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Comparing Student Experiences with Story Discussions in Dialogic Versus Traditional Settings

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ABSTRACT. The authors examined the testimonials of 60 elementary school students about their experience during class discussions of assigned readings. They randomly assigned 12 classrooms to 2 treatments: Philosophy for Children (P4C) and Regular Instruction. P4C is an alternative educational environment that places dialogue at the center of its pedagogy. Ten students from each classroom were interviewed. According to the results, significantly more P4C students stated that they enjoyed expressing disagreement with peers, taking on new responsibilities, and explaining their thinking to others. More P4C students complained about the difficulties with getting the floor to speak, and suggested that changes are needed to better balance group participation. The authors discuss these findings and suggest implications for research and teaching.

Keywords: dialogic teaching, educational innovations, student perspectives

Contemporary scholarship suggests that higher goals of education, such as the development of rational and independent thinking, are best achieved through dialogic teaching—a pedagogical approach that involves students in the collaborative construction of meaning and is characterized by shared control over the key aspects of classroom communication (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Murphy, Soter, Wilkinson, Hennessey, & Alexander, 2009; Reznitskaya et al., 2009; Sprod, 1998; Webb, 2009). In a dialogic classroom, teachers and students act as coinquirers into complex issues, as they share responsibilities for managing group participation, asking questions, and evaluating each other's judgments through reasoning and reflection (Alexander, 2008; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Nystrand, Wu, Gamoran, Zeiser, & Long, 2003; Soter et al., 2008). This approach to teaching differs considerably from traditional, monologic instruction, characterized by “closed teacher questions, brief recall answers and minimal feedback that requires children to report someone else's thinking rather than to think for themselves” (Alexander, 2008, p. 93). However, despite the recognized theoretical potential of dialogic teaching and the emerg-

ing evidence connecting it to important learning outcomes (Gregory, 2007; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Reznitskaya et al., 2009; Soter et al., 2008; Wegerif, Mercer, & Dawes, 1999), numerous studies continue to document that it is largely missing from today's classrooms (e.g., Alvermann, O'Brien, & Dillon, 1990; Galton, 2007; Nystrand et al., 2003; Smith, Hardman, Wall, & Mroz, 2004). For example, in a recent study of more than 200 American classrooms, Nystrand et al. (2003, p. 173) found that dialogic exchanges were absent from more than 90% of observed interactions.

To engage in a more regular use of dialogic teaching, practitioners need to have a rich, data-based understanding of how it functions in a typical classroom. In recent decades, researchers conducted studies to examine the properties of classroom discourse (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Chinn & Anderson, 1998; Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000; Nystrand et al., 2003; Soter et al., 2008). In addition, they analyzed individual learning gains resulting from student engagement in dialogic discussions (e.g., Kuhn, Shaw, & Felton, 1997; Morehouse & Williams, 1998; Murphy et al., 2009; Reznitskaya et al., 2001; Shipman, 1979). However, to date only a few studies systematically investigated student perceptions of dialogic pedagogy. For example, in a study of an approach called Questioning the Author, Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, and Worthy (1996) asked students to reflect on the reasons why they talked during the discussions. Student answers revealed that they valued the opportunity to collectively make sense of the readings and that they appreciated the importance of debating ideas with others. Similarly, in a large-scale evaluation of another dialogic approach, Philosophy for Children (P4C), Jackson (1993) documented that students enjoyed the program and saw themselves as “better thinkers” as a result of participating in P4C sessions.

Students are often considered a valuable source of information regarding educational innovations (Brooker &

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Macdonald, 1999; Fletcher, 2005; Flutter & Rudduck, 2004; Follman, 1995). Viewed as the most legitimate stakeholders and expert witnesses, students can offer unique insights about the realities of classroom experience and suggest improvements to teaching practices. At the same time, it is important to consider the ability of students to adequately perceive and judge innovative pedagogical approaches (Follman, 1995). It is also important to avoid an overly romantic view of student opinions as necessarily valid and flawless (Nieto, 1994). What can be learned from examining the testimonials of elementary school students in dialogic versus traditional classrooms? Can students reflect on distinct, but not necessarily obvious, features of their educational environments? These questions remain unanswered, because the research on student perceptions in relation to dialogic teaching is very limited. Especially missing are studies where student experiences of dialogic teaching are contrasted with more traditional approaches to instruction, such as recitation. In this article we aim to address this gap in knowledge by systematically comparing the interview responses of elementary students in dialogic versus more traditional classrooms during the discussions of assigned readings. The purpose of examining student perceptions in two settings is to gain a more nuanced understanding of dialogic teaching: the analysis of the differences in student testimonials can focus teachers' attention on both problematic and successful features of this practice; it can suggest the areas that require improvement, which are informed by the first-hand experiences of those who are directly and personally affected by this new method—the students themselves.

Method

Participants

The data for the present research came, in part, from a related study on the effectiveness of dialogic instruction (Reznitskaya et al., 2012). Teachers and students from 12 fifth-grade classrooms from two public school districts in northern New Jersey participated in this research. Both school districts were located in an urbanized area outside of New York City with a predominately white population earning a median household income above the national average (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The average number of children in each class was 22, ranging from 17 to 28 students.

Design

In the present study we used a mixed-methods design, which combines the features of quantitative and qualitative research. For example, part of the study was conducted as a quasi-experiment to compare student perceptions in dialogic versus traditional settings. We also chose to use qualitative data collection methods, such as interviews, in order to gather intensive, rich verbal data on student experiences. To analyze interview responses, we then relied

primarily on quantitative content analysis (QCA; Krippendorff, 2004; Roberts, 2000). Originally defined by Berelson (1954), QCA is a systematic, replicable, code-based description of communication content. As applied in this study, it involved (a) segmenting interview responses into meaningful units, (b) classifying the units into distinct themes, and (c) analyzing the frequency of the themes. We chose to transform verbal data into numerical form to take advantage of the benefits typically associated with quantitative research. These benefits include (a) systematic reporting on the entire dataset, rather than selected examples, and (b) the use of mathematical comparisons for discovering useful generalizations (Chinn, 2006).

Procedure

As part of the quasi-experimental strategy, 12 intact classrooms were randomly assigned to two treatment conditions: Regular Instruction (REG) and P4C. There were 125 students in REG and 138 students in P4C classrooms. Participants in both treatment groups were similar in terms of their demographic characteristics and reading abilities. The mean score for the REG group on the comprehension section of the Metropolitan Achievement Tests (MAT; Harcourt, 2000) administered at the beginning of the study was 39.2 ($SD = 6.5$). The P4C group's mean was 38.9 ($SD = 7.8$).

During the experimental part of the study, students in both REG and P4C classrooms met once a week for 12 weeks to participate in literature discussions of assigned readings. Each discussion lasted for approximately 40 min. In the REG condition, the discussions were conducted by six classroom teachers, who used their regular teaching materials and methods. Three REG teachers had bachelor's degrees in education, and the other three teachers had completed their master's degrees. Their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 23 years. In the P4C condition, literature discussions were facilitated by three visiting teachers, who used P4C curriculum and pedagogy. Two of these teachers were advanced doctoral students, working on their EdD in pedagogy and philosophy. Both had more than 5 years of P4C teaching experience. The third P4C teacher was a full professor in education with 18 years of practice with P4C pedagogy. All three facilitators were judged by their peers to be skilled at using P4C.

P4C is an established educational model that places dialogue at the center of its pedagogy. Its goal is to help children "learn the art of deliberation and dialogue and come to gain practice in the making of good judgments" (Splitter & Sharp, 1996, p. 9). P4C is developed, implemented, and promoted by the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children (IAPC). IAPC publishes more than 20 curriculum texts, including children's novels and teacher manuals (e.g., Lipman, 1981, 1982). It offers educational programs and courses that introduce students to the curriculum materials, pedagogical practices, and underlying theoretical tenets.

The conceptualization and development of P4C as a classroom practice has been greatly influenced by the works of several scholars within the sociocultural tradition, including Vygotsky, Mead, and Bruner (e.g., Lipman, 1988; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyon, 1980). Sociocultural theorists emphasize the centrality of social interaction in cognitive development and stress the active role of learners in discovering new meanings (e.g., Mead, 1962; Vygotsky, 1968; Wells, 1999). In a typical P4C session, children first read or act out an episode from one of the P4C novels. Children then collectively establish an agenda for the discussion and spend the rest of the session participating in a classroom dialogue. P4C teachers facilitate these dialogues by helping students pay attention to the quality of their reasoning, the inclusiveness of their group interactions, and the progress of their inquiry—from contestable questions to reasoned judgments. Teachers in P4C classrooms shift from “being *the* authority” to “being *in* authority” (Young, 1992, p. 103) and participate as “more knowledgeable peers” in collaborative meaning-making activities with their students.

P4C was chosen as an experimental treatment for this study because it fully exemplifies dialogic teaching and has substantial pedagogical and theoretical foundations (Gregory, 2006; Lipman, 1988; Lipman & Sharp, 1994; Reed & Sharp, 1996). From a practical standpoint, the authors of this article are affiliated with the IAPC and have unique access to its resources. Furthermore, despite extensive empirical research on P4C and generally positive educational outcomes associated with this model (for reviews, see García-Moriyón, Rebollo, & Colom, 2005; IAPC, 1986, 1991), there remains a substantial need for methodologically sound investigations because many previous studies did not follow or report a thorough, planned, methodical process of data collection, analysis, and interpretation (García-Moriyón et al., 2005). In several articles focused on student experiences with P4C discussions, authors presented essentially anecdotal accounts of student perspectives, by discussing overall impressions, often illustrated with select quotes from the students (e.g., Burnes, 1981; Fisher, 2001; Kyle, 1983; Northern Territory Department of Education, 1991). Thus, in addition to informing research on dialogic teaching and learning, in the present study we also aimed to add to the existing body of knowledge related specifically to P4C practice by conducting a systematic examination of student views and offering a comparative analysis of the differences in the perceived experiences of students from P4C versus REG classrooms.

In our previous investigation of classroom talk reported elsewhere (Reznitskaya et al., 2012), we examined the differences between P4C and REG classrooms using 20 discourse variables. Our study shows that P4C teachers succeeded in creating classrooms where students experienced characteristically dialogic teaching. Teachers in the P4C classrooms generally talked less than teachers in the REG classrooms: This difference was especially pronounced in relation to nominating students and asking questions. In the P4C classrooms, students exercised more control over

group interactions by having more turns, asking more questions, and managing turn taking. Furthermore, P4C classrooms were characterized by more student-to-student turn sequences without intervention from the teacher.

Teachers in the P4C classrooms asked more fundamentally open and divergent questions, as well as questions that encouraged metacognitive reflection. In contrast, REG teachers mostly focused on questions designed to test basic comprehension of the assigned readings. P4C students had more responses that consisted of lengthy explanations and reasoning, while students in REG classrooms presented more descriptive accounts of specific facts by, for example, retelling events from the story. The quantitative differences in these discourse features were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

The qualitative analysis of the following two excerpts from P4C and REG classrooms illustrates the differences between the treatment conditions observed in our research. In the first excerpt from a P4C classroom, students discuss a story called *Nous* (Lipman, 1996). In the story, an intelligent giraffe, capable of communicating with humans, has to decide whether she should be living with people or with regular giraffes in the zoo. Consistent with the typical procedures of P4C pedagogy, students suggested the discussion topic by voting on the central question, “Do we need to go to school in order to learn?”

Teacher: You don't really need it [school]?

Sam: Yeah, like you could learn it—you could always learn from somebody else who already knows about it. You don't always have to learn at school. . . . Molly.

Molly: Well, if you're learning social studies, colonial times. And then you go to—you work at a computer, like you work with computers, how is the social studies going to help you with computers? You would just need to use something else. Like something else would need to help you.

Teacher: Now, you should be looking at Sam, not at me, alright? Because you're responding to—

Molly: I'm agreeing with him.

Teacher: You're agreeing with him?

Molly: Yeah.

Teacher: And how are you agreeing with Sam?

Molly: Wait, I'm confused.

Teacher: Well, maybe—maybe somebody, can help. How, how is she agreeing with Sam?

Sally: I'm not really sure.

Teacher: Well let's, let's retrace. Lenny?

Lenny: I think I know why she's agreeing with him. Because I think you're saying that if you want to go for one goal, like being a computer—become computer wiz or something like that, you won't have to go to school and learn everything else. You just want to be a computer—you can just learn from somebody that already knows it, and then you won't have to go to school.

Teacher: OK, and this is Sam's point. That school is not necessary for picking—for things getting passed on to you. You can go find somebody else who can pass it on to you. And you're agreeing? [pointing at Molly]

Molly: Yes, that's what I meant. It just came out— [makes circular hand motion]

Teacher: OK. Thank you.

Sally: I think I have a question. Well, you guys were saying that we need to go to school to learn things, to know how to do things. But how about—who was the first person who learned how to do things? Like there was no school before, and then they started to go to school because people started to learn how to do things. But, if there weren't no school before, and people survived, and keep learning how to do many things, I don't understand why we need it.

Teacher: Let, let's stick with the medical example too, OK? The doctor example.

Sally: Yeah, and they didn't go to school when they first found how to make a medicine. They just found it, like Kathy said.

Kathy: I am so confused what you just said. I have, like, no clue.

Teacher: You need a clarification?

Kathy: Yeah.

Teacher: Could somebody clarify what Sally said?

Mick: I think what Sally was saying and asking was how, how the cavemen learned, they weren't in school.

In this P4C classroom, the group engages in a collaborative search for a better understanding of a contestable question. The question about the need for formal schooling reflects the interests of the students and has no simple answer known to the teacher or anyone else in the group. Student contributions during the discussion represent interrelated attempts to advance the group's reasoning to have a more complete understanding of relevant viewpoints. The participation structure is balanced, as the teacher does not have full control over the flow of the discussion and students take on key responsibilities for navigating the dialogue. For example, Sam nominates Molly to speak next and Sally introduces a new topic by asking the question "But how about—who was the first person who learned how to do things?" During the discussion, group members provide elaborate explanations of their thinking, stating their positions (i.e., "You don't always have to learn at school"), supporting them with reasons (i.e., "You could always learn from somebody else who already knows about it"), giving examples (i.e., "How is the social studies going to help you with computers?"), and proposing alternative viewpoints (i.e., "But, if there weren't no school before, and people survived, and keep learning how to do many things, I don't understand why we need it"). The teacher does not tell students what to think: his comments relate exclusively to the procedural aspects of the discussion. For example, he asks students to clarify their statements, relates student contributions to each other, and summarizes what has been said before. The teacher also regularly prompts students to react to others' ideas; as a result, their contributions are marked by references to the ideas of others (i.e., "I think I know why she's agreeing with him. . ."; "I think what Sam was saying and asking was. . ."; "Well, you guys were saying that. . ."). Thus, students' thinking is informed and transformed by the ideas of their peers.

A quite different picture transpires in the following excerpt from the REG classroom. Students are discussing a Native American tale from the McGraw-Hill Basal Reader (Flood et al., 2001) about a young man who showed kindness to two eagles. In return, the eagles saved the man's life by carrying him to safety.

Teacher: They found the eagles on the cliff. Okay. Alright. So as we read on, did he see the color of the eagles' feathers? Yes or no, and how do you know? Tasinagi, did he see the color, the red color on the eagles' feathers? Yes or no, Donna?

Donna: Yes?

Teacher: No, he actually didn't, because he asks Chano if he's sure that he sees red, because very what? Very few people what?

Donna: See it.

Teacher: See, right.

Donna: It's only few people have seen it.

Teacher: Only few people see red, so he really didn't think that that was true, that was correct about that. . . Um, when Chano confirms that he saw red, he says that seeing the color red is what? Is it a good sign for Chano, or is it a bad sign?

Jon: It's good luck. . . good luck.

Teacher: It's a good sign. It's a good luck. What could go wrong with Tonweya's plan to lower himself down to the eagle's nest? What actually happened now, about the cliff? Tell me about what happened on the cliff and the eagles, Melissa?

Melissa: He was climbing up to get the eagles so he can get the feathers for every warrior, but the rope broke and he got stuck on the cliff.

Teacher: Okay. So now he got stuck on the cliff. So now what? That's a big problem. . . But, first of all, why did he want to reach the eagles? Gabriel?

Gabriel: Because he wanted to bring them back to his tribe so that everyone would have, like, a feather for everybody.

Teacher: Okay. He didn't want to bring the eagles back. He wanted to bring what back, Trisha?

Trisha: The feathers.

Teacher: The feathers. For what? What's it called? For what headgear? Who's that person? What are they called? Andrew?

Andrew: The chief.

Teacher: The chief. The— starts with a W.

Jack: Warriors.

Teacher: Warriors. For the warriors' headgear. And what problem did he reach, um, when he was trying to reach the eagles again? He got what, Marla?

Marla: The rope, it was broke.

Teacher: It broke.

Marla: And he fell down.

Teacher: Okay. And he, he got stuck. So he wants to reach the eaglets. The nest is very high up on top of the mountain top. And what does he use to lower himself? What was the resource that he used?

Jeff: A ladder.

Teacher: Made out of what? Dalia?

Donna: Buffalo skin.

The previous discussion proceeds according to the familiar recitation sequence, which has been well documented as the prevalent mode of classroom communication (e.g., Alexander, 2008; Henning & Lockhart, 2003; Mehan, 1998; Nystrand et al., 2003; Onosko, 1990). The teacher asks a series of questions that prompt for recall and basic interpretation of the facts from the story. These are not authentic questions, because the teacher already knows all the answers. Students respond with short and simple statements, often consisting of a single word or phrase (e.g., "the chief," "warriors," "buffalo skin," "a ladder"). The teacher is the ultimate source of authority and expertise when evaluating students' responses. She moves rapidly from student to student, focusing on perfunctory participation at the expense of deep intellectual engagement. There are no peer-to-peer exchanges, and all

communications are mediated by the teacher. The teacher controls both the content and the form of the discussion by initiating topical shifts, choosing the questions, correcting the answers, and calling on students to respond.

Our previous study of classroom discourse documented the presence of important and systematic differences in P4C versus REG classrooms and confirmed that the majority of interactions in REG classrooms tended toward the monologic (Reznitskaya et al., 2012). The goal of the present study was to compare student perceptions of their experiences in the two settings. Ten students from each classroom were selected for individual interviews (60 students from each treatment condition). Two researchers conducted videotaped interviews within two weeks after the treatment was completed. The interview consisted of three questions: (a) What did you like best about the story discussions? (b) What did you like least about the discussions? and (c) What can be done to make the discussions better?

Analysis

Before evaluating student responses, we transcribed the interviews and gave each student an anonymous identification code. Thus, the QCA was conducted by researchers blind to the treatment conditions. We then segmented and coded interviews responses, using an “idea unit” as a unit of analysis. Defined by Mayer (1985), an idea unit “expresses one action or event or state, and generally corresponds to a single verb clause” (p. 71). We used Qualitative Solutions and Research Nvivo 8 computer software (Qualitative Solutions and Research, 2011) to support the analysis. Using QSR Nvivo 8, one can assign a particular code to selected text—such as a student utterance made during an interview—and perform various searches of coded text patterns. An identified and coded word string can be effortlessly placed back into its original context, allowing the researchers to re-examine the function and meaning of the coded utterance. This, in turn, permits the required contextual sensitivity, which is often lacking when natural discourse is fragmented into easily quantifiable segments.

To analyze the interviews, we read an initial sample of interview protocols, looking for recurring themes in student responses. Through this process, we compiled a list of distinct themes in relation to each interview question. The list was refined and expanded through the analysis of additional interview protocols. After several iterations of this process, the changes to the list of themes became infrequent. The first author (Alina Reznitskaya) then coded the entire dataset, using the systematic coding scheme to assign student responses to given theme categories. The second author (Monica Glina) performed the interrater reliability analysis of 30 randomly selected interviews. We used Cohen kappa, available in SPSS software, as a measure of interrater reliability. Kappa coefficients for all theme categories were high, indicating substantial to perfect levels of rater agreement.

Next, we selected 21 common themes for further analysis. A theme was defined as common when it was endorsed by six (10%) or more students in either P4C or REG condition. Table 1 presents the definitions of common themes and related direct quotes from students’ testimonials that exemplify each theme.

We conducted a Pearson chi-square test of statistical significance using SPSS software for each common theme presented in Table 1. Because multiple tests were conducted on the same data, we used a conservative level of Type 1 error, equal to 0.01.

Results

Table 2 summarizes the differences in responses of students in P4C versus the REG condition. It also displays the interrater reliability coefficients for each theme.

In relation to Question 1, the differences in student responses reached statistical significance for three themes. First, P4C students stated more frequently that they enjoyed expressing their *disagreement* and arguing with others. Second, P4C students commented more frequently about the opportunity to take on different *roles* during the discussion, including suggesting discussion topics and nominating students. Third, more P4C students talked about liking to think, explain their views, and reason through questions, a theme we called *thinking*. Although not statistically significant, the differences on the *discussion* and *peer opinions* themes were pronounced and in the expected direction. Specifically, more P4C students found discussions engaging and appreciated the opportunity to hear what their classmates think about the topics discussed. On the other hand, although the difference on *readings* theme did not reach statistical significance, more students in the REG classrooms commented that they enjoyed the assigned *readings*. There were three themes for which the frequency of endorsement was comparable in both treatment conditions: Students stated that discussions provided with opportunities for learning (*help with learning*); they liked interesting meaningful, and relevant discussion *questions*; and they enjoyed sharing their opinions to their classmates (*own opinions*).

For Question 2, statistically significant differences in responses were found for two themes, *length* and *nomination structure*. More REG students experienced discussions as lasting for too long, whereas more P4C students complained about the difficulties they had with getting the floor to speak during the discussion. Again, although the differences on the next four themes—*disagreement*, *lack of participation*, *boredom*, and *readings*—were not statistically significant, they were large enough to be of practical importance. Compared to REG students, 4 times as many P4C students disliked the argumentative nature of the discussions. P4C students also complained much more frequently about their classmates not contributing enough to the discussions. On the other hand, twice as many REG students found the discussions boring and almost twice as many disliked the stories they read.

TABLE 1. Common Coding Themes

Theme	Description	Examples
Question 1: What did you like best about the story discussions?		
Disagreement	Disagreeing and arguing with each other	When we were answering questions, we agreed and disagreed and if we disagreed we would help the question come out more. (P4C) You could kind of contradict . . . and you kind of think of an answer that . . . and you could contradict people and answer questions in your own way. (P4C) I liked it when people, just like when some people disagreed with the other people, because that was the most exciting part, because everybody is really, like, talking and stuff and we only did that in some, so that was the part I liked best. (REG) We can, if we don't agree we can say that "I don't agree and I think this." Yeah. (REG)
Roles	Having more control over the discussion, including the opportunity to decide on questions and nominate peers	That we all got to say in what we would work on and talk about. (P4C) We didn't really have to raise our hands and wait for turns. (P4C) I liked it when she would let us pick let us pick each other out and stuff because some . . . It is just better and stuff. It's just we kind of know who has the really really really good ideas and stuff like that. (P4C) You can be the teacher for once and ask the questions to other students. (REG)
Thinking	Thinking deeper through questions and explaining thinking to others	That you had to explain why. It wasn't just a Yes or No question. You had to state reasons, and you wouldn't just say "yes, no, maybe." (P4C) Just keep thinking about what the answer is. It's just fun to go on and on and on, cause I like to think about some questions. (P4C) I liked it because everyone would say something and would say why they liked it or why they didn't. (REG) Having to think hard of what the answers could be . . . If it kind of involves an open-ended question that you need to think of, not something you can't just look in the book for an answer. (REG)
Discussion	Having fun and engaging discussions	I think it was fun discussing it. (P4C) They're very interesting, and they had a lot of . . . like, you could go into them, and it was really fun. (P4C) I thought it was fun because we all got to sit in a circle, and everything, and we got to discuss the story we all read and liked and that's it. (REG) Just how everyone would just have fun reading it together, and just have fun talking about it with each other. (REG)
Others' opinions	Hearing what peers think about the readings	I like to see how other people think about the situations and see how they figure it out. (P4C) And I loved listening to people just express their feelings cause we never really got to do that in reading, so it was good that we got our opinions out on different topics. (P4C) That we can listen to other people's opinions. (REG) I like how everybody had different opinions, and you know people would say their interest in the story and what they liked and disliked. (REG)
Readings	Having interesting and engaging readings	The story about uh Pixie and how they got the giraffe out of the zoo. (P4C) I liked reading the story. (P4C) I like reading stories, because reading is kind of fun. (REG) I liked reading the stories because every week it was different and I didn't know what was going to happen. (REG)

(Continued on the next page)

TABLE 1. Common Coding Themes (Continued)

Theme	Description	Examples
Help with learning	Having discussions that help with learning and improve understanding	They really helped me form new questions, because I remember in one class I was really very confused, then I asked what this meant, what that meant, and it helped me. (P4C) I guess in a way that it's helping me write, because I always wrote inside the box, like, really just plain basic ideas. But now I think I can do more than that. (P4C) You can learn more when you discuss it with the class, besides just reading it on your own. (REG) It helps you understand the book more sometimes, and you can actually figure out some of the things if you get deeper into the story. And sometimes the pictures in the stories, it's more than meets the eye. So, if we discuss it, it's a little easier to understand something. (REG)
Questions	Having engaging discussion questions	I liked the part where we started talking about, like, if it's right to tell the truth and what is the truth. (P4C) It kind of gives you an open mind to what the possibilities of life could be, like, questions "Do we need to be lazy?" or "Why do we need to kill other animals to survive?" Questions like that really brought my mind to open me to the world. (P4C) I liked it best about hearing the interesting questions people had to give. (REG) Usually our teacher gives us questions, like she asks questions that pertain to the story and to real life, so it is actually kind of cool to relate our life to a story. (REG)
Own opinion	Sharing opinions with others	What I liked best was that we got our ideas out and say it to people. (P4C) That you got to speak your own . . . that you had your own answers. (P4C) That you were being able to share your opinion with other people. (REG) I like how we can all speak freely about what our opinion and what we think. (REG)
Question 2: What did you like least about the discussions?		
Length	Having discussions that lasted for too long	They took up so much time, like, in the class. (P4C) The discussions took a really, really long time. (P4C) I thought they were kind of long. (REG) How long it was. It was pretty long discussion. (REG)
Nomination structure	Having nomination rules that precluded students from participating	What I liked least is that . . . like if I raised my hand, they would just keep calling to the person next to them or their best friends . . . Say, if you have your hand up a lot and they don't call you, then you just forget about it and don't say. (P4C) When new people raised their hands, some people, they don't pick them, they just pick the people that are their friends and everything. Like, when there's a boy up, I mean . . . he'd pick a boy, then it would keep on going until like [Teacher] would say "Pick a girl," or something." (P4C) Some people never would call on you. (P4C) Sometimes, when we were doing it, it's kind of annoying that people wouldn't call on us. (P4C)
Disagreement	Having class members disagree and argue	The arguments. How some people disagree, and then they got in all these fights and things like that. (P4C) When you come up with a great idea, someone just disagrees. So, I don't like that much. (P4C) Some people might have a different opinion than someone else, and they get upset and screaming at the other person. And he screamed back at him. (REG) People have different opinions, and some opinions I didn't agree with. (REG)

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TABLE 1. Common Coding Themes (Continued)

Theme	Description	Examples
Lack of participation	Having classmates that did not contribute to the discussions	That not everyone stated their opinions, and not everyone was getting active in it. (P4C) Only certain people talk. Like, I talked a lot and some other kids talked a lot too. But I did not hear many other kids' opinions, because they didn't raise their hand up. I think I would have liked to hear their opinions. (P4C) The one thing I didn't like was some people that I know could have really come up with some good stuff, they didn't volunteer. (P4C) When . . . we were just sitting there and, like, only two or three hands went up. (REG)
Boredom	Having boring or repetitive discussion topics or questions	Some of the questions were sort of boring. (P4C) Some of the questions, they were dragged out. Like, he would keep going into them and you'd be, like, forty minutes and everybody is kind of bored. (P4C) A lot of questions got repeated . . . A lot of them got repeated. Some of them would say something, and then later on, it would come up in a different way, but the same question. Then, it would take, like, ten minutes talking on that same exact question. (REG) You couldn't even answer the questions. You didn't know what it was about. Cause, I mean, it was like two sentences you could describe about the story, it was so boring. (REG)
Readings	Having boring or confusing readings	I didn't really like the story. (P4C) The book was a little confusing. It was just was a whole huge story and it didn't really go into different things, and it was just hard to keep up with it. (P4C) Some stories were just plain boring. (REG) If it was a boring book. (REG)
Confusion	Having difficult or confusing discussion questions or topics	If you picked a really, really hard one [question]. (P4C) In some of the discussions I got confused. On some talks I got lost, and some things I didn't even understand. (P4C) I don't like when they ask really, really hard questions. (REG) Some of the questions I didn't really get or didn't know. (REG)
Question 3: What can be done to make the discussions better?		
More opportunities to talk	Having more equal opportunities for everyone to participate	I didn't raise my hand as much at all in philosophy, but in some way I was still thinking about it in my mind, and I had everything I wanted to say in my head. And so what we can do better is that we could call on each other and not just the person who had just answered, people who had their hand up a long time and really didn't get to go that much. (P4C) Maybe, have different turns for people to talk, if they want . . . Like, turns, so one person would go, then another person, and just keep going on. (P4C) More possibility to get other people a chance in saying something. (REG) [Have] the people that never said anything to talk and stuff. (REG)
Better readings	Having more engaging stories to read and discuss	Maybe, not longer stories, but just make them more entertaining. You know, put more, better words into it, make it a good story, not just a lot of info. Put some entertaining info and everything. And I mean . . . if it's just going to be information, that's good too. But I think we should have entertainment with the reading. (REG) If there was, like, an action story that talked about action or about the future and the past. (REG) I think sometimes we can have funner stories. (REG)

(Continued on the next page)

TABLE 1. Common Coding Themes (Continued)

Theme	Description	Examples
More supportive groups	Having a more supportive and productive group environment	<p>Maybe, if we read a longer story, because the stories are short and they didn't really have that much detail in textbooks, and if we read a longer story, maybe we could actually get more discussion. (REG)</p> <p>I think that we can take it . . . just be more mature about it, and just think about other people's opinions, and respect their opinions and respect their thoughts. (P4C)</p> <p>Instead of disagreeing all the time, help another person with their opinion or objective . . . By agreeing with their idea or adding something to it that will make it more sophisticated, or to make it better in a way. (P4C)</p> <p>I think we should just hear each other out. Try to piggy back off their ideas and see what would happen, but stay on topic and if someone says something that is a little off topic, try to get it back on topic. (P4C)</p> <p>To listen and not focus on your story. Listen to other people's story to see how you can change your story to make it be more better, make it more good. (REG)</p>
More discussions	Having longer, more frequent opportunities to discuss questions with classmates	<p>I think that if we do it more often and do it in two grades or something and not have it half way through the school year. (P4C)</p> <p>If we have longer classes, more stuff could have gotten said. (P4C)</p> <p>I like them the way that they are, but maybe if we got to talk about it a little bit more. Like, if they were a few minutes longer, talking about them. (REG)</p> <p>Probably if you do it for a longer period of time, or not have a ton of things to do right after this, so then you have more time and if you accidentally go on to the next period, then it is not going to be a problem. (REG)</p>
Better quality of questions	Having more interesting, engaging questions and topics to discuss	<p>Making sure the questions are ones that everybody likes or can get a lot of people to talk, that are actually . . . that a lot of people are interested in. (P4C)</p> <p>Get better questions [that] people would enjoy. Not something about other people. Something you would know about, like school, or something like "why should we be able to play games?" So, stuff we would know. (P4C)</p> <p>We could go around and say what was our favorite part of the book, why did we like this part, what was your favorite character. (REG)</p> <p>Maybe to have it more fun, like, describe it more so that people would know it, like, the questions better. (REG)</p>

Note. P4C = Philosophy for Children; REG = Regular Instruction.

Approximately the same number of students in each condition found discussion topics and questions difficult to understand.

Finally, when asked what could be done to make the discussions better (Question 3), significantly more P4C students mentioned the need to ensure that everyone has an *opportunity to talk* during discussions. Another statistically significant difference was related to the quality of *readings*, with only REG students suggesting that changes are necessary. More P4C students talked about the need for *more supportive groups*, where students work collaboratively and

productively with each other's ideas, although the difference was not statistically significant. Comparable numbers of students from both conditions indicated that they would like to discuss more and to have more interesting topics.

Discussion

Taken together, the results of our study demonstrate that examining elementary school students' perspectives on dialogic versus traditional pedagogical models of reading instruction is a worthwhile endeavor. We were pleased to discover that many students in both treatment conditions were

TABLE 2. Frequencies and Interrater Reliabilities for Common Themes

Theme	P4C	REG	Total	Reliability (kappa)
Question 1: What did you like best about the story discussions?				
Disagreement ^a	17	6	23	0.89
Roles ^a	10	1	11	1
Thinking ^a	16	7	23	0.87
Discussion	20	12	42	0.85
Others' opinions	17	11	28	1
Readings	7	12	19	0.92
Help with learning	8	6	14	0.87
Questions	8	7	15	0.63
Own opinions	17	17	34	1
Question 2: What did you like least about the discussions?				
Length ^a	4	12	16	1
Nomination structure ^a	8	0	8	1
Disagreement	8	2	10	1
Lack of participation	6	1	7	1
Boredom	4	8	12	0.84
Readings	4	7	11	1
Confusion	6	7	13	1
Question 3: What can be done to make the discussions better?				
More opportunities to talk ^a	15	3	18	1
Better readings ^a	0	8	8	1
More supportive groups	6	1	7	0.78
More discussions	4	7	11	1
Better quality of questions	7	6	13	1

Note. P4C = Philosophy for Children; REG = Regular Instruction.

^aThe difference is significant at $\alpha = .01$.

quite reflective about their own learning and were able to articulate unique and deeply personal first-hand experiences that can help to direct the attention of educators to important aspects of instruction. The differences in student responses for several, although not all, common themes were also fully consistent with the fine-grained analysis of the discussion transcripts conducted in our previous study (Reznitskaya et al., 2012). For example, the results of our previous quantitative examination of 36 discussion segments indicate that in P4C classrooms interactions were more balanced, as students took on responsibilities traditionally reserved for the teacher, such as asking questions and managing turn-taking (Reznitskaya et al., 2012). In addition, P4C students also had significantly more responses consisting of lengthy explanations and reasoning, during which students expressed agreement or disagreement with their peers. It is encouraging to see that many P4C students in the present study were not only cognizant of the features of dialogic classrooms just described, but they also enjoyed these patterns, as evidenced by the quantitative results related to *roles*, *disagreement*, and *thinking* themes reported in Table 1, as well as the following illustrative quotes from P4C students:

[I liked] that we could say what we think . . . and we didn't really have to raise our hands and wait for turns, and if someone

disagreed, we can just try to express our opinions and stuff. I liked that part.

I like the discussions because when we were answering questions, we agreed and disagreed and, if we disagreed, we would help the question come out more.

What I liked best was hearing people's different opinions, seeing their way of thinking. Some people agreed, some people disagreed, and some people had very good thoughts, and I loved listening to people just express their feelings, cause we never really got to do that in reading, so it was good that we got our opinions out on different topics.

I liked how we were all so open-minded. I liked how everybody expressed their feelings with passion, and you can really tell that they thought it through. They really put their mind into it and it turned out to be awesome, I think. It was really fun listening to all my friends arguing, and it's not that anybody was right or wrong. It's just that the way we thought really opened up a new path every time. So, it kept it going and it was, I think, a really great experience.

I liked it because everyone could say what they felt and nobody told them it was wrong, well, kind of they did, but it's not like they made them shut their mouths. They were allowed to say whatever they want. People could either disagree or agree. Also, some things I never thought about, the way I thought of some things differently than I used to, and, I guess, in a way, that's helping me write because I always wrote inside the

box, like really just plain basic ideas, but now I think I can do more than that.

These quotes suggest that P4C students enjoyed the freedom to negotiate their own participation, as well as the opportunities to form and articulate their opinions on questions with no predetermined right answers. They appreciated the contributions of others and the capacity of disagreements to “open a new path every time.” Notably, these same features of classroom communication have been shown to promote student learning at the higher levels of cognitive complexity (e.g., Alexander, 2001; Bakhtin, 1984; Mead, 1962; Nystrand et al., 2003). Research on dialogic teaching shows that pedagogically effective classroom discourse is characterized by shared authority, where power relations are flexible and teachers treat students “as potential sources of knowledge and opinion” (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 140; Au & Mason, 1981). Also, dialogic teaching focuses on collaborative inquiry into truly contestable questions that serve to engage students in a meaningful search for new understandings (Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Burbules, 1993; Nystrand, 1997; Splitter & Sharp, 1996). There are strong theoretical arguments for the pedagogical value of these features of classroom discourse (e.g., Burbules, 1993; Lipman, 2003; Mead, 1962; Paul, 1986; Vygotsky, 1968), as well as emerging empirical research connecting them to important learning outcomes (Kuhn & Udell, 2003; Murphy et al., 2009; Reznitskaya et al., 2009). This study adds another piece of evidence to the developing picture of dialogic teaching, suggesting that many, although not all, students enjoy more egalitarian and intellectually stimulating classrooms, where they can have more control over the content and form of communication (*roles*) and think deeper about questions that, in the words of one study participant, “[give] you an open mind to what the possibilities of life could be.” Further, more P4C students experienced their discussions as fun and interesting, whereas twice as many REG students complained that the discussions were boring. Also, significantly more REG students felt that the discussions lasted too long. Because the length of the discussions was the same in both conditions, the difference in the perceptions of length may suggest that dialogic pedagogy was more engaging for the students.

Interestingly, students from REG classrooms expressed similarly positive opinions in relation to such themes as *disagreement*, *roles*, *thinking*, *other’s and own opinions*, and *questions*, although the frequency of REG students’ endorsements of some of these themes was lower. The following are several examples of REG students’ responses:

I like that we get, you get your own free time. You get to read, and then you get to express your opinions, and talk about different questions, like you can be the teacher for once and ask the questions to other students.

We did actually meaningful questions, we actually got to think about, like that story about the slaves and that black people weren’t allowed to vote. We actually got to think about, “is that right or is that wrong?” and those questions

were really . . . not really hard questions to answer, but only because you really had to search down and find if you really agreed or disagreed with the question.

How one person would be like “Oh, I liked it because, like” and they just said their answer and how some people would be like “Oh I don’t like it.” Because usually some people, they’re afraid to state their opinion, but I liked it because everyone would say something and would say why they liked it or why they didn’t.

Similar to their peers from P4C classrooms, REG students seemed to enjoy having more flexible roles in a classroom community (i.e., “you can be the teacher for once and ask the questions to other students”). They also liked to share their own viewpoints, think about “meaningful questions,” and hear the opinions of others. We suggest that the reason for the lower endorsement of themes such as *roles* and *disagreement* reflects the lack of opportunities given to the students in REG classroom to experience different roles or to debate with one another. Consistent with previous research, our analysis of the discussion quality indicates that although students in REG classrooms occasionally engaged in more balanced and intellectually challenging conversations about important topics inspired by the day’s reading, such “dialogic spells” or “shifts from monologic to dialogic discourse” (Nystrand et al., 2003, p. 149) were rare and short-lived (Reznitskaya et al., 2012). It is noteworthy that REG students identified more dialogic features of their classroom experience as their favorite, even though such features occurred less frequently.

Testimonials from P4C students also reveal several aspects of their experience with dialogic teaching that need to be re-examined and improved. Perhaps, the most disconcerting finding was the consistent complaint by P4C students about the difficulties they had with getting the floor to talk (*nomination structure*). This problem was also evident from P4C students’ suggestions to change existing discussion structures and rules to ensure more equal opportunities for participation (*more opportunities to talk*), as evidenced by the following quotes:

I didn’t really enjoy how sometimes, when you raised your hand and the teacher wouldn’t pick you, and I have been raising it for, like, 10 minutes or so, or something like that, and then you just get tired.

Sometimes when we were doing it, it’s kind of annoying that people wouldn’t call on us, but it was fun still, but then the whole time is up.

We can pay attention. Like, first, the teacher can look around and see who has been waiting longer, and that could help us because some of us just there, stand and say, “Oh-oh, pick me please,” for 10 minutes or so. It gets really annoying to see people say, “Oh, pick me.”

I think that maybe they should have separated us into groups of a few people, so everyone would get picked on a few times, and we would still get the same thing done, and maybe you could switch the groups every week.

One straight-forward adjustment to increase and balance individual participation, also suggested by the last student, is to reduce the size of discussion groups. Studies generally find a negative relationship between class size and student engagement (Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, & Pianta, 2007; Finn, Pannozzo, & Achilles, 2003; Wang & Finn, 2000); and some other dialogic approaches to discussion, such as Collaborative Reasoning or Thinking Together, have students discuss stories in small groups or combine whole-class and small group instruction (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Waggoner, Chinn, Yi, & Anderson, 1995). However, having small groups may not always be practical and merely decreasing the group size may not necessarily lead to productive student behaviors. Students need to understand the responsibilities of being a learner in a dialogic classroom, and teachers need to know how to create collaborative classroom communities that accommodate the variety of student personalities, from excessively shy to overly domineering. Unfortunately, very few studies have examined participatory norms and practices in a dialogic classroom and identified instructional strategies that promote equal learning opportunities for students with different individual characteristics, including personality, ability, and motivation. Such studies are rare and continue to be a high priority in research on student engagement (Finn et al., 2003; Kovalainen & Kumpulainen, 2005; Stoeckli, 2009).

Similarly, P4C students more frequently criticized their peers for not contributing to group discussions (*lack of participation*), as shown in the following responses:

Some people didn't even talk once. I didn't really like that.

Not lots of people spoke . . . talked and . . . yeah . . . not a lot of people speak up. Not very much cooperation.

There are a lot of really smart kids that have a lot of really good ideas in this class, but I didn't see too many of them volunteering.

We suggest that dialogic classrooms, which have less focus on individual evaluation and more flexible student roles, may exhibit more "social loafing" or "the reduction in motivation and effort" by individuals working in groups (Karau & Williams, 1993, p. 681). Furthermore, because participation in traditional settings is largely controlled by teachers (e.g., Alexander, 2005; Nystrand, 1997), students in dialogic classrooms may require additional support and relearning to modify their typical behaviors, and not only adopt more active roles in a group discussion, but also be able to address undesirable tendencies of their peers. Although the existence of social loafing is well established, much of the research has been conducted with college students in laboratory settings (e.g., Chidambaram & Lai, 2005; Piezon & Ferree, 2008). We need more studies that examine the mechanisms responsible for potential changes in student motivation in dialogic environments and analyze the ways to improve the group's capacity to self-correct.

Although twice as many P4C students enjoyed the argumentative nature of the discussions (*disagreement*, Question

1), there were also a number of students that disliked disagreement (*disagreement*, Question 2).

Everyone was, like, "No, I disagree. I disagree with you. I disagree with you." Everyone has their own thing to say, but it gets a little like, "Someone just said that."

How people would disagree with each other a little too much and they wouldn't build on each other's answers. They would just state their own opinion instead of adding to another person's.

Sometimes, when we gave an answer, we would argue and then we would never get an answer, so it would take a long time.

It was kind of hard to . . . when you were disagreeing or agreeing. 'Cause people would come up with a lot . . . with better explanations for their side of the question . . . I didn't like it because it was hard to come back from some of the people's questions.

The reasons behind students' discomfort with disagreement seem to vary and possibly include personal preferences, uneasiness or unfamiliarity with novel classroom practices, a lack of understanding of the legitimate role that disagreement plays in inquiry dialogue, or an unsuccessful teacher's facilitation that led to the frustration and hurt feelings. Research has yet to reveal more about the effective use of disagreement in elementary school classrooms, as the experience with contrasting perspectives and the critique of an individual's reasoning have been determined to be essential for supporting student learning in a dialogic classroom (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Bakhtin, 1986; Paul, 1986; Vygotsky, 1968). For example, it is important to better understand how the teacher's ability to embrace respectful and productive disagreement affects student views about the value of controversy. It is also necessary to know how students can be taught to work with each others' opposing viewpoints, as they engage in collaborative meaning-making and build more comprehensive understanding of complex questions.

Conclusion

Student responses to interview questions examined in this study highlight the inherent possibilities and challenges of dialogic teaching. On the positive side, supporters of dialogic instruction will be pleased to see that learners generally enjoy educational environments that are characterized by more flexible participation structures and offer new opportunities to negotiate meanings through social interaction with others. Thus, this study adds another dimension to the emerging argument for the pedagogical value of dialogic teaching—this time, from the perspectives of the main stakeholders in an educational system, the students themselves. Combined with strong theoretical claims about the power of talk to promote the development of students' thinking (Burbules, 1993; Vygotsky, 1968; Wells, 2000) and with evidence showing improvements in students' reasoning following their participation in group discussions (Dong, Anderson, Li, & Kim, 2008; Kuhn & Crowell, 2011;

Mercer et al., 1999; Reznitskaya et al., 2001), this study suggests that students, even at the elementary school level, should be having more control over the flow of class discussions and should be engaging in shared thinking about complex questions. We hope that our findings will inspire practitioners to experiment with their teaching methods, to try out new participatory practices, and to reconsider the typical patterns of classroom discourse. Teachers interested in using dialogue-based pedagogy in their classrooms could explore established instructional approaches that have sound theoretical foundations, as well as related curriculum materials and teacher manuals that support classroom applications (e.g., Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Splitter & Sharp, 1996; Trickey & Topping, 2004; Waggoner et al., 1995; Wegerif, 2010). A website, recently constructed through collaboration between the Ohio State and Penn State Universities (Wilkinson, Soter, & Murphy, 2010), provides information about these pedagogical innovations, including Philosophy for Children—Community of Inquiry (Gregory, 2006; Lipman et al., 1980), Collaborative Reasoning (Waggoner et al., 1995), Instructional Conversations (Tharp & Gallimore, 1991), and Thinking Together (Dawes, Mercer, & Wegerif, 2003).

On the other hand, our findings underscore the complexity of using dialogic teaching in a typical classroom. Despite the extensive preparation and experience of P4C teachers, some students in our study felt excluded, whereas others complained about the lack of group cooperation and their discomfort with disagreement. Literature on P4C pedagogy suggests various strategies for addressing problems with participation and insufficient mutual support by class members, and it provides various recommendations for accommodating unique needs and preferences of individual students (Gregory, 2008; Lipman, Sharp, & Oscanyon, 1984; Splitter & Sharp, 1996). For example, class participants are encouraged to engage in self-evaluation at the end of P4C sessions, by reflecting on questions such as “Were we listening to each other today?”, “Did most of us talk or only a few people?”, “Were we respectful in our disagreements today?” (Gregory, 2008). However, there are no clear-cut solutions for helping a diverse body of students learn to become a self-correcting classroom community that can “take responsibility for its own procedures, including a sense of care for each and every participant” (Splitter & Sharp, 1996, p. 307). To develop into such a community, all classroom participants need to continually reflect on existing social norms and language practices and to modify their roles, rights, and responsibilities to support respectful and rigorous inquiry. This transition from a traditional to a dialogic classroom may be challenging and uncomfortable for teachers and students. Yet, the difficulties with dialogic pedagogy should not lead us to abandon this practice, especially if we consider the potential it has to create authentic, inclusive, and intellectually rewarding classroom experiences. In the words of Burbules (1993),

We engage in dialogical approaches not because they are methods guaranteed to succeed, but fundamentally because we are drawn to the spirit of equality, mutuality, and cooperation that animates them. (p. 143)

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