’s flexible implementation of the rules, the boys created spaces to engage with reading even amidst classroom norms for reading that emphasized leveling and quiet. Kathy explained to me that when students were prohibited from pursuing books not on their level, many students expressed discouragement and discontent, and also became preoccupied with their reading levels and those of their peers. Kathy said:

My non-negotiables are that kids need to be reading and they need to like reading. It is my job to get them reading and help them like reading, and I think it is important that they can pursue reading books for purposes that are meaningful to them, such as interest in a topic or socializing with peers.”

(Interview, November 18, 2011).

Such a focus on multiple purposes for reading illustrates how Kathy consciously made decisions to set purposes for reading for students, and to provide multiple ways to engage with reading.

At the beginning of the school year, Kathy rarely assigned Jorge and Daniel to work together, yet they still sought each other out before Morning Meeting, between subjects, and sometimes during Independent Reading time to engage in discussions about animal or science-related texts like the robot book, and also about comics like Dragon Ball Z. They did not police each other’s transgressions from classroom norms, as when they both were supposed to be reading leveled texts but were instead talking about several books at once. At other times during the school day, and in other literacy practices, as I have argued, Jorge was positioned as a “low” reader through the leveling and testing-related Discourses. Through interactions with Daniel, he could transcend these labels and read and discuss texts of interest with a trusted ally, thus finding a new positioning for himself as a capable and insightful reader in those moments.
Discussion and Implications

The purpose of this study was to examine the opportunities for students’ engagement with reading produced through talk in one fourth-grade classroom labeled as “inclusive” by the administration of the school and the teacher. For Jorge, Daniel, and their peers, reading involved an enactment of and negotiation of both reading skills and peer relationships. Students’ social and academic considerations were intertwined, and should be studied together when investigating “inclusively oriented practices” (Naraian, 2014, p.1).

Not every peer relationship enabled an increase of opportunities to be regarded as a capable reader. It is significant that Daniel and Jorge seemed to regard each other as valued allies, as they sought each other out to share interesting texts and sometimes angled their conversation away from other peers in order to engage together. The social tensions that arose for Jorge, in particular, seemed to be associated with leveling Discourses that emphasized his “low” status as a reader. For instance, Alex tried to discipline Jorge when he was not reading leveled books, reminding him of the “level C” books he should be reading, thus also evoking a leveling Discourse and creating a tension with Jorge. In contrast with Alex’s leveling discourse, Jorge and Daniel’s talk, specifically around multimodal texts, comics and picture books, afforded rich opportunities for engagement with reading and enactments where they were regarded as valued community members and competent readers.

Even though Kathy did not witness all of their supportive interactions with each other around reading because she inevitably had to divide her time among students, she did recognize how Daniel and Jorge’s interactions seemed to support Jorge’s identity as a reader as well as his development of higher order comprehension skills. The interactions supported Daniel’s engagement as well, but she was especially concerned about Jorge because he was so far “behind” in terms of his levels, scores, and motivation to read.

After observing their supportive relationship, in January Kathy assigned Jorge and Daniel to be more regular “Turn and Talk” partners during Morning Meeting, and she allowed them to be official partners again when the class studied nonfiction reading strategies and research of animal habitats in a literacy and science interdisciplinary unit in March. She built on their preferred multimodal reading practices of science-related books like the robot book by having them watch National Geographic video clips as a part of a nonfiction reading unit, for example. During conversations about these video texts, Kathy engaged students in discussions of the content and structure of the video, including interpretations of the pictures, music, spoken and subtitled words, and editing moves made by the text-maker. Thus, Kathy supported students’ comprehension skills while also affirming and building up their identities as capable readers.

The students’ talk about reading shows that they sought out engagement with reading whether or not it was directed or supervised by their teacher. As a researcher, I had the privilege to observe those interactions while the teacher was sometimes otherwise occupied with the myriad of responsibilities she attended to each day. If teachers pay close attention to students’ interactions with each other — through practitioner research, for example, which I describe later in this section (Campano & Simon, 2010) — they can then create reading curricula that builds upon students’ experiences, interests, experiences, and initiations.

For example, it is important that teachers study supportive peer relationships when they occur, as Kathy did in the case of Jorge and Daniel. Such social partnerships have the
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potential to create entry points into the curriculum and contexts for engagement for students who are otherwise marginalized or labeled as “struggling.” In contrast, assigned partnerships sometimes constrain students’ learning and engagement with reading because they became focused on social tensions, competition, comparison, and unkind words. Teachers need to be cautious when assigning leveled reading partners, or any kind of partnership that does not change, so that these relationships do not become just another way to sort and track students. If level-based partnerships are a required school practice, and the students are resisting working together, teachers can provide support for their social engagement as well as multiple opportunities to also work with a variety of other students for a variety of purposes (Peterson, 2016). Partnerships do not automatically produce trusting, productive, and enjoyable interactions for students; sometimes partnerships produce a web of tensions, misunderstandings, and rejections instead (Bomer & Laman, 2004; Christianakis, 2010).

In her ethnographic study of students’ peer relationships during Writing Workshop, Mary Christianakis (2010) asserted that effective peer dialogic collaboration requires that students work within a “fluid horizontal expertise structure” (p. 447) similar to how Daniel and Jorge recognized each other as capable and even expert readers of information. Thus, in order to avoid students’ merely seeking to solidify classroom social hierarchies as a part of their engagement with reading, teachers need to spend time (through classroom talk) making children “accessible” to one another in ways that construct each student as capable and able to contribute in valuable ways (Naraian, 2014). Naraian describes “relational accessibility” as “a form of knowing the person that is situated outside the discourse on measurement in which educators are compulsorily situated” (p. 18.). In other words, promoting relational accessibility between peers discursively produces knowledge about children through conversation that does not rely on references to levels and scores, but rather on a wider range of attributes, experiences, and interests that help students to “know” each other. Daniel and Jorge’s friendship enabled them to “know” each other as valued allies and capable readers without an emphasis on their levels and scores.

One way to support teachers’ reflective practices about inclusive literacy instruction is to teach practitioner research methods (Campano & Simon, 2010) to preservice and in-service teachers. Practitioner research methods involve teachers identifying conundrums or questions they have about their teaching by first observing in a detailed manner how their students interact and engage in the classroom and then reading related professional research that might help them try out new ways of teaching and responding to students. In this way, teachers increase their awareness of the particularities and nuances of their classroom and students. Campano and Simon argue that practitioner research might help teachers to resist the normal curve, or the “ideology of what is ‘normal’ in education as more than a bad or unjust idea that merely needs to be debunked” (2010, p. 222). They suggest that what is “normal” is deeply inscribed in all social practices and policies that shape education, but that teachers, through their “intuitive understandings of how the idea of normal is reductive insufficient and counter-productive” (p. 222) might reshape cultural understandings of normalcy by enacting more democratic arrangements and practices in schools. Examining classroom interactions “from the thick of things,” as they say, gives teachers-as-researchers opportunities to develop understandings and practices that move beyond labels and levels to more complex understandings of individuals and social spaces.
Conclusion

In conclusion, scholars working from a DSE perspective have argued that inclusion is not a material place but a social space that disrupts the oppressive discourses that limit students’ learning and personhood. Yet, this vision of inclusivity is daunting in a policy climate in which accountability is treated as the lever for educational equity. In contrast to the imagined, ideal “inclusive” classroom (Graham & Slee, 2008), the portrait I have constructed of Kathy’s classroom offers a more complex image of inclusivity, one produced by the intersection of Kathy’s view of reading and the ways that she and the students connected reading practices with social practices. Kathy could not avoid reproducing some positivist Discourses of ability or assessment when the curricular policy demanded it, but she managed to make room to expand the possibilities of reading and personhood for her students by noting how they were already engaging with texts and including their peers, as in the case of Jorge and Daniel. This discussion of peers making space for each other as capable readers and valued allies at the margins of the Reading Workshop shows that the discursive processes of inclusion were delicate and always in motion, but it may offer an image within reach to more teachers than one that is ideal but elusive. Marginalized readers can be effectively included in Readers Workshop when they are provided space to engage with texts with their peers and when the teacher notices and flexibly supports this engagement.

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