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# Factors That Influence Teachers' Use, Or Non-Use, Of Small Group Discussion

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**FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TEACHERS' USE, OR NON-USE,  
OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

by

**JULIANNE SNIDER**

**DISSERTATION**

Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

**DOCTOR OF EDUCATION**

2016

MAJOR: READING, LITERATURE, AND  
LANGUAGE

Approved By:

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Advisor

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## DEDICATION

I choose to dedicate this work to my mother, Lois C. Dalak, whose words have made all my best works possible, all my failings survivable:

“Well, you do the best you can, and that’s all you can do.”

Thank you, Mom.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### Background

Effective literacy instruction to meet the needs of students, schools, and communities includes development of abilities to read, interpret the text, and discuss interpretations of that text. Literacy instruction approaches that include small group discussion support this learning goal. However, small group discussion is an approach rarely used by classroom teachers.

The State of Michigan has adopted the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) (NGA Center for Best Practices, 2010); therefore, all Michigan teachers are designing and re-designing what and how they teach to meet those standards. CCSS was implemented in the State of Michigan in the 2013-2014 school year and presently these standards are adopted by all but four states. For English teachers the CCSS include more complex reading skills to meet the identified College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards. For sixth through twelfth grade students, these standards include:

- Determine explicit and inferred text meaning,
- Cite specific text as evidence,
- Determine central ideas and themes,
- Analyze how characters, events and ideas develop and interact with the development of the plot,
- Interpret word meaning, connotative and figurative text meanings,
- Analyze how word choice shapes text meaning and tone, and
- Assess how point of view or author's purpose shape the content and text style.

CCSS criteria specify the significance of “cultivating student responsibility and independence” of these abilities by engaging students in discursive practice, with “opportunities for students to participate in real, substantive discussions that require them to respond directly to the ideas of their peers” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 8).

I am a Michigan secondary English teacher and a doctoral student. Not only did my doctoral studies include a focus on discursive approaches to literacy learning, my experiences

as a doctoral student were largely discursive in approach. As we read, studied, and discussed cognitive, socio-cognitive, and socio-cultural learning theories, our class-time provided us living laboratories of those discursive approaches. My fellow doctoral students and I simultaneously learned of and experienced discursive literacy approaches that supported the higher reading skills delineated in the CCSS. We learned first hand the power of collaboratively making meaning of text as we shared our responses to the literature we read. This led me to my dissertation topic and an interesting conflict... If discursive literacy approaches, like student-led small group discussions, are effective teaching approaches and known by teachers as a best practice, why, as research finds, is small group discussion rarely used by classroom teachers? I explored this question in this dissertation.

Researchers have long found small group discussion to enhance student learning across a wide range of literacy criteria, including:

1) student engagement (Almasi, 1995; Certo, 2011; Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Lee, 2012; McMahon, & Goatley, 1995; Whittingham & Huffman, 2009),

2) reading comprehension (Alvermann et al., 1996; Certo, 2011; Fall, Webb, & Chudowsky, 2000; McMahon & Goatley, 1995; Murphy, et al., 2009; Nystrand, 2006; Pearson & Fielding, 1991; Pressley, 2000; Wilkinson & Son, 2010; and

3) high level thinking (Almasi, 1995; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003; Chinn et al., 2001; Gambrell, Hughes, Calvert, Malloy, & Igo, 2011; Goatley, Brock, & Raphael, 1995; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Medina, 2010; Moeller, 2002).

A meta-analysis of recent research (Murphy, et al., 2009) involving nine different

student discussion approaches found literacy instruction that included small group discussion was able to be shaped by teachers to meet a variety of student outcomes. Furthermore, surveys have established that teachers overwhelmingly acknowledge the value of small group discussion (Commeyras & DeGross, 1998). However, even before the 1900's, concern was raised for the dominance of teacher driven, recitation type instructional approaches (Wells, 1998). Since then, studies have repeatedly found recitation continues as the default teaching approach. Therefore, despite repeated research findings supporting literacy learning approaches based upon student engagement in small group discussion, research has also found that class time dedicated to student engagement in small group discussion remains rare (Alvermann et al., 1996; Commeyras & DeGross, 1998; Lee, 2012; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Nystrand, Gamoran, & Heck, 1993); Smith, Hardman, Wall, & Mroz, 2004).

### **The Problem**

Given the more complex standards for literacy achievement currently mandated by the recently adopted Common Core curriculum and evidence that supports student-led discussion as a means to higher-level meaning making of text, I wondered why teachers continued to practice teacher-led, recitation approaches over student led, small group discussion. While there is significant research identifying the rarity of student discussion, the research literature does not address the factors that influence teachers' perspectives, knowledge, and rationale for their choice of discussion approach. Factors that influence teachers' decisions about using small group discussion are the focus of this study. In an online teacher survey with follow-up interviews, I examined and explored interview data to determine factors that influenced teachers' decisions about instruction and student discussion. I provided teachers with the opportunity to explain why they chose, or did not choose, to use small group discussion.

## Significance

This study was not focused on a specific discursive literacy learning approach, i.e. book clubs studied by Almasi, (1995), literature circles researched by Eeds and Wells, (1989), or cooperative learning studied by Slavin, (1990). Instead, the focus of this study was to identify and explore the insights and beliefs of classroom teachers regarding literature discussion in order to gain a better understanding about why discursive approaches continue to be rarely used.

Existing research about discursive literacy approaches largely comes from two sources: large scale national studies and doctoral dissertations. Large scale, literacy initiatives like CELA (The National Research Center for English Learning and Achievement) and The Partnership for Literacy (a study of professional development, instructional change and student growth by Langer and Applebee, 2006) involve large numbers of schools and teachers volunteering to participate. “Over the years, a range of large scale research initiatives were implemented and studied, including students’ ability to sustain open discussion, to ask authentic questions, to ask higher-order questions, to support envisionment building, and to foster extended curricular conversations” (Langer & Applebee, 2006, p. 5). In studies like these, teacher training and teacher support throughout student instruction are key components.

The other source of research on discursive approaches to literacy arises from doctoral dissertations. These studies also involve teachers who volunteer to be trained in and then use a particular form of discursive literacy approach, i.e. book clubs or envisionment building. Therefore, the research on classroom instruction that supports small group discussion has been conducted in classrooms of teachers receiving training and on-going support, usually in a very specific approach espoused by the researcher/s and doctoral students. With research that supports the understanding that small group discussion continues to rarely exist, the



significance of this research is that it reached regular classroom teachers, not to train them in a specific approach or practice, but to ask what they knew about small group discussion and why, and under what conditions, they chose or chose not to use it.

Teachers implement programs differently, unique to their own school and classroom context and management style, and consequently the implementation of the research or the program learned about in a conference or in training results in varying application and effect from classroom to classroom. “Even in classrooms that overtly share the same curriculum and similar students, there are important differences that suggest the classrooms may be very different learning environments” (Bloome & Kinzer, 1998, p. 345). With the understanding that teachers’ implementation of instructional approaches would be as individual as their unique classroom contexts, I asked teachers why they used small group discussion approaches or why they chose to use other than discursive approaches to meet expanding curricular demands.

### **Research Question**

The intent of this qualitative study was to explore, in-depth, the following question: What factors influence teachers’ decisions to use, or not to use, small group discussion approaches?

### **Defining Small Group Discussion**

Student discussion groups have been called by many names, created to reflect the intent of the discussion, i.e. accountable talk, (Michaels, et al., 2007); book clubs (Daniels, Zimelman, & Steineke, 2004; Raphael, 2001); collaborative reading groups (O’Brien, 2007); grand conversations (Brabham & Villaume, 2000); literature circles (Daniels, 1994); literature clubs, (Moeller, 2004); and literature study (Fountas & Pinnell, 2001). I chose to use ‘small group discussion,’ a term inclusive of all discussion models. Not seeking to support research that employs a particular variety of discussion, I wanted to investigate factors and teacher

beliefs that influenced teachers' use of any small group approach.

Teachers interviewed in this study used a range of discussion approaches or created their own variations. Therefore a broad definition of small group literature discussion was best suited for this study. I found it helpful to consider both terms: 'group' and 'small group discussion.' Fisher and Ellis (1990) explained that most definitions of a 'group' point to the significance of members sharing around perceptions, motivations, and/or tasks. Fountas and Pinnell (2001) clarified the purpose of small group discussion was to "bring students together for an in depth discussion on a work of fiction or nonfiction" (p. 252). In this study, small group discussion is defined as any group of students engaged in purposeful talk about one text. These group discussions may be student led, teacher led, or a combination of both. I anticipated that teachers would present a range of interpretations about small group discussion. This definition lent the widest inclusion of small group discussion.

### **Limitations**

The use of interviews allowed teachers to respond with open and in-depth responses to questions designed to capture the full meaning of their views, beliefs, and practices about the way they used discussion and their rationale for their approach to discussion. One of the limitations of face-to-face interviews was the extensive amount of time required of both the interviewer and the participant. This limited the number of subjects willing and able to participate in the study. Results of this study, therefore, are not able to be generalized. However, the teaching worlds described by the teachers interviewed may be found transferable to those known and experienced by other teachers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 215). While not generalizable to a wide population, those teachers who participated in the study and other teachers or teacher educators who may read this study may find the in-depth narratives informative. The findings of and implications of this study may provide "a more

personal understanding of the phenomenon and the results can potentially contribute valuable knowledge” (Myers, 2000, para 9).

### **Assumptions**

The data gathered in this study came from two sources, an online survey taken by teachers and follow up interviews with teacher volunteers. Research literature affirmed that though it is rarely practiced, teachers are knowledgeable about small group discussion approaches. I assumed that teachers engaged in this study were familiar with small group discussion, as well the common core curriculum.

It was assumed in the study that teachers would be honest and forthcoming in their responses. Measures were taken to protect teachers’ anonymity. Teachers were not contacted through school administrators. Pseudonyms were used during data collection and throughout the analysis and reporting process. All digitized audio recordings of interviews will be destroyed at the completion of the study. I assured teachers that I wished to present their voices as the experts of their classrooms. Despite this, the honesty of their responses is an assumption. A related assumption is that teachers believed my assurances that their truthful responses would not be judged, but be held with respect. I was sensitive to the pressure teachers may have felt in the face of increasing demands for student achievement and teacher accountability. “Teachers’ anxiety results from the fact that their work and personal behaviors are constantly being judged: by administrators, by their students, by parents, by other members of the school staff and by test scores” (Haberman, n.d., para. 1). Teacher participants may see the researcher as another source of judgment and therefore, alter their responses to *appear correct*. Prior to engaging in interviews, I thanked the teacher participants, stressing this studies’ reliance upon their perspectives. Following this, I assumed the measures taken to provide teachers with the confidence to speak freely and truthfully would be effective.

## CHAPTER 2 REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter provides a context for this study in which I asked teachers about factors that influenced their decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion. Following discussion of supportive research and theory, research is discussed that reveals positive and negative factors related to implementing and managing small group discussion. Research included in this review also reveals the dominance of teacher-led discussion approaches.

### **Benefits of Small Group Literature Discussion That Establish It As An Effective Approach**

Shirley Brice Heath (1991) described the significant and empowering benefits for students who acquire effective skills as literate individuals:

Being literate goes beyond having literacy skills that enable one to disconnect from the interpretation or production of a text as a whole, discrete elements, such as letters, graphemes, words, grammar rules, main ideas, and topic sentences. The sense of being literate derives from the ability to exhibit literate behaviors. Through these, individuals can compare, sequence, argue with, interpret, and create extended chunks of spoken and written language in response to written text in which communication, reflection, and interpretation are grounded (p. 3).

As this description indicates, literacy is difficult to learn and teach. The newly adopted Core Curriculum standards call for student mastery of such rigorous literacy skills. In this section I discuss research findings that support small group discussion as part of an effective and rigorous literacy instructional approach including engagement, comprehension, high-level thinking, development of questioning skills, and literacy growth for ELL and multi-cultural students. In teacher interviews, I anticipated these benefits as factors teachers may comment on as they talked about their discussion practice and the factors that led them to it.

**Engagement.** Landmark research (Carnegie Council, 1989; National Endowment for the Arts, 2004, NASBE, 2006) found that of variables that affect literacy learning (SES, student

age, gender) student engagement has comparably more impact on student reading and learning about reading. In small group discussion, the source of meaning made is shifted from teacher to the students through a dynamic, collaborative, dialogic, meaning making process. Listening to and feeding off one another's ideas and interpretations, students engage with each other and the text. Raising and resolving differences of opinion is an engaging process (Wilkinson & Son, 2011). Students develop their own rich discursive communities and the relevancy of their own discussion fosters student engagement (Almasi, 1995; Goatley, et al., 1995).

Student engagement, as measured by the length of discussion, was found to significantly increase in a study comparing teachers employing both recitation and Collaborative Reasoning groups in their fourth grade classrooms (Chinn et al., 2001). They found a significant difference between the amount of teacher and student talk. Comparing the words spoken per minute by students and teachers, in recitation and collaborative reasoning groups, researchers found student talk at substantially lower rates in recitation. In collaborative reasoning groups, the mean for student talk was 110.8. This compared to a mean for student talk in recitation of 65.8. Of the total talk, in recitation approaches, 53.1 percent was talk by teacher; in collaborative reasoning groups, 33.5 percent was talk by teacher.

Additionally, the analysis of 'turns' revealed a dramatic increase in student engagement. "Just 6% of student turns during recitations fell into runs of student turns; by contrast, 45% of turns during collaborative reasoning were part of runs of student turns" (p. 398). In discussions between peers, students are motivated to listen to other speakers and react to those ideas; small group discussion allows them to articulate a question or comment that emerges from their personal reaction to the text or to another's comment. The discussion is created by and belongs to the students.

In a study using authentic literacy tasks including pen pals and small group discussion,

Gambrell et al., (2011) found that when comparing fall and spring literacy motivation surveys, spring surveys reflected significant increases in motivation to read by the students. Gambrell et al., also found that engagement led students to comprehension acquisition. “Specifically, students responded that they learned new information through peer discussions and that the group discussions helped them to understand the books better” (Gambrell, et al., 2011, p. 250).

**Comprehension.** Once engaged, it is a student’s ability to comprehend text that supports a deeper experience into the world of reading. Since the 1970’s, researchers have studied and noted the importance of comprehension skills, recommending explicit instruction of isolated strategies. However, following a movement to dialogic learning, a more flexible approach to comprehension skill use and instruction was suggested by Kucan and Beck’s (1997) research review of think aloud and comprehension strategies. Researchers have called for this more flexible use of comprehension strategies, including summarization, prediction, imagery, and comprehension monitoring, arising from the students’ collaboration to make meaning of the text (Almasi, 2002; Applebee et al., 2003; Meijster & Rosenshine, 1994; Reninger, 2007; Taylor et al., 2006). Studies of students engaged in book clubs found students constructed understandings that supported comprehension including metacognition and other learning processes to include “recall, connecting, sharing, imagining, interpreting, inquiring, listening, and observing” (Frank, Dixon, & Brandts, 2001, p. 460).

Clark (2009) also identified strategies used to support reading. In once weekly short story discussion groups of fifth graders, spanning nine weeks, Clark measured student talk related to strategic comprehension, the way students used language to make meaning of the text. Specifically, she analyzed student talk, coding utterances classified as the comprehension strategies that follow.

- |                        |                            |
|------------------------|----------------------------|
| -Comparing/contrasting | -Evaluating                |
| -Contextualizing       | -Interpreting              |
| -Stating a confusion   | -Inserting self into text  |
| -Questioning           | -Noting author's craft     |
| -Searching for meaning | -Engaging in retrospection |
| -Using prior knowledge | -Summarizing               |

She found that students used strategies with varying rates. Of all the strategies, students most often used questioning (27.69%) and evaluating (26.96%) strategies. Clark found that when looking at the individual utterances, 86% were made by students assessed as normal to high-level readers. Regardless of reading level, she found utterances included questioning and evaluating strategies, and all students' utterances were largely implicit. The post-reading discussions and resultant comprehension were most influenced by higher level readers (p. 116). Clark compared the implicit strategy use she observed to the explicit instruction of comprehension strategies by Palincsar and Brown (1984) and Pressley, et al., (1992), reciprocal teaching and transactional strategies instruction, respectively. Clark suggested, "were students engaged in small group, peer-led discussions to employ more explicit strategic language...they would develop not only students' declarative knowledge of focal stories, but also students' conditional and procedural knowledge of when and how to use comprehension strategies..." (p.116).

This literature provides evidence that as students participate in small group literature discussion they model for one another metacognitive processes involved in reading, comprehension, literature analysis, and discussion.

**High-Level thinking and the development of questioning skills.** Educators are facing increasing demands for students to acquire high-level thinking skills for their preparation as future workers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This section includes discussions of a variety of studies,

from a range of grades, that find small group literature discussion approaches promote high-level thinking.

In a 2002 study, Moeller shares a metaphor for literature discussion by Patterson, et al., (1998) comparing discussion to the physics phenomena of complex adaptive systems where “interdependent components transact in unpredictable ways...” Energy and turmoil lead to a “...breaking point, forcing adaptation at a higher level of complexity” (p. 476). In student discussion, Moeller found complexity arose from the discussions that moved across and between texts, students, and teacher all shifting within the dynamic classroom context that reflected “literary, societal, and personal issues” (p. 476).

A recent meta-analysis of quantitative studies (n=42) provided a synthesis of the findings of varied discussion formats upon comprehension and high-level thinking (Murphy, et al., 2009). The study examined the effect of discussion to promote “high-level comprehension” (p. 741). The researchers defined high-level comprehension as not only understanding the text, but knowing how to think about a topic as well as having the ability to reflectively think about how one thinks (p. 741). Their synonyms for high-level comprehension included, “literate thinking, higher order thinking, critical thinking, and reasoning” (p.741). This meta-analysis presented a range of discussion approaches that could meet those CCSS standards. The meta-analysis included studies from nine discussion approaches: Collaborative Reasoning, Paideia Seminar, Philosophy for Children, Instructional Conversations, Junior Great Books, Shared Inquiry, Questioning the Author, Book Club, Grand Conversations, and Literature Circles. Researchers divided those approaches into three categories for the meta-analysis: critical-analytic, efferent, and expressive (aesthetic). Despite the differences in approach, Murphy, et al. found, “all of the discussion approaches have potential to promote students’ high-level thinking and comprehension of text” (p. 742).



In a quantitative study (four classes each in nineteen middle and high schools, equaling over 1,000 students) and building upon previous research, Applebee et al., (2003) focused upon extended student conversations in envisionment building. Controlling for variables like SES, GPA, gender, etc., they examined instruction and student track to measure the effectiveness of varying discussion approaches upon student language arts skills. Measurement included student written responses to prompts for character analysis, answering questions about five stories, and standardized reading tests. They found discussion contributed most to student performance at the most complex literacy tasks, such as the ability to sustain and extend discussion (p. 722).

Almasi's (1995) landmark study comparing students engaged in peer-led discussion and teacher-led discussion, similarly found discussion approaches to benefit students in generating complex thought. She found that when a teacher entered the discussion, the students returned to I-R-E (Inquiry-Response-Evaluation) patterned behaviors seeking to support the teacher's interpretation. Almasi explained the shift to recitation resulted from increased teacher talk and teacher questions driving the discussion. Considering complexity, established by Mishler (1978) and comprised of length of utterance and syntax complexity, Almasi found that 26% of utterances in peer-led discussions were judged highly complex as compared to 15% of student utterances in teacher-led discussion. Conversely, utterances of low-level complexity occurred at a rate of 28% in teacher-led discussion as opposed to 12% in peer-led discussion (p. 330).

Almasi writes,

The results suggested that discourse containing large amounts of student verbalization (as in peer-led contexts) was significantly correlated with responses that were of medium and high complexity, greater amounts of student questioning and alternate interpretations, and discourse that was sustained by arching and embedding" (p. 332).

Almasi's findings with fourth graders were mirrored in more recent research analyzing

the talk of seventh grade literature groups discussing narrative text (Juzwik, et al., 2008). This analysis of student discussion, found students sustaining themes and topics across narrative turns and engaging each other in high level talks about moral and social issues like poverty, sexism, and racism. Embedded in a large-scale research project, Juzwik et al. (2008) investigated the effect of discussion (especially narrative genre) upon students' abilities to comprehend text. In Mrs. Gomez's class, students were encouraged to engage in a range of narratives (responsive evaluation, second stories, and narrative spells--stories short or long, personal or hypothetical--) to respond to each other or the text. In the analysis of the student discussion, questions asked in addition to overlapping talk, interjections, and co-telling narratives, were found to be the basis of higher comprehension. Student narratives were interrupted by other students with questions, interjections, or connected stories, each of which functioned to sustain the narrative event (p. 1148).

In a subsequent study of students engaged in book clubs, a form of small group discussion, Almasi, et al., (2001) analyzed the discussions of more and less proficient student groups. They found students of the more proficient groups "responded to one another, extended others' comments by adding on and asking questions, supported ideas by referring to text, and asked questions to clarify text" (p. 105).

**Literacy growth for multi-cultural and ELL students.** The Common Core, adopted by the Michigan Department of Education, calls for higher literacy standards and asserts the goal of narrowing achievement gaps between identified groups. English Language Learners (ELL) comprise one such group. Studies reveal students of multi-cultural backgrounds are often marginalized by the medical model of reading instruction. The medical model seeks to identify 'reading deficiencies' and then correct those deficiencies through 'skill and drill' treatments. Early studies in literature group discussion, Goatley et al. (1995) found support for

readers who span a range of reading abilities. In mixed ability small groups, readers made reading and language processes visible to one another while engaged in meaning making. “This study demonstrated that both peers and teachers can effectively serve in the role of more knowledgeable other” (p. 376).

Marginal readers lack an identity as readers capable of making meaning. They view reading as a search for the ‘right’ answers. Literature discussion groups can shift the initial responsibility of meaning making to more able readers, in which they can model ways to talk about literature. In this way, students, acting as the more knowledgeable others, can model ways for all participants to shift into action to articulate, listen to, and share emerging ideas. Literature discussion groups have demonstrated a move to an active stance that engaged marginal secondary readers in ‘real reading’ (Blum, Lipsett & Yocom, 2002; DaLie, 2001). Studies also show that group discussion, which is by nature iterative, responsive, visible, and collaborative, helps students with disabilities, in inclusive classrooms, to learn complex ideas (Hindin, Cobb-Morocco, & Aguilar, 2001). In group discussion, students become part of an intimate literary community. In this community, students who had identities as readers provided bridging experiences to ELL students that helped them to acquire identities as readers.

Teaching approaches that access and build upon specific knowledge derived from students’ cultural backgrounds has been found to support student learning. In a study of fifth grade immigrant children engaged in literature discussion groups matching students born in Mexico with the stories “La Llorona” and “El Coyote.” These stories shared the students’ cultural background and enabled their use of their background knowledge to connect with the stories. Medina (2010) found,

Students collectively participated in the discussion in ways that dynamically demonstrated the transformative nature of culture across time, space, and places.... These dynamics of cultural production are important in reaction to voice, participation, and students' ways of knowing" (p. 57).

Medina worked with one teacher anxious to help her Spanish-speaking students acquire English language skills. Medina found that in group discussion of stories based on Hispanic culture, students talked about their personal stories and experiences, intertwining them with the text story. In stories with a setting near the border, students brought to the discussion stories of their own border crossings and sights common to those in the stories. They compared them to the sights in their current Midwestern lives. Their literature discussion allowed them to collectively share and build upon their cultural histories, bridging them to the multiple worlds they navigated (p. 58).

**Summary of Benefits Attributed to Small Group Discussion.** This review of the literature attributed benefits to the use of small group discussion that included comprehension skills, engagement and motivation to read, the development of high thinking skills evidenced in speech and writing, the ability of students to model skill development to each other, and development in student's personal/cultural identity as well as their identities as readers.

In interviews with study participants, I asked teachers to discuss their beliefs related to small group discussion and whole class discussion, and how those beliefs impacted their use, or non-use of small group discussion. This literature provides evidence that as students participate in small group literature discussion they model for one another metacognitive processes involved in reading, comprehension, literature analysis, and discussion.

Despite the benefits of small group discussion, evidenced in the literature review, research for over 100 years confirms small group literature discussion continues as a rarely used literacy approach.

### **Small Group Literature Discussion Continues to Be Rare**

Research demonstrates many teachers conceptually embrace small group discussion, but that appreciation is not realized in their teaching practice. “Despite teachers’ considerable stated allegiance to discussion, Nystrand and colleagues observed little discussion in any classes in the sense of an in-depth exchange of ideas in the absence of teacher evaluation” (Christoph & Nystrand, 2001, p. 251). In 2006, Nystrand performed an exhaustive review of literacy research across the United States, which included studies from the Center for the Study of Reading, the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement, the Santa Barbara Classroom Discourse Group, the Group Discussion Research Project at Ohio State University, and updates from previous literacy research reviews. Nystrand found, “American education research over nearly the last century and a half has documented the historic and widespread prevalence of recitation as the instructional method of choice” (p. 394). In an analysis of the minute-by-minute observations of 58 ninth grade classes, only five classes used any group work. Of the group work done in those classes, only 11.1% “was judged to be wholly autonomous or to display significant student interaction in producing the outcomes; most of the rest was collaborative seatwork” (p. 395). These results have been supported by studies by Judith Langer, director of the National Research Center on English Learning & Achievement (CELA) since 1987. Langer’s substantive research and investigations of the way students make sense of text through envisionment building demonstrates how specific literacy contexts that include group discussion affect student thinking and language. Langer also found that despite the acknowledged potential of group discussion among teachers, implementing group discussion proved challenging. Langer reports, “We found that even teachers in our project who wanted to embrace this kind of classroom culture all the time (interactive approaches that included group discussion) had difficulty doing so (1998, p. 20).

Student-centered, group discussion approaches, though recognized as best practice, have yet to alter the traditional format of the secondary classroom. Teacher-centered, whole class recitation-recall formats continue to dominate classroom activity (Goodlad, 1984; Gutierrez, 1994; Nystrand, 1997; Nystrand & Gamoran, 1991; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988). In a study that surveyed middle school students about what makes them want to read in classrooms, Ivey and Broaddus (2001) found that, “teachers want students to be able to read critically, but they seldom allow them to initiate conversations about books” (p. 350).

These research findings led the call for more student-centered, constructivist approaches including small group discussion. Despite these repeated findings, teacher-driven transmission approaches continue to be the most common mode of instruction in subject area classrooms across America (Alvermann, 2001; Wade & Moje, 2000). As of yet, research does not include data collected in in-depth interviews with teachers to gain their perspectives about their decisions to use, or non-use, small group literature discussion. This is the intent of this study.

The rarity of this effective approach raises questions about the factors that influence teachers’ decisions to use or not use small group discussion. In the following section, research findings on small group literature discussion are looked at through the lens of factors that may facilitate or constrain teacher use of small group discussion.

### **Factors Influencing Teachers’ Decisions About Using Small Group Discussion**

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, a factor is “something that helps produce or influence a result.” These factors could be positive outcomes of the approach the teacher is looking for or they could be secondary outcomes not necessarily set as a target of instruction. Therefore, there could be factors that cause teachers to choose to use small group literature discussion, factors that cause teachers to choose not to use small group

discussion, or other factors that teachers must work with or around when choosing to implement small group literature discussion. In the following section of the literature review, research findings are discussed that suggest factors that may influence teachers' decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion in three areas: Variety Within Discussion Approaches, Classroom and Group Environment, and Teacher Training or Expertise.

**Factor: Variety within discussion approaches.** Research provides evidence of the great variety within small group discussion approaches each possessing elements that may lead to specific student outcomes. Teachers make many decisions when implementing small group discussion based upon their goals for instruction and student outcomes. Factors related to small group discussion may align with a teacher's instructional purposes and become the approach of choice. Chinn, et al. (2001) identified the following elements of small group discussion teachers may consider in their implementation of small group discussion, including:

- The literary stance taken and who determines that stance
- Topic
- Who determines topic
- Interpretive authority
- Determination of turn-taking
- Group size, gender
- Mixed or like ability level
- Reading in or out of class
- Reading performed silently or aloud (by teacher or by students, jointly)
- Written work: before discussion, following discussion; notes, journals, outlines, etc.
- Authority over text choice
- Peer-led discussion, teacher-participant

The meta-analysis by Murphy et al., (2009) analyzing nine different discussion approaches, can be reviewed in terms of how discussion approaches may align to meet the desired outcomes of individual teachers. Murphy found reader's stance and instructional frame differentiate discussion approaches and are directed by the goal the teacher. Murphy et al.

(2009) and Chinn et al. (2001) expanded Rosenblatt's two stances, efferent and aesthetic, adding a third stance category for questioning the text in search of its world views – the critical-analytic stance. Finding that most students do not attain a truly 'aesthetic' stance as defined by Rosenblatt, the stance was renamed, *expressive*, to reflect the reader-focused response. The meta-analysis included nine discussion based approaches: Collaborative Reasoning, Paedeia Seminars, Philosophy for Children, Instructional Conversations, Junior Great Books, Questioning the Author, Book Club, Grand Conversation, and Literature Circles. Three of the nine approaches guided students toward expressive stances. Those three and Questioning the Author gave students the authority of asking questions. The other approaches employing efferent or critical-analytic reading stances, left question posing to the teacher and shared argumentation as an outcome. However, outcomes of all approaches included high level thinking, (p. 747).

Another important finding by Murphy et al. (2009) of this meta-analysis was that all of these discussion-based approaches were found to increase student talk and all but Paideia Seminars were found to decrease the amount of teacher talk. These two elements, increasing student talk and decreasing teacher talk, are linked to increased student engagement and motivation.

This meta-study demonstrates the range of student outcomes and discussion formats within small group literature discussion approaches. The range of different group discussion approaches creates factors that provide teachers with choices to match their goals and desired student outcomes.

**Factor: Classroom and group environment.** In this section I discuss factors that arise from the social nature of small group literature discussion. In this context, discourse means the combination of language with social practices. Gee (2005) explains,



The key to Discourses is ‘recognition.’ If you put language, action, interaction, values, beliefs, symbols, objects, tools, and places together in such a way that others recognize you as a particular type of who (identity) engaged in a particular type of what (activity) here and now, then you have pulled off a Discourse (p. 18).

Therefore, the content language that is the target of literacy instruction and specified in the Core Curriculum, occurs within a larger ‘D’iscourse. Small group literature discussion is part of the larger socio-cultural discourse with factors that influence what happens within the group. Discussion is affected by behaviors, values, customs, clothes, and ways of thinking that can work to advance or interrupt the goals teachers have for instruction, which may include small group discussion. Environmental factors, related to small group discussion that is part of the larger ‘D’iscourse, is the focus of this section. Research findings of environmental factors have been categorized into three sub-sections: Safe Environments that Foster Student Discussion, Dominance of Some Voices Over Others, and Difficulty in Shifting to Student Centered Environments. Each of these factors can influence student discussions and therefore, may affect teachers’ decisions about using small group discussion as a literacy approach.

**Safe environments that foster student discussion.** Students must feel confident about their place in the classroom and in any group within the classroom in order to feel safe enough to freely participate in discussion. To participate in peer-led discussions, students must trust that their interpretations will be treated with respect and that the personal histories, experiences, and knowledge that led them to those interpretations will also be respected (Almasi et al., 2001; Commeyras & Summer, 1998; McIntyre, 2007; Moeller, 2002). “We must create situations in which students feel able to risk offering opinions instead of being concerned with giving the ‘right’ answer” (Fairbanks, 1998). Adding to this, Commeyras and Summer (1998) write, “By encouraging and valuing student questions, we had created what

Oldfather (1993) identified as ‘honored voice,’ an aspect of classroom culture that supports intrinsic motivation for literacy” (p. 148). Following a socio-cultural theoretical basis, the appreciation of language as social discourse recognizes social power. Students aware of and able to manage their groups as safe places help develop groups in which each student is comfortable speaking their opinion. In discursive events, like classroom group discussion, social power shared within the group impacts the dialog...whose voice is heard, who determines topic, turn taking, interruptions, etc. (Alvermann, et al., 1996; Gee, 2004). However, even when classroom teachers attempt to shift power from self to group, that does not mean the power shifted to the group will necessarily be justly distributed.

**Threats to climate and safety.** Research reveals another factor related to discussion groups ... the social dominance of male voices (Moje, Young, Readance, & Moore, 2000; Tannen, 1990). In a study of fifth grade students engaged in peer led discussions of *Shiloh*, Clarke (2007) found the power of social relationships a controlling factor negatively affecting the student discourse. Clarke found male gender dominance displayed in the group discussion reflected the values of their working class community as well as the classroom context that was created by the male teacher who “aligned himself with a hegemonic display of male dominance” (p. 118). The girls described the teacher as a sexist who always referred to them as “‘little girls’ and never let them do anything in the classroom” (p. 119). In this study, the researcher initiated measures to reduce the dominance by male voices that included: 1) using literature to address social/gender biases, 2) sharing video tapes of group sessions with students, jointly analyzing their discussion process, 3) offering mini-lessons on group process, and 4) occasionally entering the group, as model, not teacher-director (p. 121). Clarke acknowledged the temptation to return to teacher led talk, but was pleased see the students respond to the interventions designed to lead students back to effective group discussion.

In their analysis of discussions from Paideia Seminars, Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) similarly found male voices dominant in discussion. In the first seminar, talk by both males and females was approximately the same in terms of turns taken and duration of speech. However, the second and third rounds of discussions found clear gender differences. In the second round of discussions, males took 66.1 percent of the talking turns and talked 63.1 percent of the time. In the third round of discussions, turn-taking by males dropped slightly to 63.3 percent, and their percentage of the time talking was 54.7 percent of the time. This dominance of male voices was repeated in findings of the meta-analysis by Murphy et al. (2009). Specific to the discussion groups in Paideia Seminar, Murphy et al. demonstrated that intents to frame civil discussion of all student views were frequently cut short of that goal. Murphy et al. write, “the seminars moved outside the egalitarian parameters...male and female talk were unbalanced” (p. 923). Therefore, the struggle to shift away from discussions that are dominated by males may become a factor affecting teachers’ use of small group literature discussion.

Research also shows that social dominance is not exclusive to the male gender. Chinn, et al. (2001) found that in Collaborative Reasoning groups, “It was more difficult to shift control over turn-taking and topics to students than to shift interpretive authority” (p. 407). They studied the literature discussion of four adolescent girls following their reading of books with themes arising from the storied events of strong female characters. Their discussion revealed meaningful conversation with “discovery, reflection, and examination,” (p. 513) but also “rash statements, thoughtless comments that hurt others, [and] words and phrases often deemed not acceptable in schools...” (p. 514). Therefore, when teachers implement small group discussion, those discussions may be affected by factors of social dominance. Appreciating the significance of environment and the likelihood of dominant voices leads to the last section...the difficult shift to student-centered classrooms.

**Factor: The shift to student-centered discussion is difficult to establish and maintain.**

A fundamental constructivist belief is that people are active agents of their learning. Students engaged in dialogue construct meaning. In discussion, they exchange and build upon ideas of others. However, the dynamic social and cultural worlds and relationships that students and teachers bring with them to class create many factors that affect the context of the class. These factors are complex and make the implementation of group discussion formats difficult. Gee's (2004) concept of 'D'iscourse helps explain why social power and hierarchical social structures work to sustain the status quo and challenge the implementation of small group discussion. Shifting social dynamics to make discussion work to particular literacy ends can be difficult for teachers and students.

Even with the teacher training in preparation for implementing Paideia Seminar methods (nine days of workshops), Billings and Fitzgerald (2002) found 'teacher-fronted' methods persisted that fell "outside the bounds of dialogic discussion" (p. 932):

1. 'Who' was to speak was controlled by the teacher as she talked nearly half the time,
2. 'Topics and ideas' of discussion were focused on what the teacher thought significant,
3. Students' behavior, in whole class or small group, followed the teacher's lead.
4. The 'form' of the group talk was shaped by teacher posed, and
5. In response to the teacher's function as "knowledgeable coach," students were limited to one of two roles: helpers to the teacher ("Enablers, Intermediaries, and Observers") or those daring to gently resist her opinions ("Self Asserters and Challengers in Disguise") (p. 932).

"Perhaps Mrs. Tully's (the classroom teacher referred to above) pre-Paideia teaching practices had become so ingrained that shifting away from them and toward a very different way was extremely difficult" (p. 935). It is important to note that Mrs. Tully's class was a high school

Honors English class with only eighteen students. Despite student maturity, high ability level, and small numbers, the teacher maintained influence over students' perception of their classroom role, their voice, agency, and student behavior, both work and social.

Parallel results were found in a similar study at the second grade level. McIntyre, et al., (2006) noted additional teacher-directed instructional moves taken above those that were planned by teacher and researchers. The researchers interpreted that more 'up-front' instruction may be necessary for younger children. Speaking of the difficulty the teacher found to move students to active discussants of stories, McIntyre, et al. write,

Too often new perspectives or approaches on classroom teaching are advocated without accompanying ideas on how teachers can be successful in the implementation of the new approaches. Classroom talk might look quite natural when viewed from a video or described in an article but, if children have little experience in academic talk around books, it takes much from a teacher to assist them in getting there (p. 59).

Factors emerge as challenges arise in the design of the discussion approach itself. Some early formats of student led discussion called for students to take on specific roles to share and cover desired aspects of discussion. Daniels (1994) recommended individual group member roles for literature circles, including 'Questioner,' 'Connector,' 'Illustrator,' and 'Word Wizard.' The assignment of roles was widely implemented by teachers wishing to engage students in student-centered discussion. More current findings suggest that roles function to limit discussion. Daniels wrote a new edition warning teachers about "the mechanical discussions that can stem from over-dependence on (these) roles" (Daniels, H., 2006, p. 10). Following interviews with twenty-four elementary students regarding their perceptions of participating in literature discussion groups for four months, Certo (2011) suggested assigning the role of 'discussion director' could result in monopolization of discussion by one student or by the teacher attempting to 'jump start' discussion. She

recommends elimination of the role “so that leadership could be shared” (p. 75).

An appreciation of environmental factors leads to the last of the categories of factors discussed in this literature review. Teacher training is a factor that may influence a teacher’s decision to use small group literature discussion, or to decide to choose an alternate approach.

**Factor: Teacher training and expertise.** Research findings indicate effective use of small group discussion is dependent upon teachers’ skill in scaffolding and the gradual release of responsibility. The fluency with which a teacher has mastered these skills may act to limit or promote their decision to use small group literature discussion.

**Scaffolding.** Explicit teacher instruction and peer-led student discussion are not mutually exclusive. Due to the predominance of teacher-directed (IRE) instruction, quality discussion requires that the teacher provide a range of scaffolds to help students become active and effective discussants (McIntyre, et al., 2007). Peer-led literature discussion requires much of students. Students must be prepared to discuss the text, which means they must engage in active reading with comprehension. Students must approach literature discussion with their own questions and interpretations supported by text evidence they are ready to bring to the discussion. Discussants must be able to listen with the intent of responding, questioning, and/or asking for or providing support or defense of interpretations or connections made. Discussants collaboratively synthesize new information, and develop group management skills that govern their behavior to support the meaning making process of the group (Kong & Pearson, 2003).

Varied scaffolding for discussion skills are required including: explicit directions, linguistic and paralinguistic cues (cueing), scaffolds for talk (follow-up, take-up questions, as

described by Christoph and Nystrand, (2001), and high-level open-ended questions that have no pre-determined 'right' answer. In addition, teachers must provide authentic responses (not evaluative) to student questions and modeling and scaffolding of high-level student responses. Teachers need to extend wait time and provide democratic supports (Almasi et al., 2001; Christoph & Nystrand, 2001). Describing the discursive classroom, McIntyre (2007) writes, "Classrooms in which problem solving, student decision making, student choice in academic work, collaborative work, and respect for students characterize the instructional environment" (p. 613).

These skills, identified above and requiring explicit instruction and teacher scaffolding, are evidenced in a study seeking to investigate authentic literacy tasks (pen pals and small group discussion) (Gambrell et al., 2011). Prior to the study, teachers attended twelve professional development sessions focusing on strategic reading, writing in response to literature, and using discussion strategies for high level thinking (p. 239). Third, fourth, and fifth grade students were paired with adult pen pals. The adults were given access to tutorials providing help with questions that would "promote the dialogic nature of the letters" (p. 241). Discussion skills were explicitly taught during language arts instructional time and were practiced in small group, peer-led discussions (p. 242). An analysis of fifteen discussions provided evidence of discrete skills discussants used in discussion. These included expansion of ideas, summarizing, paraphrasing comments by others, defining terms, providing evidence to support arguments, providing usable prior knowledge, connecting ideas across text, making inferences, drawing conclusions, comparing and contrasting ideas, agreeing or disagreeing by providing supportive information, and asking questions about concepts (pp. 247-248).

These identified skills reflect the findings of Almasi, et al. (2001) in their study comparing more and less proficient discussions of fourth grade discussion groups.

Microanalysis of the discussions found that more proficient groups were able to apply skills that support 'coherence' in their collaboration to make meaning of the text. Similar to the skills noted in the Gambrell et al. (2011) study, Almasi et al., noted skills to include returning to previous topics, broadening topics, creating links across topics, and keeping talk focused on the content.

These skills, at any level, require explicit teacher instruction. In a study of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student's shift towards literature discussion groups, Maloch (2004) refutes the assumption that moving to student-centered discussion groups is a move away from explicit instruction. Maloch explains that students struggle with release of teacher responsibility and these struggles necessitate teacher guided experiences preparing students for student-led discussion, like fishbowl activities, teacher-provided models of discussion techniques, and reviewing and discussing tapes of their own discussions (p. 17).

Group discussion of literature provides the medium for students to actively engage in multiple literacy skills. Galda and Beach (2001) found it to be a 'transformative practice' when students were challenged to apply thematic findings to their own worlds, using a range of literacy skills. When seventh grade girls, reading a novel, *Catherine, Called Birdy*, about a young girl's struggle facing inequalities in medieval times, were asked to consider present-day inequities women face, the research they pursued on Equal Rights Amendment, Title IX, mail-order brides, etc., led to bolster "self-efficacy as having expertise about women's roles" (p. 71). In this study, teacher scaffolding of what to think and how to talk about issues in the novel was accomplished by connecting contemporary issues to issues taking place in the novel. The scaffold is the bridge connecting students' familiarity and ability to talk about current issues to those of characters living in a distant age. The teachers' ability to see the scaffolding need and to create an effective scaffold become factors that affect the success of small group literature



discussion. Without scaffolding skills, small group literature discussion may become frustrating for both students and teachers.

**Gradual release of responsibility.** Research findings support the idea that implementing discussion takes an extended commitment of classroom time (Almasi, et al., 2001; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2011; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Fecho, 2000; Juzwik et al., 2011; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Maloch, 2004; Michaels et al., 2007; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991; Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001). Discussion approaches are a departure from the traditional recitation approach and are likely to be new to students who year after year are taught by the default teaching approach—teacher directed, whole class discussion. Furthermore, because small group discussion is a departure from the historic dominance of recitation, teachers may not have experiences to support their attempts to use small group literature discussion. Therefore, a teacher’s difficulty making an attempted shift to small group discussion may be compounded by its unfamiliarity to both teacher and students. It follows that the transition to small group discussion will take time as teachers develop instructional techniques, model discussion skills new to students, and gradually release the responsibility of discussion management to the members of the group. The effectiveness of instruction to empower students to take that responsibility will determine the effectiveness of the student led groups.

Analysis comparing the discussion of more proficient student groups to less proficient groups led Almasi et al., (2001) to also compare the impact of the individual teachers upon the proficiency of those groups. They found that the teacher of the less proficient groups kept control of the discussion. The teacher provided prompts to lead the action of the group, interjecting, “Let’s find it. Let’s find the...You’re on the page. Can you read?” (p.114). After five weeks of discussion, this group had “relinquished any stake they had in assuming that role” (p.117). Conversely, the teacher of the more proficient group made note of the group’s

problem, but turned the responsibility of the solution back to the students. “Hmm, this is a difficult part of the story to understand. What could we do to help clarify what happened?” (p. 115). Releasing responsibility for management of the discussion to the students engaged them in active collaboration central to their meaning making process.

Students take responsibility for solving their own problems and learn that the next time they encounter a similar problem they might be able to solve it by using the same strategy—referring to the text. This is one way teachers can gradually reduce their role and enable students to assume more responsibility (Almasi et al., 2001, p. 116).

Almasi et al., (2001) also found that more proficient groups spent significantly less time talking about group management issues than did less proficient groups, but noted that all groups new to discussion engaged in “metatalk.” Discussion approaches are founded on skill, trust, and group management abilities, and therefore, require time and patience on the part of the teacher. “Teachers must be patient with metatalk, knowing that its use will subside if students are given the opportunity to monitor their own discussions” (p. 117).

The range and depth of skills necessary for students to successfully engage in peer-led discussion is facilitated by a gradual release of responsibility from teacher to students (Almasi et al., 2001; Gambrell et al., 2011; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Langer, 2001; Maloch, 2004; Moore, 2004; Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). In Kong and Pearson’s study (2003) of a fourth/fifth grade teacher implementing book clubs over the course of a year, the transition from teacher-directed to student-directed fell into three overlapping stages. The first was marked by the dominance of teacher talk. The second stage was marked by teacher modeling and scaffolding, in which student talk increased from three to thirty-two minutes in a 78-minute period. The third stage reflected higher-level student-led discussions and a shift to more student directed control of the group process (p. 105).

The *gradual* part of gradual release speaks to the behavioral and cultural shift students

are required to make away from the dominant discussion approach, teach-led whole class discussion. Of the teacher's efforts to support the transition, Kong and Pearson (2003) noted,

Besides checking students' homework assignments [the reading and writing preparation for discussion] and talking to them about the importance of being prepared, Ellen undertook a series of steps to help students overcome their initial difficulties and resistance" (p. 98).

Maloch (2004) focused on a teacher's efforts to implement literature group discussion in a third grade class, particularly the scaffolding that enabled students to shift from teacher- to a more student-directed context. She found that student resistance to this move required varied and extended pre-discussion activities (i.e., fishbowl) as well as explicit talks to raise student awareness of the transition (p. 17). In her 2002 study, Maloch found that students "fell back into routines previously established in teacher-led discussions" (p. 100). Upon reflection, following her implementation of peer-led group discussions, a novice teacher found some connections she felt important were missing in the students' talk. She offered her intent to bridge group discussion with additional teacher-led supportive activities including interspersed days where part of the hour would be whole class discussion, in which she could interject topics, engage students in targeted tasks or cross-book discussions (Bond, 2001, p. 583). This teacher found the need to have periods of time when she could take back responsibility in whole class discussion to ultimately move to more student-directed discussion.

### **Summary**

The review of the literature informs reasons why small group literature discussion, despite its potential to provide students opportunities for higher level literacy learning, struggles to make ground against teacher recitation approaches, the dominate form of instruction. Studies based on socio-cultural theories establish that teachers, aware of the philosophical shift to constructivist approaches, find the move to more dialogic instructional

approaches difficult. This review established small group literature discussion as an approach to support more rigorous standards, leading to student experiences that provide higher level abilities to interpret, question, discuss, and synthesize literature with benefits for students across a range of literacy abilities and cultural backgrounds. Studies included in this review also revealed factors necessary to the successful transition from teacher-led to student-led discursive classroom approaches, including student-safe classroom contexts, explicit discussion instruction, and the gradual release of responsibility to student groups. The review also exposed challenges teachers face when implementing small group discussion, including the force of long established recitation style classroom behaviors upon students and teachers alike. Therefore, while small group discussion can provide the forum to empower and engage students to share learning and expertise, it could also play host to challenges unknown to teachers, like the social dominance of more powerful students over others.

Input from teachers about factors that influence their use, or non-use, of small group literature discussion needs to be added to the research literature. This literature review suggests positive and negative factors connected with small group discussion that could influence teachers' decisions that shape what discussion experiences students will have in their classrooms. The range of factors, positive and negative, the call for student-centered approaches, like small group discussion, and the continued dominance of teacher-led whole class discussion were the focus of this study: What are the factors that influence teachers decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion?

### CHAPTER 3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to understand why teachers use the discussion approaches they do. As Creswell (2008) states, “Research is a process of steps used to collect and analyze information to increase our understanding of a topic or issue” (p. 8). In this chapter the steps used to collect and analyze the data in this study are discussed.

Research has established the benefits of small group discussion as an engaging, student-centered literacy approach. Research has also revealed challenges teachers face to implement small group discussion. With the adoption of Common Core Curriculum standards, teachers have been held accountable for stronger demands on literacy skill development, including discussion. However, research consistently finds that small group literature discussion rarely exists in the classroom. The incongruity between the positive effects of small group literature discussion as a literacy learning approach and its continued lack of use raises the question of why this is so. With most research focusing on student performance and not teacher perceptions (Au, 1980; Kim & Kwon, 2002), there is a gap in the research reflecting teachers’ beliefs about discussion and factors that influence their decision to use, or not to use, small group discussion approaches. In this study, teachers were invited to respond to an online survey and volunteer as one of fifteen interview participants. The following question guided this study:

What beliefs and factors influence teachers’ decisions to use, or not to use, small group literature discussion?

#### Research Design

Qualitative research “can be used to gain new perspectives of things about which much is already know, or to gain more in-depth information that may be difficult to convey

quantitatively” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 63). The focus of this study, small group discussion, is well researched; we know much about it. We do not know much about teachers’ perceptions of their use, and of equal importance, their non-use, of this effective literacy approach. The purpose of this study is to gain ‘more in-depth information’ about teachers’ use of discussion in their classroom; therefore a qualitative design is appropriate.

Prior studies have used teacher surveys to gather data about literacy approaches that include small group discussion. In those studies, small group discussion was attended to in one or two items on a survey intended to cover a wide range of English Language Arts topics; whereas, the online survey in this study is dedicated to student discussion. Furthermore, surveys do not allow for the dynamic exchange between the researcher and the teacher participant. Surveys are absent in-depth participant feedback or input into questions to be asked. However, one-on-one interviews are designed to collect rich descriptive data that surfaces in the open exchange between researcher and interview participant.

Existing studies by literacy researchers have often been designed to investigate a particular discussion approach, analyze the discussion itself (how discussion is shaped, extended, or cut short), or the interaction between discussants. In these studies, teacher participants received training and classroom support by the researcher, or research assistants. This study was designed to interview reading/writing teachers not engaged in any other discussion-centered study in which they were receiving training and support. A descriptive qualitative design allowed me to gather data from the detailed narratives teachers shared about discussion, small group or whole class, in their individual classrooms.

According to Knufer and McLellan (2001), descriptive studies seek to find out “What is?” With regard to education studies, they advise descriptive studies answer questions about teacher attitudes, concerns, opinions, reactions, interpretation, reflection and experiences

about their teaching practices and their relationships with students, administrators, parents, and their peers. I chose to use a descriptive research approach, collecting data from an online survey and interviews with fifteen teachers, to provide insight into teachers' perceived worlds, particularly regarding discussion in their classroom.

### **Application of Qualitative Research Axioms to This Study**

This study is influenced by the following axioms of qualitative research: 1) Ontologic, or "realities are multiple, constructed, and holistic" 2) Epistemologic, or there is a relationship between the knower and the known, and 3) Axiologic or inquiry is value bound, and values may reinforce realities or create conflict with realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37).

This study rests on constructivist ontologic beliefs that realities are socially constructed and therefore, unique to individuals, communities, and/or regions. The goal of this study is not to find the one answer to the research question, but to come to a better understanding about teachers' use of discussion through the comments teacher participants share during their interviews.

The epistemologic axiom, the belief that "the knower and known are interactive, inseparable," also guided this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 37.) Data gathered from interview responses emerged in the space created between the teacher participants and the researcher. In keeping with dialogic processes, each discussant influences the other. This axiom guided the researcher to proactively and reflexively take steps to ensure the influences functioned to support the purposes of this research. The design of this descriptive study included the complete disclosure of study purposes and procedures to the participants, in writing and verbally. Guided by this axiom this design supported the researcher and the participants as positive and honest influences upon one another.

This study was also guided another by axiologic axiom, a belief that inquiry is value

laden. This follows the other axioms, the interactive knower and known and the belief that realities are socially constructed. In this study I recognize that my values will shape the construct of interviews, as will the values of the participants. My research question is value bound, as well. Appreciating this, it was my responsibility to ethically design and execute this study. To do this, the number of interview participants was increased from the originally planned eight to fifteen teachers. Of the available interview volunteers, I selected a sample that included teachers with the widest range of demographics. In this way, the largest range of 'realities' could be represented. In the data collection process, I included and analyzed all teacher comments and took care to treat participants and their beliefs with respect to ensure ethical treatment of the subjects and the focus of inquiry. An awareness of my own values and realities is the source of respect for my appreciation of the values and realities of others. To maintain respect for the values of participants in this study, I kept a journal of my reactions to conversations, interviews, planning, and writing to reflect up things ways keep my values from interfering with the values expressed by others. I was also careful to let each participant know they were respected as *the expert in the field* and that the true purpose of this study to learn what teachers knew and experienced about discussion in their classrooms. Interview questions were designed to move teachers to freely talk about their schools, classrooms, instruction, students, and small group literature discussion. Questions were prepared in advance of the interviews, however, teachers were encouraged to raise questions or comment on issues to more completely express the beliefs and perceptions that influenced their decisions about discussion.

According to Baumann and Bason (2011) the conversational tone and flexibility of interviews can extend the depth of informational data available to the researcher. As a teacher, I expect teachers to act as individuals. I was open to answers I could not anticipate, never



having seen any of their classrooms. The setting often helped the flexibility, frequently meeting in over dinner. I found that teachers like to talk about their classrooms and students and their role as teachers. I was genuinely interested in their responses, and expressed my interest by leaning forward, listening and not interrupting, and asking them, "Tell me more about that?" According to Patton, 2002, when interview questions are open-ended and flexible one is able to gain rich data about the perceptions and beliefs of interviewees that are not observable. Classroom discussion can be observed, but observations won't explain why a teacher chooses small group discussion over whole class discussion. If a teacher volunteers to be interviewed, the teacher's rationale for her use of discussion may become accessible. To ensure the ethics of this study, the complete disclosure of study purposes and procedures was provided to the participants, as well as the opportunity to review the transcript of their transcribed interview. All fifteen of the participants were sent an email copy of their transcripts. Participants responded by email thanking me for the transcript, but none returned their copy with amendments or comments.

The goal was for teachers to voice their beliefs and perceptions, to provide knowledge to the larger literacy and professional development communities so they may better understand factors that influence teachers' use of discussion.

### **Participants**

Interview participants were selected from online survey respondents who volunteered to be interviewed. When indicating their desire to be interviewed, a screen appeared allowing them to share their contact information. I contacted them by phone to answer any questions they had about the study or interview process and to arrange the time and place for the interview. With the exception of two, all interviews were conducted in restaurants, chosen by the interviewees in a place quiet enough to successfully record our interview. One interview

was conducted in the teacher's classroom, by her request. Another interview was conducted on the phone, using Googlevoice, as it was not possible to meet in person. With this application, I received a unique phone number for the purpose of recording calls. That number was then provided to the interviewee via email. We agreed on a date and time to conduct the interview. At that time, the interview participant called that number. Upon accepting the call, a prompt was given to, "Begin recording," which was audible to both parties on the call. This system ensured that the interviewee knew that the call was being recorded.

Most of the over 500 invitations to the online survey were sent to individual teacher emails, specifying that the survey would take between fifteen and twenty minutes and was anonymous. Professors of graduate teacher education courses at Wayne State University and Western Michigan University also hand delivered invitations to their students (Appendix A). These invitations included a 'QR Reader' code to allow the teachers to immediately open and respond to the survey from their i-phones. Despite these attempts to encourage teacher participation to the online survey, the response was less than the fifty responses hoped for and the sample of teachers from which interviewees were drawn.

Most of the teachers who took the survey and volunteered to participate in the interview process were teachers who used small group discussion. I sought to include teachers who used small group and teachers who used teacher-led whole class discussion in equal numbers. As discussed in the methodology, teachers who did participate in the study were encouraged to extend the invitation to participate to other teachers, in the 'snow-ball' type of distribution. Two participants who volunteered to be interviewed invited two other teachers to the study. The sample to draw from, particularly with regard to teachers who used whole class discussion was small. I invited all teachers who identified their preference for whole class discussion to participate in the study. The fifteen teachers selected as interviewees included

ten who used small group discussion and five who used teacher-led, whole class discussion.

Kindergarten and first grade are omitted from this study in keeping with the kindergarten through twelfth grade curricular goals identified by the Common Core. Standards at the kindergarten and first grade levels call for teachers to present, share, and model effective reading skills, with a gradual shift of reading responsibility to the student beginning in the second grade. The literature reviewed for this study emerged from studies largely conducted at grades two through eight. Therefore, I chose to limit my participants to teachers of grades two through eight.

The selection of interview participants was aimed to reflect the characteristics of maximum variation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) following the purpose of naturalistic research to provide rich descriptions of a context, collecting, analyzing, and describing a depth of information, sampling that is designed to result in reaching a maximum variation is best suited (p. 201). Interviewees taught a range of grade levels, were users of both small group discussion and whole class discussion, and included the following demographics:

- Years of service
- Teacher education
- Grade level taught
- Charter, private, or public school
- City, rural or suburban school

Of the ten teachers who used small group discussion, two taught in rural school districts, three in suburban districts, and four in cities and one had experiences in both city and suburban districts; eight taught in public schools, one in charter schools, and one had been employed at both private and charter schools within her eight year tenure; three teachers worked in districts with communities of high socio economic status (SES), six teachers worked in districts with low SES, and one teacher had experience working in communities of both high

and low SES. The average of years experience for the teachers that used small group discussion was eleven years, however there was a wide range among them. Two teachers had over twenty years experience, two had between fifteen and twenty years experience, four had between five and ten years experience, one teacher had four years experience and one teacher participant had completed her first year of teaching. (See Table 3.1.).

Of the five teachers who used teacher-led whole class discussion, one taught in a rural school, three taught in suburban schools and one taught in a city school. All five teachers taught in public schools, three districts with high SES and two with low SES. In terms of years of experience, one teacher had over twenty years experience, one teacher had between fifteen and twenty years experience, two teachers had between ten and fifteen years experience, and one had completed her first year of teaching.

Table 3.1

*School Demographics of All Teachers Interviewed*

Demographics	Teachers Who Use Small Group Discussion (N=10)	Teachers Who Use Whole Class Discussion (N=5)
Rural	2 teachers = 20%	1 teacher/s= 20%
Suburban	3 “ = 30%	3 “ = 60%
City	5 “ = 50%	1 “ = 20%
Public	8 “ = 80%	5 “ = 100%
Private	0 “	0
Charter	1 “ = 10%	0
Private & Charter	1 “ = 10%	
High SES	3 “ = 30%	3 “ = 60%
Low SES	6 “ = 60%	2 “ = 40%
High & Low SES	1 “ = 10%	
20+ Years Experience	2 “ = 20%	1 “ =20%
15-20 Years Experience	2 “ = 20%	1 “ =20%
10-15 Years Experience	0	2 “ =40%
5-10 Years Experience	4 “ = 40%	0
4 Years Experience	1 “ = 10%	0
1 Year Experience	1 “ = 10%	1 “ =20%

Research has consistently found that the dominant discussion format used by teachers is teacher led, whole class discussion (Nystrand, 2006). One of the online survey questions asked the teachers to identify their primary discussion approach. This divided the respondents into two groups, answering two different but parallel sets of questions. One set was for users of small group discussion and the other for teachers who identified themselves as users of whole class discussion. Of the teachers identified as users of whole class discussion on the survey, only one completed the survey questions about the benefits and challenges of using whole class discussion. Therefore, the omissions and gaps in responses left by online survey respondents resulted in incomplete data, and therefore, not useable in this study. I used the teacher interviews as my source of data. Most of the survey respondents and volunteers to participate in the interviews were teachers who used small group discussion. Perhaps their own use of small group discussion piqued an interest in a study about student discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion may not have felt in interest in student discussion. The few numbers of responses by teachers who used whole class discussion may mean they are not interested in responding or talking about student discussion.

### **Data Collection**

There are two tools for data collection: the online survey and teacher interviews. The survey and interviews were supported throughout by the researcher journal.

**The online survey.** Email invitations to participate in the online survey were sent directly to English/language arts teachers, grades two through eight, in the schools districts within my local ISD, as well as private and charter schools in the same area. In the invitation, I urged them to invite other teachers they knew who may be interested in participating. Using chain-referral or snowball sampling to recruit subjects presented an alternative way to contact teachers without using school administrative channels. If asked by administrators to participate

in a study, teachers may feel pressured to participate or complete the survey in a particular way. Teachers who wanted to extend the invitation to participate to other teachers were sent an email with a link to information about the study and the survey (see Appendix B).

The survey was designed to gather information about teachers' beliefs about small group literature discussion and factors that influence their decision to use, or not use, small group literature discussion approaches.

In quantitative research, survey data are used to describe numerical distributions in a population and create statistical representations that are generalized to a larger population. Conversely, "the qualitative survey analyzes the diversity of member characteristics within a population" (Jansen, 2010). While survey results will not be generalized, individual teachers may discover data and findings to fit or inform their own teaching practice.

After searching literacy research data sources, ERIC and Proquest, and searching literacy dissertations, no surveys were found with a focus on factors that influence teachers' use, or non-use, of small group literature discussion. Therefore, following a review of the literature, the online survey was constructed framing items around the research literature review, which included factors that influence teacher decisions regarding literature discussion. Completion time of the survey was approximately twenty minutes. Teacher respondent information included grade level taught and school community (urban, suburban, or rural; public, private, and charter). The survey included twenty-eight statements about teacher beliefs and factors regarding their use of literature discussion. These statements were framed in a Likert type format. The survey included four open questions to provide teachers the opportunity to provide their own extended responses.

Closing screens of the online survey included a note of appreciation for their participation.

**The interview.** “An interview is a conversation with a purpose” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 268). The purpose of this study was to determine factors that influence teachers’ decisions about the use, or non-use, of small group discussion. There was a gap in the literature for teacher voices about their beliefs and decisions regarding the use of literature discussion approaches. Interview questions were prepared in advance of the interviews, based upon the wealth of research information we have about small group literature discussion. In this study, fifteen teachers participated in two semi-structured and flexible interviews. The literature review provided the basis for the interview questions (Appendix C). Interview questions were designed to be flexible so new lines of questions or discussion could emerge as researcher and participants jointly participated in interviews aimed to create depth of teacher information.

Invitations to participate in the online survey were sent to teacher email addresses in early May, 2015. They were sent a second time, three weeks later. I checked for survey respondents daily. I contacted all respondents who volunteered to participate as volunteers. We talked about the study, I answered any questions, and we set up a place and time to meet. Interviews were conducted at the close of the school year for five teachers. With the one exception, second interviews were scheduled at the close of the first interview, and held the following week. One teacher was going out of the country for an extended time. We reconnected in August upon her return for the second interview. Interviews were conducted with six more teachers in July. The last four teachers were interviewed in late August, when teachers were getting ready to start the new school year. Most interviews lasted between forty-five minutes to an hour. One of the teachers could not meet in person with me. We conducted two telephone interviews, one week apart, using Googlevoice to record the conversations. Interviews were completed by the end of August, 2015. All interviews were

concluded in August, before the 2015-2016 school year began.

The interview process included: Initial moves during which participants were asked broad questions to facilitate free-thinking and speaking. Spradley (1979) refers to these as *grand tour* type questions, like “What’s a typical day like?” Following an initial phase where the interviewer and participant warmed up to one another and the participant had time to collect and organize his or her thoughts, “The interviewer began to sense what is salient about the information ... and was careful to keep the ‘talk turn’ with the respondent. The interviewer rarely learns anything when he or she is talking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 270). Interviewer probes were brief interjections that initiated more complete responses and included silence pauses like, ‘uh-huh’, ‘Ummm,’ and quick questions like, ‘Can you tell me more?’ ‘Can you give me an example?’ or to clarify, ‘You seem to be saying...’. Probes resulted in clarity, embellishment, and extended information (p. 271). The interview was opened with a very brief review of the purpose of the study, to find out more about how and why teachers use discussion. Following this, the interjections suggested by Lincoln and Guba encouraged participants to share their experiences and perspectives without the intrusion of researcher biases.

**Participant anonymity.** Privacy protection for respondents who participated in the survey alone was provided in two ways: 1) Invitations were sent directly to the invited teacher through their individual email address, not through their school office, administrator, or department head, and, 2) no personal identifiers were taken from those who participated in the online survey alone.

Anonymity of survey respondents who participated in the interview process was secured by the use of pseudonyms for both themselves and their districts. Identifiers were attached to the survey data when survey respondents indicated their willingness to participate



in the interview process. The identifiers were kept separately from the interview data. Pseudonyms were used through all phases and documents of the study. The list of identifiers is kept in a separate password protected computer. Access to the list of identifiers is limited to the primary investigator.

Despite measures taken to provide interviewees anonymity, it is possible that someone reading the interview comments included in the data analysis could recognize a teacher or classroom by the instruction, student activities, or materials shared by the participants. To minimize this possible breach of confidentiality, information about interview participants was held separately from the data and will be destroyed at the close of the study.

**Participant consent.** The opening screen to the online survey included an information letter. (Appendix D). The survey ended with the opportunity for respondents to volunteer to participate in the interview process. Another letter of information was included with this screen. (Appendix E). In this way, respondents who were considering participating in the interview portion of the study would have the consent information before they provided their contact information. At the first interview, written consent was received from interview participants. (Appendix F).

**Debriefing.** Debriefing feedback from the committee chairperson and the two peer reviewers was provided to ensure the collection of credible and valid information. Areas addressed in debriefing included over- or under-emphasis of points, vague descriptions, errors in data analysis, and identification of researcher biases (Onweugbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2008). Debriefing sessions were digitally recorded for the researcher's review and application to the study. The first debrief session was with the Chairperson of the committee. Her long-standing research expertise provided an experienced model. This model was subsequently applied in debriefing sessions with two other literacy professionals who also acted as my peer advisors.

**Reflective researcher journal.** In this descriptive study, I created the interviews and was the interviewer. My own knowledge of and experience using small group literature discussion could lead to bias. The connection between ‘the knower and the known’ (Lincoln & Guba, (1985) requires the qualitative researcher to be alert to bias. I kept a journal throughout the research process to reduce bias, recording all my reactions, assumptions, values, interpretations, preliminary findings, and data analysis proceedings. This journal was kept and used to help personally reflect upon the entire research process with the intent of maintaining the validity, reliability, and trustworthiness of the study.

In addition to the journal, after meetings (interview, debrief session, data audit session, or other communication (phone or e-mail), I recorded audio notes on my computer, noting responses and questions, while they were fresh in my mind. These gathered details, though not transcribed, were listened to and contributed to the rich description associated with qualitative research.

### **Data Analysis**

The process for managing, gathering, and interpreting data followed the guides established for qualitative research by LeCompte (2000); Lincoln and Guba, (1985); and Spradley (1979). LeCompte provides details for a five stage analysis process: “tidying up,” “finding items,” “creating stable sets,” “creating patterns,” and “assembling structures.” “Tidying up” provides a thorough processing of all data (copying, cataloging, labeling, and indexing. LeCompte identifies three sources for “finding items,” all of which are likely sources for this study: 1) items that occur with a high frequency, 2) items that are noteworthy in their absence, and 3) items that are declared by study participants (teacher interviewees). The digitally recorded interviews were transcribed, line-by-line. Listening to the recorded interviews as I slowly transcribed the data provided a recall of the interview as well as the

participant, his or her tone, and body language. Having read each interview several times, interviews were divided into units of ideas, which could be phrases, a sentence or sentences. Holsti (1969) explains coding is defined as the process in which “raw data are systemically transformed and aggregated into units which permit precise description of relevant content characteristics (p. 94)” (p. 203).

Coding units of information can be identified from “observational and interview notes, documents and records, notations, or nonverbal cues” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 346). These units were initially written above lines of text on hard copies of transcribed interviews. Data was later entered in a spreadsheet to accommodate the ongoing rereading and review of the data. All units of data were coded and included in the spreadsheet to “err on the side of over-inclusion” as it is “easier to reject what later appears to be irrelevant material than to recapture information suddenly realized to be relevant but discarded earlier” (p. 346).

Some initial categories came directly from the study questions, the survey, and the literature review, for example, scaffolding or discussion instruction.

The constant, comparative evaluation of data created layers of data analysis sifted into unique domains. Domain analysis aggregated data units into structures that were then re-read and re-analyzed in componential analysis. For example, a closer look at a domain related to teacher knowledge was made possible by using additional terms including: teacher resourcefulness, teacher knowledge, and teacher knowledge and application. These additional terms or categories created differentiations that clarified understandings on the part of the inquirer.

As I read and reread each transcribed interview, a phrase, a sentence, or sentences gave rise to an identifiable idea. Bogdan and Biklen (1982) describe qualitative research as “working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching

for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what you will tell others” (p. 145).“ I assigned a category representative of its meaning to each unit of data. I kept the driving question of this research on a journal page in front of me as I read each transcribed interview. Additional questions also affected the focus of my analysis, and were added to the list of questions, including:

- What are the challenges of small group discussion?
- What are the challenges of teacher-led whole class discussion?
- What are the benefits of small group discussion?
- What are the benefits of teacher-led whole class discussion?
- How does education impact a teacher’s ability to use small group discussion?
- How are teacher’ choices about discussion approach related to their philosophies about how students learn?
- Are there outside issues beyond the control of the teacher that impact their decision

I transcribed each interview in its entirety as I did not want to miss any information or factors that may be related to student discussion. Using hard copies of each interview, I penciled in categories for each unit, above the line of text. At the same time, I kept a word document with the expanding list of leveled categories and their descriptions to guide my consistent analysis. A first identifier, or category, was the phrase or sentence type: rationale, belief, example, evaluative statement, reflection, or observation. One of these six became the first level category given to each unit.

As I analyzed each interview the numbers of categories expanded (n=139). (see Appendix G). At this stage of analysis I was focused on identifying and closely describing teacher ideas. Additional levels of categories were identified and tagged to each unit. The second level identified type of discussion, factors related to the student, or factors related to the teacher. The third level identified factors outside the teacher or classroom, factors particular to the discussion approach (i.e., benefits, challenges), and factors related to teacher

knowledge and training. The fourth level provided specifics of benefits and challenges (i.e., student engagement or does not meet teacher goals). The following example shows the category abbreviations I penciled in above a specific quote, in italics. I have also included the category description, which would have been available for my review on the category list.

*I knew then that small group discussion would be a part of my classroom.*

Coded as: Reflection/small group/teacher plan

I considered this statement a reflection because the teacher was thinking and talking about his or her approach to instruction. The second level, 'Small Group,' was used to identify her or her decision to use small group discussion. The third level, 'Teacher Plan,' was chosen because that decision impacted the teacher's plan for instruction.

Often, categorizing was not so clear-cut. For example, units were not always attributable to either small group or whole class discussion. In the following unit, the interviewee shared his perspective of his seventh grade students' view of reading.

*That deeper experience of reading is not an integral, essential part of their life.*

Coded as: Evaluation/Student Engagement/Surface Reading/Not Relevant to

Student

I coded this an evaluative statement, or a judgment of his students' engagement with a negative impact on reading because the activity was not relevant to the student. This comment was not directly related to either small group or whole class discussion, but I considered the potential of this perspective as a factor that influenced this teacher's choice of discussion approach.

Some of the categories were anticipated before the interviews began because they arose from the review of the literature for this study. For example, Almasi, (1995), Chinn et al. (2001), Goatley et al. (1995), and Wilkinson and Son (2010) observed the positive impact of literature discussion upon student engagement. Therefore, I anticipated 'student engagement'

as a category. Clark (2009) found student discussion to support reading and discussion strategies, while a meta-analysis by Murphy et al., (2009) found discussion to support high level comprehension. Findings by Murphy et al., and Clark suggested ‘comprehension’ and ‘reading and discussion strategies’ as categories likely to emerge from teacher comments.

The literature review of prior research alerted me to benefits and challenges related to student discussion approaches and when I found mentions of ‘benefits’ and ‘challenges’ as I studied the interview data, those became categories. No studies were found specific to how and why teachers implement discussion, the focus of this study. Therefore, factors particular to teacher decisions about discussion use came from the interviews. Categories for factors emerged after reading and rereading teacher comments about 1) their own practice, or 2) their observations of how other teachers used discussion. For instance, in the following unit of data, the teacher’s awareness of the impact of her opinion of a book guided her practice to introduce books and led to the creation of three new categories: “Teacher Practice” at the second level, ‘Teacher/Student Relationship’ at the third level and “Positive Buy-In” at the fourth level.

*When I am sharing book talks with kids, and I express, ‘I love this book,’ many of them will sign up for that book. It’s like my feelings for the book are contagious.”*

Coded as: Teacher Practice/Teacher-Student Relationship/Positive Student Buy-In

The layering of the categories reflects a range of factors described by the teacher about her practice. The category ‘Teacher/Student Relationship,’ allowed me to identify the teacher’s comment about the importance of her relationship with the students. The coding ‘Teacher Practice’ was created to identify her acknowledgement of the power of sharing her passion for reading, which she put to use in her teaching practice. The code “Student Buy-In” identifies her awareness of her impact on the students’ positive response to buy-in, in this case, to try out

the book the teacher loves.

The number of levels and categories in each level increased as more interview data was analyzed. The compare and contrast approach is based on the idea that themes represent the ways in which texts are either similar or different from each other. I repeatedly engaged in the “constant-comparative method” (Glaser, 1978) conducting a careful line-by-line analysis of each interview and asked, “What is this about?” and “How does this differ from the preceding or following statements?”(pp. 66-72).

I kept adding levels and categories until all data were described. Additionally I would re-analyze data to reconsider the new categories. To check my own interpretation of the data, the first four interviews and the categorization list were given to a peer reviewer to analyze the data. This resulted in 83% agreement between my coding and that of the peer reviewer. Then, interviews eight through twelve were coded by the reviewer. This peer review resulted in an 85% agreement.

A spreadsheet was then created from the coding and tables were generated from the spreadsheet.

The repeated readings of the interviews, the coding and the generation of tables led to the emergence of early themes that centered on teacher perspectives about discussion in three areas:

- Student related factors
- Teacher related factors
- Other or outside factors

### **Trustworthiness**

The promise and satisfaction of conducting research, an exhaustive process, came from the desire to help advance the human condition, particularly through education. In this study, it

is hoped teachers, teacher-educators who read the results will hear teacher voices and connect and reflect upon small group literature discussion approaches. It is hoped the teacher educator community will gain a deeper understanding of teacher' perspectives that explain why teachers choose or choose not to use small group literature discussion. This new understanding may advance teacher education in the area of small group literature discussion approaches. These hopes rest on the rigor and trustworthiness of this research. Without trustworthiness, research is of no consequence.

In conventional (quantitative) research, four criteria have become known to answer questions related to trustworthiness: internal validity, external validity, reliability, and objectivity. Criteria unique to qualitative inquiry methodology have emerged to address these four elements that establish trustworthiness. These criteria include: "‘credibility’ (in place of internal validity), ‘transferability’ (in place of external validity), ‘dependability’ (in place of reliability), and ‘confirmability’ (in place of objectivity)" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 218-219). Specific methodological strategies incorporated into naturalistic inquiry ensure trustworthiness.

**Credibility.** In this study, credibility is secured by the use of a researcher's reflective journal providing the means to think through and critically review my assumptions, interpretations, and decisions. The journal provided a source of questions and ideas to share with my peer advisors. Interviews were conducted face-to-face to develop a familiarity and team-type relationship between researcher and interviewee. This and peer-reviewer scrutiny of coded interviews support the credibility of the voices represented by the teachers. Debriefing sessions with two peer advisors support the credibility of the data analysis. These debriefing sessions worked to confirm that the teacher voices presented belong to the teachers and not the biases of the researcher/interviewer.



**Transferability.** The limited numbers of participants in this study did not allow for findings to be generalized, however, Stake (1994) suggests that each case [interview participant] may, though unique, may be representative of others within the larger group. Given the dense, descriptive narrative presented and established as trustworthy, others may determine the transferability of the results to their own situation. The sample, selected to achieve maximum variation, can support the opportunity for other teachers to find the study transferable. Transferability is secured by the detailed analysis, and implications drawn from the rich narratives by teachers who volunteered to talk about factors that influenced their use of small group discussion or whole class discussion. Teachers or teacher educators who read these narratives may find them transferable because of the thorough descriptions that allow them to make connections to their own practices.

**Dependability.** Dependability is the likelihood that if the study were repeated, the results would be the same. Qualitative perspective assumes the existence of different realities, and that realities are socially constructed. Therefore, it is understand that no study could be repeated in exactly the same way. The investigator and interview participants would be different and other values and realities would then be found. However, the thorough and reiterative analysis process, with peer review checks establishes the findings as dependable.

**Confirmability.** Confirmability of the study findings is supported by the reflective researcher journal that allowed me to reflect upon personally held values and biases that could influence this study. As I am a teacher who uses small group literature discussion, I looked to debriefing sessions to share these reflections with my peer advisors to ensure my biases did not impact my representation of teacher voices. To establish confirmability, coding was checked initially with my faculty advisor, then later by two peer advisors. All decisions and procedures were discussed with peer advisors and recorded in my journal.

In addition to the journal, following all interviews, meetings, and phone calls, I made digital recordings of my recall of those meetings. This created a paper/digital trail that was available for my review and recall of details and ideas that affect the entire research process from survey and initial interviews to final data analysis.

In this chapter I discussed the specifics and rationale for the methodology of this study. In Chapter IV the findings are presented, and in Chapter V those results are discussed.

## CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH FINDINGS

This qualitative study was based upon one broad research question: What factors influence teachers' decisions to use, or not use, small group literature discussion approaches? In this chapter I discuss the findings from interviews with fifteen teachers: ten who used small group discussion and five who used whole class, teacher-led discussion. Findings arose from the analysis of the interview data, particularly the discussion-related terms used by teachers in their interviews, as well as the ideas, behaviors, interactions, and classroom incidents they talked about.

### Emerging Themes

Interviews were conducted in search of answers to the guiding question of this study, "What factors influence teacher use, or non-use, of small group discussion?" The talk by fifteen teacher interviewees included: their own experiences as students, their education and/or training, their teaching practices, their goals, their challenges, and their role as teacher. They talked about demands on teachers, and they spoke about their classrooms, colleagues, administrators, students and themselves as teachers. The early analysis of the interview data led to a "naming of parts" which initially segregated teachers' ideas about discussion into categories like benefits, curriculum, teacher strategies, student needs, discussion skills, etc. However, through the reiterative process fundamental to qualitative research, threads of commonalities began to surface. Things said, and left unsaid, were similar by teachers within each group, those who used small group discussion and those who used whole class discussion. Talk by teachers between the two groups was different. These commonalities within groups, and differences across groups, led to a close look at teaching philosophy. Personally held teaching philosophies, known or unknown to the teacher, unified their ideas about teaching practices, purposes, beliefs, and curriculum, allowing them to deal with choices

and conflicts they faced as they planned and executed units of study. Those philosophies undergirded and directed their teaching decisions. “As a matter of daily practice, educators formulate goals, discuss values, and set priorities...Educators confront philosophical issues on a daily basis, often not recognizing them as such” (Rozycki, 1999, p. 551-564).

Some teachers reported acquiring philosophies as a result of years of university studies. Other teachers spoke about philosophies adopted from an influential mentor. Still others spoke of the cumulative influences their own experiences as students had upon their teaching practices. The themes that emerged from the in-depth analysis of the teacher interviews are connected to the philosophies their talk revealed. Therefore, the theme about teacher philosophies is the first to be discussed. Those teacher-held beliefs shaped teachers’ visions of learning, classrooms, students, and teachers. Just as teachers’ philosophies were connected to teachers’ practices and use of discussion, their philosophies connect the themes raised in this study. The themes include:

- Teacher’s perspectives about their *philosophy of education* differed between teachers who used small group discussion and whole class discussion,
- Teacher’s *talk about students* differed between teachers who used small group discussion and whole class discussion, and
- Teacher’s *talk about the teacher’s role or purpose* differed between those who used small group discussion and whole class discussion

### **Theme 1: Teachers’ Perspectives About Their Philosophy of Education Differed Between Teachers Who Used Small Group Discussion and Whole Class Discussion**

The differences in teacher philosophies reflect the paradigm continuum from behaviorist traditional approaches (teacher-centered approaches) to constructivist approaches (student-centered approaches). In this study, comments by teachers revealed their position on this philosophical spectrum. Their comments indicated a striking difference between the ideology that created two distinct classroom experiences: classroom led by the teacher who

directed whole class discussion and classroom with student led, small group discussion.

All teachers made comments that revealed their philosophical stance, however, more teachers who used small group discussion overtly stated their philosophy. Four of the ten teachers identified as users of small group discussion either stated the belief that 'learning is social' or described their practice as constructivist.

Participant SG #2, an eighth grade English and math teacher, reflected upon the way his undergraduate experience became the foundation of his teaching practice.

*When I was at University, I was introduced to social constructivism and Vygotsky and that learning is social theory... kids learn from each other, so when kids that can't yet infer or support ideas with evidence from the text... they learn that... becoming aware of that by seeing their peers do it, as opposed to a teacher telling them. That is powerful for them.... Modeling by other students is more effective... That's why you have to get them discussing. That's where the real learning happens.*

*When I was at University, I was introduced to social constructivism and Vygotsky and that learning theory. It took me a while to read it and process it and then I came to that moment when I realized, "Yes... this is how learning happens.*

Participant SG #3, a sixth grade English and math teacher did not use a specific term, as did the teacher in the previous example, but her stated beliefs place her on the constructivist end of the philosophical spectrum.

*Learning is social... kids learn from each other, so when kids that can't yet infer or support ideas with evidence from the text... they learn that... becoming aware of that by seeing their peers do it, as opposed to a teacher telling them. That is powerful for them.... Modeling by other students is more effective... That's why you have to get them discussing. That's where the real learning happens.*

Participant SG #4, a middle school librarian talked about her work in classrooms across curricular disciplines. She described students modeling for each other in small groups and also identified that exchange as the place learning happens. "This speaks directly to that learning theory

*piece... the whole constructivist theory about learning being social. When a student struggles to come to an idea with the invested help of his group members... as that idea takes shape, they are all learning.”* She continued, identifying her philosophical stance, *“My belief is learning is a social process...I was committed and my teaching today continues to be based on constructivist beliefs.”*

The last of the four teachers, SG #8, started her career in seventh grade science, but following a few years as a stay-at-home mother, returned to teach a self-contained classroom at the elementary level. As she considered the range of her teaching experiences, she noted her consistent student-centered approach. *“I fit well with constructivist thought... Interest builds learning...real learning. I could memorize something and have, but that is never as effective. Real learning provides a chance to demonstrate your passion about something.”*

To continue the discussion about the philosophical focus of teachers who used small group discussion, two more teachers did not specifically use the term constructivism or ‘learning is social,’ its definitive phrase, but their reflective description of learning placed them at the constructivist end of the spectrum. Having described example after example of her student-centered elementary practice at multiple grade levels, participant SG #7 paused to reflect and sum-up her approach and beliefs. *“I’m discovering that in the classroom, I’m really a hippy! I really believe students learn best when kids are comfortable... That learning should be a very chill experience. And if things are working, great and if they are not, we need to move your group somehow, so things will be better for the learners.”*

The second participant, SG #9, considered her own practice as a former elementary teacher and her more current experiences with many classroom teachers in her role as an elementary school librarian. She clearly defined the place where she believed learning happens.

*I feel like a lot of times, teachers spend a lot of time preparing the wrong things... They spend more time reading the book and coming up with 'the' questions when they would do better by picking great text... And then teach them how to talk about their thoughts... I feel that it is the giving of that responsibility to the kids for giving the ideas... but giving more of the responsibility to teachers to provide the structure.*

In contrast to the teachers who practiced small group discussion, teachers who used teacher-led, whole class discussion did not make comments about the learning theory that supported their practice, with the exception of one. Speaking of her work as a seventh grade English teacher, participant WC #5 described herself as a constructivist but was also clear about her preferred discussion method: teacher-led, whole class discussion.

*I am a constructivist, through and through... and if you made meaning from the text, than that's what it is for you... and I want kids to feel like literature is a relevant part of their lives... I've told you, I'm not enjoying discussion... it's not working for everyone... I have found that teacher led discussion is probably the most effective way to discuss literature in our seventh grade.*

This teacher spoke about her failed attempts to use small group discussion. The practices she described were teacher-centered with her at the front of the class, reading aloud and asking questions to guide students' learning in a safe teacher-controlled environment. Therefore, despite her assertion that she was a constructivist, I placed her with those teachers situated at the behaviorist end of the spectrum. While she expressed appreciation for the constructivist theory, her teaching practice was teacher-centered.

The other four interview participants who used whole class discussion, WC #1 through WC #4, did not make comments about a philosophical affiliation. The absence of comments about an educational philosophy distinguished them from the teachers that used small group discussion. Their placement on the philosophical spectrum was inferred from comments like that of WC #5 above. To support the accurate placement of participants I compared their comments about teaching practice, their role as teacher, and their statements about students to the following table comparing traits related to behaviorist and constructivist

teaching practices. Table 4.1 differentiates constructivist and behaviorist learning theories in terms of the roles of the teacher and student (Gray, 1997; Harasims, 2012, Rogers & Frieberg, 1994).

Table 4.1

*Behaviorism and Constructivism: Comparison of Philosophical Traits*

Teacher/Student	Behaviorism	Constructivism
Teacher Role	Class manager	Builds community of learners
	Student manager	Engages student in self-reflection, evaluation
	Assessment creator, manager	Collaborates with students on activity goals and outcomes
	Outcome based	Process based
	Shaping behavior w/ rewards & consequences	Gradual release of responsibility to students
	Distributes content	Scaffolds discursive, problem-solving skills
	Directs classroom activities	Works to engage student in
Student Activities	Flash Cards, recitation, rote memory	Meaning making
	Providing the right answer	Questions
	Listening to lecture	Problem solving
	Responds to teacher prompts	Co-creates learning activities
	Working for extrinsic rewards	Working for intrinsic rewards
	Passive stance	Active stance
	Isolated	Small group; inquiry
	Following teacher lead	Student-led

I connected the following statement by WC #1, a seventh grade English teacher, to a behaviorist philosophical stance. *“I’m a pretty old school teacher... I mean I’m young, but I run my class very old school. I am in the front of the class... I teach, present a lesson or explain a project and then they either read or work.”* This statement places the teacher as the manager of the class and as the distributor of content. It also places the student in a passive stance, either reading or



working as directed by the teacher. WC #1 clearly expressed her responsibility to control her teaching environment. She defined her role as teacher and distributor of information and the students' role to listen, learn, and do.

WC #3, a third grade teacher, expressed her struggle to manage student-led discussion, and in so doing, she made comments that situated her on the behaviorist end of the spectrum.

*I lead most of the discussion. The management piece with all of this is that you have students that struggle with attention and organization... and... it's a lot to manage.*

*And these kids... they're not independent enough to go to the board and say, "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to do that." I have cards on the bulletin board... with cards that have the name of the book, the assignment, and when it is due... And then they were to go back and get going on it. They're not mature enough to do that yet... Some of them are...but not the ones with the attention issues...So, I'm either leading the group, or being interrupted by the rest of the class to lead them!*

WC #3 explained that a school-wide literacy initiative had been instituted that year, designed to help teachers engage students in small group discussion of stories provided with the program. WC #3 chose to work with one group at a time while the rest of the students were to work silently at their desks. Therefore, she organized and directed student activity for those not in the group and she led the discussion in the group. Her perspective places her as manager of students and activities, 'leading' and controlling the discussions.

Comments from participant WC #4, a seventh grade English and science teacher, also situated him on the behaviorist end of the spectrum. (Table 4.1) *"As a seventh grade English teacher, kids are talking all the time, or they will talk as much as they are allowed to. But for instruction purposes, I generally use whole class, allowing opportunities for students to ask questions as I go."* This teacher recognized the power of students' desire to talk, but while he expected them to socially engage with one another and even gave the students time to talk together in groups, he located the place of learning not in student groups, but in whole class, teacher-led

instruction. WC #4 continued,

*So, I give them this group opportunity, and I want them to drive it, and they do enjoy it but they are not driving very far... Their group talk is not really discussion of literature. Hence, I always use whole class discussion whenever I want to deliver curriculum I am responsible for.*

Therefore, while WC #4 allowed his students to engaged in 'group talk,' his practice to control the delivery of the content through teacher-led whole class discussion placed him on the behaviorist end of the spectrum. He allowed his students to talk, but maintained control of the responsibilities to direct student activity and distribute the content. (Table 4.1)

The last of the five teachers to be associated with teacher-centered, or behaviorist practices was a first year teacher participant, WC #2. At the beginning of the interview, she recalled her university classes and an emphasis on small group student discussion. However, when asked about those practices, she could only recall the discussion strategy she used during her methods classes, a strategy called 'think-pair-share.' She was surprised she could not remember more.

*Everyone else had to come up with a way to model discussion... I'm not remembering much, just that we all had to do it... that we all had to model and do an activity with discussion... I feel like, I remember seeing my peers coming up with all these great ideas, but then you forget them and kind of get stuck in what you were thinking, what you used... Get stuck using the same old ideas we used before.*

Mid-way through the interview, WC #2 stopped to reflect and realized she was more comfortable using teacher-led approaches.

*...I'm actually learning a lot about myself during this interview... When I think about it, I am personally more apt to do the whole class discussions...Being my first year of teaching I was so overwhelmed and things were crazy busy and so large group, whole class discussion just worked.*

She became the fifth teacher associated with behaviorism, as she reflectively identified her preference for teacher-led practices. The other ten interview participants (SG #1-10)

were associated with constructivist beliefs and practices.

Once each teacher was identified at one end of the philosophical spectrum or the other, analysis of the data moved beyond comparisons of comments by different teachers, to comparisons of teachers belonging to one of two groups: teachers who used small group discussion and those who used teacher-led, whole class discussion. Identifying the teachers across this spectrum is appropriate for this study because small group discussion is based upon Vygotskian theory that learning is social. In behaviorist techniques, the teacher provides the information and the activities while in small group discussion the students themselves are more in control of and engaged in their learning. Teachers' philosophical stances shape the learning environment and the activities used. Identifying the stance of each participant helped establish the differences and similarities between those teachers that used small group discussion and those that did not. The remaining themes, which also are impacted by teachers' personally held philosophies, are:

- Teacher's *talk about students* differed between teachers who used small group and whole class discussion, and
- Teacher's *talk about the teacher's role or purpose* differed between those who used small group and whole class discussion.

## **Theme 2: Teacher's Talk About Students Differed Between Teachers Who Used Small Group Discussion and Whole Class Discussion**

A comparison of the statements made by the two groups of teachers revealed that teachers who used whole class discussion talked differently about their students than teachers who used small group discussion. All fifteen teachers interviewed in this study made comments about their students that were categorized as belief statements. Each teacher who used teacher-led, whole class discussion, participants WC #1-5, made comments about her/his own decision to use whole class. These comments described their students as not developmentally

ready or not invested enough to participate well in small group discussion. (Table 4.2)

Table 4.2

*Comments About Students by Teachers Who Used Whole Class Discussion*

Pseudonym	Comment	Trait
WC #2	I know not all children are listening to our discussion but they probably wouldn't be involved in small groups either.	Not invested
	They're uncomfortable (in discussion), they don't know where to go... and they don't know how to get discussion going.	Unskilled
WC #3	And these kids... they're not independent enough to go to the board and say, "Oh yeah, I'm supposed to do that" and go back and get going on it. They're not mature enough to do that yet...	Immature
	We don't do literature circles, like everyone has a role... That's really difficult to do in my opinion... They are not sophisticated enough to do that...	Immature
WC #4	I think generally students struggle to care about participating... And it's bigger than discussion. Kids don't see themselves as readers. They do not come into my classroom as someone who is passionate about reading and sees value in reading.	Not invested
	I believe kids can be trained to spot literary stuff, but I haven't seen them get to the point where they are reflecting, analyzing, and then connecting the dots. They read too passively to experience that level.	Immature
WC #5	So I think the built-in problem with 7th grade is their development as human beings. They don't have the confidence to speak up... A lot of kids just don't feel safe doing that.	Emotionally immature
	There's a certain amount of ... maybe... intellectual laziness... of not wanting to go further or think about it (literature), beyond the obvious or concrete things.	Lazy
WC #1	Kids don't know how to talk about books... In fact, they would need to learn how to manage their talk together.	Unskilled

These comments in Table 4.2 revealed teachers' beliefs about the fixed limitations of their students to participate in or manage small group discussion. These opinions of their students were given as a reason to abandon or not adopt small group discussion.

In contrast, none of the ten small group teachers, participants SG #1-10, made statements about their students' abilities or inabilities. Instead, based on their constructivist beliefs, these teachers believed their students would engage and learn; therefore if students were not learning, teachers who used small group discussion did not think their students as not ready, not able, or not interested. Instead they reflected upon their practice and ways they could amend the students' environment to engage them in their bookclubs. In some of their statements focused on what students required in order to be able to engage in small group discussion. These student requirements predominantly fell into two categories: a safe learning environment and a trustworthy teacher/student relationship. Table 4.3 shows the total number of comments made related to each of the two categories (safe environment and student/teacher relationship) and representative quotes. It should be noted that there were comments by teachers who used small group discussion that mentioned students with behaviors that challenged the success of group discussion, for example, *"...In every class you'll have one or two kids that will scoff at, roll their eyes just at the mention that we need to have meaningful discussions in class."* However, teachers who used small group followed these and similar comments with a means of resolving the behavioral challenges. They reflectively assessed their students' needs and then took action to provide the change they determined necessary to better support student discussion. As SG #1 explained, *"You just learn what works. Well, you learn what doesn't, then you add something to make it work."* Teachers who used small group discussion resolved to make student discussion work and each described a variety of actions they took to make change to their classroom environment, instruction, or to the student groups. Operating from their constructivist beliefs, they persisted, despite and through challenges. As shown in Table 4.2, above, without a belief system to sustain teacher decisions and actions that support student-centered approaches, teachers abandon attempts at small

group discussion. The comments in Tables 4.2 and 4.3 show the contrast between the two groups of teachers.

Table 4.3

*Belief Statements About What Students Require to Successfully Participate in Small Group Discussion by Teachers Who Use Small Group Discussion*

Total Comments	Comment	Category
36 comments about safety	Conversation equates to natural where kids are <b><u>comfortable</u></b> and safe.	Safe Environment
	They need support but first to go deeper... they need a safe environment.	Safe Environment
	Without that freedom to speak, to share in a safe environment... kids are on edge... having to worry about their ideas being judged, dismissed, or being called out for not speaking. Who can learn in that environment? So, my acceptance of kids as they are makes the room for them to be as they are. They have safe space to move, to speak, to think, to share... It is <b><u>comfortable</u></b> and a place kids are free to take chances and learn.	Safe Environment
	But above everything, I think it is real important for students to feel safe in their classrooms...of course physically safe, but I mean that they feel safe to share their ideas without others making fun of them or laughing at them.	Safe Environment
33 comments about student/teacher relationship	Kids in my class participate in discussion because they know that I care about them... that I am invested in them. I will go to their softball games... their basketball games. Someone tells me about their dance recital and I'll be there. So they know I'm invested in them. That connection helps with student buy-in.	Teacher/Student Relationship
	But when you do all the groundwork that supports discussion... kids will naturally do that... And when you establish good relationships with kids, they feel <b><u>comfortable</u></b> sharing their concerns...	Teacher/Student Relationship
	You really have to partner carefully. I don't let anyone choose their own partner. Partners are something I decide. You get a feel for the kids early on.... This is all part of that student/teacher relationship that is so critical to establishing a discussion based classroom.	Teacher/Student Relationship

These comments by teachers who use small group discussion include the terms ‘safety’ and ‘teacher/student relationship’ but they reveal more about teacher beliefs that support their use of small group discussion. Participant SG #2 commented, “*In English, and probably social studies, it (discussion) is a natural fit.*” In this comment, the teacher reveals his belief that discussion is ‘natural’ in these classes. The belief in student discussion as ‘natural’ would support his use of small group discussion by providing the foundation for his own expectation for student discussion. His personal expectation for discussion would then be projected to his students to take part in what he envisions as a natural behavior.

As noted in Table 4.3, teachers who used small group discussion made thirty-six comments about student safety as a requirement for small group discussion. In terms of discussion, their comments were not focused on what students could or could not do, but elements of classroom climate that students required to support their discussion.

The following comment by participant SG #3 about safety and discussion also revealed the teacher’s expected outcome of student engagement in discussion, deeper level thinking and communication skills.

*If I just have to read something passively and passively answer questions that are comprehension based... then I don’t have to infer, or question, or predict... They need those support skills, but first to **go deeper**... they need a safe environment.*

As does this comment, comments about safety and discussion by teachers who used small group discussion revealed an appreciation of not only the need for a safe environment, but also an understanding of the interwoven nature of safety and skills that lead to effective discussion. In Table 4.3, three of the comments included the word ‘comfortable.’ In their interviews five teachers who used small group discussion made sixteen comments that included the word ‘comfortable’ as they described the climate students needed to engage in discussion. The dictionary definition for ‘comfortable’ is a) *being in a state of physical or mental*

*comfort; contented and undisturbed; b) producing mental comfort or ease; easy to accommodate oneself to or associate with.* In this comment by SG #3 the criteria for ‘comfort’ extended and clarified the meaning of ‘safety.’

*Without that freedom to speak, to share in a safe environment... kids are on edge... having to worry about their ideas being judged, dismissed, or being called out for not speaking. Who can learn in that environment? So, my acceptance of kids as they are makes the room for them to be as they are. They have safe space to move, to speak, to think, to share... It is **comfortable** and a place kids are free to take chances and learn.*

To be safe may mean to be free of attack, physically or verbally. By adding the word ‘comfortable’, these teachers demonstrated a higher expectation for the discursive environment they create... a place where students would be ‘at ease’ and ‘able to associate with and accommodate oneself to others.’ Perhaps, these teachers’ beliefs about student comfort perpetuated the environment they created, as asserted by Hargreaves and Fullan (1992), “It is what teachers think, what teachers believe, and what teachers do at the level of the classroom that ultimately shapes the kind of learning that young people get” (ix).

Conversely, WC #2, a first-year teacher, made two comments that included the word ‘comfortable.’ When speaking about her student teaching assignment in which she used small group discussion, she noted the comfort students exhibited as they followed her lead. “So, the way I did discussion was to first get the kids very comfortable with it, by me leading and modeling.” She mentioned that small group discussion was highly supported in her university methods courses. However, upon teaching her own class, she moved to whole class discussion because, “It was easier for me to hold whole class discussions.” She used the word comfortable once more, talking about students in whole class discussion. “This was whole class discussion, led by me, and of course, students that are more comfortable speaking are those that raise their hands...”

There were three other comments using the word comfortable by teachers who used



whole class discussion. Participant WC #1 commented, *“I do what works in my classroom and that is what I am comfortable with.”* Participant WC #2 noted students’ discomfort with small group. *“They’re uncomfortable (in discussion), they don’t know where to go...”*

In these stated beliefs about students, teachers who used whole class discussion revealed they did so because they believed their students were not comfortable with small group discussion, or able to conduct small group discussion... or because the teachers were more comfortable with whole class discussion. In contrast, teachers who used small group discussion did not look at the limitations of students, but considered factors outside the student’s control that might limit their ability to discuss. These differences relate to their philosophical differences.

A philosophy positioned more closely to the behaviorist end of the spectrum generally leads to practices that engage teachers as deliverers of content. Teachers in this study who used teacher-led, whole class discussion, defined their role to deliver knowledge to students. Conversely, teachers who used small group discussion placed the site of learning with students and students’ process to make meaning. This revealed a constructivist philosophy. Philosophical differences between the two groups also extended to the third theme.

### **Theme 3: Teacher’s Talk About the Teacher’s Role or Purpose Differed Between Those Who Used Small Group Discussion and Whole Class Discussion**

Comments by all teachers interviewed indicated their perception of their role as teacher. Analysis of those comments revealed differences between teachers who used small group discussion and those who used whole class discussion. This section is divided in two sections: The first section presents discussion of comments by teachers who used whole class discussion and the second section discusses comments by teachers who used small group discussion.

### Comments about the role of the teacher by teachers who used whole class

**discussion.** Comments by this group of teachers revealed that they believed their role as teacher was to know and to deliver the content. These comments reveal that teachers who use whole class discussion focus on the instruction and the management of students to listen to their delivery of the content and when called upon, answer teacher questions with the correct answer, anticipated by the teacher. These comments, made by each of the teachers who used whole class discussion, were similar to the comments included earlier to establish their teacher-led, behaviorist philosophy.

Table 4.4 *Comments About Teacher' Choices of Whole Class Teacher Led Discussion*

Teacher	Comment
WC #1	It is my job to know the curriculum and make sure they are doing assignments to help them learn that identified content.
	The units we developed contain content I need to teach... In these I ask the questions, I control the flow of the discussion and there's always someone that knows the answers.
	I watch and make sure that students are listening... And students that answer provide that targeted info... The whole class discussion works for me... It is a way I manage the students and the content they need to get.
WC #3	As far as the discussion... I lead most of the discussion.
	We have a comprehension program this year called "Making Meaning." And that gives us mini-lessons- about 15-25 minutes-that is more direct teaching. I'll do the mini lessons with everyone (whole class)...
	I'm sure there's tons of things that didn't work.... Trying to stay away from just answering the kids who raise their hand, trying to get everyone to be accountable... Not to allow the kids who always participate to drive the discussion...Using strategies like these keeps the discussion going and keeps everyone involved. That's hard to manage and the reason I still lead the class.
WC #4	I use whole class discussion to cover a new idea or concept, or to get an idea of what we generally know as a class. That might be certain objectives related to literature study, like things related to author's craft or theme or plot structure.
WC #5	I have found that teacher led discussion is probably the most effective way to discuss literature in our 7th grade level.
	In whole class discussion, I'm asking questions, kids are answering, I'm calling on kids randomly, sometimes on kids that aren't raising their hands...Because you get the same kids raising their hand every time...
WC #2	It was good that we listened to it (tape of a novel) together because I could pause the tape and ask, "Whoa! What just happened?" "How does that make you feel?" So when I taught that novel, it was whole class, teacher led discussion the whole way.

Comments in support of whole class discussion, by teachers who used whole class discussion, were focused on the control it provided for classroom management purposes including moving the curriculum forward. However, each teacher also acknowledged the potential for small group discussion as shown in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

*Teacher Acknowledgement of Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	Comment
WC #1	I know about lit circles and student discussion would be interesting for the students,
	I think it's (group discussion) an idea with a lot of potential... It sounds like a wonderful way for kids to work together
WC #2	In college, group discussion was definitely something taught and talked about. It was definitely a methods class... I can remember a class where all the students were from different curricular areas, math, English, science, etc. , but we were all grades 6-12... and then I took another methods class that was just for English teachers, grades 6-12. ... I feel like, I remember seeing my peers coming up with all these great ideas, but then you forget them and kind of get stuck in what you were thinking, what you used... Get stuck using the same old ideas we used before. ..Discussion would be talked about and examples were given.
WC #3	Now one thing I observed a fourth grade teacher do ... she's new to our district this year... But she's been trained in some sort of management system, an engagement system. There is not a moment when her kids are not engaged in talking to each other... So I'm encouraged to teach them that language...
	Student discussion, especially with the higher readers... that could be a place they could dig deeper into complex issues in the text and stuff...
WC #4	I do use group work... I do so because kids are so social and they love to do anything if it involves group... There are times when kids are working together that they ask one another questions about the task... so it is possible for them to learn from each other...
WC #5	It's fun to think about the Kagan stuff we've been exposed to here in PD... and to create groups and to get kids interdependent with their thinking about something... And that's the goal ... I think that could happen in discussion... I think building off other people's ideas could be very positive and motivating, and pleasant brain candy for kids and education for real life experiences...

Teachers who used whole class discussion felt their responsibility was to deliver content, however, they recognized that small group discussion had the potential to engage and interest their students. Their statements raised questions about why they did not use small group discussion and led the participants to talk at length about their reasons for not doing so. These reasons included:

- Student Inabilities (See Table 4.2, p. 66)
- Lack of Student Buy-In
- Insufficient Teacher Time
- Difficulties with Classroom Management and Accountability
- Teacher Lack of Education/Training for Small Group Discussion

**Lack of student buy-in.** Reflecting upon her students' unengaged responses to her teacher-led discussion, comments by participant WC #1, a seventh grade English teacher, revealed her assumption that if students would not be engaged in teacher-led discussion, neither would they be engaged in small group discussion.

*It is hard, and I know not all children are listening to our discussion but they probably wouldn't be involved in small groups either. I watch and make sure that students are listening... And students called on to answer provide that targeted info...*

This comment is an acknowledgement by WC #1 for her students' lack of interest in whole class discussion. It also revealed her use of whole class discussion to select students based on their ability to provide the pre-determined 'correct' answer. This comment bridged her knowledge of the potential for small group discussion to her rationale for the use of whole class discussion. She also stated the belief that if small group discussion were implemented, student participation would be limited to the same students who participate in teacher-led whole class discussion. To fulfill her perception of her role as teacher, to deliver the content, WC #1 chose whole class discussion, assuming some students would be interested in neither small group nor whole class discussion. This sentiment was shared by participant WC #4, who

also commented on students' limited engagement or buy-in. He said, *"What I see is that generally, the kids that will speak in whole class are the same that will speak up in small group."*

Participant WC #4 commented on his students' lack of buy-in for small group discussion. He continued and further questioned students' lack of buy-in to his teacher-led instruction.

*And I wonder, "Are you just reading because I'm telling you to? Are you just thinking about these ideas because I have spelled them out for you and told you to think about them? I wish the answer to that is, 'No'... Where is that natural curiosity that's driving you to want to know more...?" It's hard for them to get invested into what I am teaching when it is not important to them... The only time I have success getting them to deeper meaning is when I lead the class.*

The following comment by participant WC #5 expressed a similar frustration with her students' disengaged responses to instruction, to their book clubs, and to school in general.

*"The biggest problem for Book Club discussions, outside of kids not willing to dig deep enough in their reading, is simply not enough student buy-in into school."* This comment revealed the belief that students' lack of investment in school undermines potential success of small group discussion.

In contrast, this comment by SG #3 reveals a constructivist perspective that student investment comes from opportunities that are student centered. *"Students will discuss if what they discuss is relevant to them. And I think that's the other piece... to find text that the kids are interested in. Remember relevance, rigor, and relationships..."*

Participant SG #2, a special education teacher who often 'pushed in' to support her students in regular education classrooms, had the opportunity to regularly observe teacher colleagues across all subject area. Her observations included classrooms in which teachers used whole class discussion. She also observed classrooms in which teachers used small group discussion that successfully engaged students and others where it did not. She recalled an English teacher's failed attempt to use small group discussion. She commented on what the teacher did to engage students.

*Last year I was in one teacher's class often and he tried to engage kids in group discussion, but there was so little student buy-in that it was not good participation. It was like one person in the group had read, but the others had not, so they had nothing to say... They were supposedly accountable for having discussion... and some of my students, special education students, didn't read or remember what they read so they would just sit there and they would not get points.*

This special education teacher noted the lack of buy-in by students, hers and others, to both the reading and the discussion. Her comment also revealed a lack of student preparation to support successful discussion. She added, *"This teacher did literature circles and I did not see the benefit. If anything, they just read a surface reading of the book. That was it."* Her comment indicated procedures that did not support depth of reading and that did not improve student engagement.

When teachers who used whole class discussion explained their decisions to do so, they talked about why small group discussion did not work. In comments previously discussed, teachers indicated reasons for the failure of attempted small group discussions that were born of the students themselves: their immaturity, lack of skills, or lack of their buy-in. Other reasons for not using small group discussions were based upon small group discussion as a teaching approach, and their view that small group discussion limited their ability to do their job in terms of managing both their classrooms and their students. One such reason for not using small group discussion was that it required too much time.

***Lack of teacher time to use small group discussion.*** The time required of small group discussion was one of the challenges anticipated from research discussed in the Literature Review. Research findings support the idea that implementing discussion approaches takes an extended commitment of classroom time (Almasi et al., 2001; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Juzwik, et al., 2011; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Maloch, 2002,

2004; Michaels et al., 2001; Wood, Roser, & Martinez, 2001). All teachers in this study who used whole class discussion mentioned time constraints as a rationale for not using small group discussion, regardless of the length of their tenure as teachers.

Participant WC #2 commented about her struggles as a first year teacher, and her frustration to deal with the demands of teaching. In this comment she referred to the demands of both preparing for book clubs and leading students who knew she was a first year teacher. She confided,

*Being my first year of teaching I was so overwhelmed and things were crazy busy and so new that large group – whole class – discussion just worked. I was scrambling the night before... reading the night before.... If you tell students, "Okay, take a few minutes and discuss the story," they are not going to do it. They are just too cool by that point, and they know the teacher can only be at one group... so they're going to talk about whatever they want to talk about... They are not going to talk about what you asked them to.*

This teacher connected her struggles as a first year teacher to time as a limiting factor in her decision against using small group discussion. This comment also revealed student behavioral issues and their unwillingness to follow her instruction. This is related to a previous noted requirement of small group discussion: teacher/student relationship. These comments by WC #2, a first year teacher, exposed a teacher/ student relationship not adequate to support small group.

In the following quote, participant WC #5, a seventh grade English teacher for over twenty years, talked about a past attempt to use small group discussion, and noted its time consuming disadvantage, one reason she reverted to whole class novels with teacher-led whole class discussion. *"I had to assign books based on the five or six book titles students gave to me and assign books to kids as close to their reading level as I could, which was time intensive... "*

Similarly, participant WC #3, a third grade teacher with over fifteen years experience using teacher-led, whole class discussion, spoke about a newly adopted school-wide literacy

initiative to implement a community building and small group discussion program. WC #3 opted to run only one group at a time so that she could 'lead' each group's discussion. Her decision to be the discussion leader for each group restricted the frequency of each groups' discussion as well as the time for each student to discuss. She explained,

*Reading groups meet with me in the back corner of the room for discussion. The higher the reading level... Well, the highest groups I may only see once a week...seeing groups take up so much time.... And they might have four chapters to read during that week.*

Participant WC #1 also commented on the time required of small group discussion, which she deemed inaccessible to her. Speaking of her students and small group discussion, she lamented,

*In fact they would need to learn how to manage their talk together... I would have to first teach them how to talk together, what to talk about... I don't have time to do that...*

In contrast, participant SG #1, a fifth through eighth grade teacher with over twenty years experience, who used small group discussion commented on her choice to invest time and effort to seek out a range of novels to support her students' reading groups.

*That's the part where I make adjustments because I don't think it's enough (books available). There are hundreds of books in our middle school library and I took books out of there to use in my class. Trying to find 90 novels in the elementary library was not fun. So I went to the middle school library and started pulling. "I have kids that can read this," "This would make a great book club." So I created a reading list of materials for myself, which was a pain....*

As she reported, "I created a reading list of materials for myself, which was a pain..." her comment reflected a determination to support her students' book clubs, despite the time it took to do so. Her comments indicate a commitment to providing students with book title choices to inspire their interest and buy-in. SG #9, an elementary teacher and librarian, also commented on the investment of time teachers make to support their decision to use small



group discussion. *“I have seen groups of third graders engaged in their own great discussions.... But their teachers took a lot of time preparing....”*

Participant SG #3, a sixth grade English and math teacher, commented on student learning as a result of time invested in small group discussion. *“Even though it does take a lot of class time to teach and support it (small group discussion), it ends up being the way to access those higher curriculum standards.”*

Lastly, participant SG #5 confided her allegiance to small group discussion, but her comment also acknowledged those teachers who may choose not to do so. *“I could never teach without my students engaged in their own discussion, but I know there are teachers who feel that teaching kids to discuss takes time and they get the mandated content to their kids faster (using whole class discussion)...”*

This quote by a teacher who uses small group discussion identifies an understanding of and appreciation for reasons teachers choose recitation, teacher-led discussion over small group discussion. Other teachers who used small group discussion made similar comments. SG teacher #4 commented,

*But today, many teachers are very concerned about meeting requirements and getting their effective or highly effective, so they do not want to do anything out of the norm; they don't want to do anything with a potential for failure, and it's (small group discussion) scary to them.*

SG #4 raises the issue of teacher evaluations. None of the teachers interviewed stated that their concern over teacher evaluation impacted their decision regarding their use of discussion, but this comment by SG #4 indicates that she may know of teachers for whom this is a concern. Another teacher who used small group discussion noted how the growing demands on teachers challenge the use of small group discussion and teacher performance, in general. SG #7 confided,

*Having kids work in group is difficult because a teacher can only be in one place at a time... As a teacher who's goal it is to have kids share in groups, it is always my plan to walk the room, sit with individual groups, and assess students' participation... but the reality is that it is tough to get there. Teachers deal with so many demands... You get a phone call from a parent; "Oh, I forgot to do attendance this morning..."; "Oh, I've got to finish this for our next activity!" You miss sometimes because it's so hard to be everywhere. Truly, it is very hard to be a 'good' teacher all the time!*

These teacher comments support evidence that increasing demands upon teachers place a premium on class time premium on class time. Comments about the significance of time by teachers in this study, whether they use whole class discussion or small group discussion, show that they take their role as teacher seriously, and use the time available to them in the best way possible. Teachers who used small group discussion find their students able to learn more if given the support they need to engage in their own discussions. As SG #4 asserts, "So, again, we seem to have less time, more to do, but if you can use discussion, discussion is almost necessary to get the work done that we ask them to do because of the process the kids end up going through in discussion." Teachers who use teacher-led, whole class discussion continue to control and deliver the content as their teachers before them did. Their comments reveal they do not have the skills or training to do otherwise.

The following comment by participant WC #1, a seventh grade teacher who used whole class discussion, addressed concerns for more than just the time small group discussion would require.

*I would have to first teach them how to talk together, what to talk about... I don't have time to do that... and I wouldn't know what to do and what would happen in my class?*

*This comment blended three reasons for choosing not to use small group discussion: lack of time, lack of content control, and threats to classroom management.*

Teachers' comments about classroom management included comments about the

management of the classroom and teachers' ability to manage the accountability and assessment of their students. In the previous comment, the teacher clearly stated a concern shared by all participants who used teacher-led whole class discussion: There is a loss of teacher control when activity is shifted from teacher-led to student-led. This comment was expressed with a sincere tone of anxiety over the loss of control and the inability to know how to navigate that shift.

***Lack of control of classroom management.*** Classroom management includes an array of elements that shape instruction, learning, and assessment. Classroom management varies from teacher to teacher, a result of the unique influences brought to the classroom by teachers and students. All teachers in this study made comments about the importance of a teacher's classroom management. When teachers in this study talked about management, those comments were related to management of their physical classroom, management of paperwork related to units of study and student assessment, and their ways of making sure students were participating in the learning activities. Teachers in this study who used small group discussion talked differently about the management of student instruction than those who used whole class discussion. In this section, comments made by teachers of both groups are discussed. Aspects of classroom management described by individual teachers vary as do their philosophies and their teaching practices.

Participants in this study used the term 'classroom management' in an inclusive way incorporating paperwork, classroom set up, maintenance of record keeping, and also included their management of curriculum and students. As they spoke of their classroom management, several areas of concern were commented on related to the use of small group instruction:

- Loss of physical control of students' activities,
- Loss of control of the delivery of content,
- Reliance upon student buy-in and engagement,
- Difficulty to hold students accountable,
- Difficulty to assess students, and
- Insufficiency of knowledge to teach small group discussion.

Each of these is discussed in conjunction with a participant quote.

Participant WC #1, a seventh grade English teacher who chose to use teacher-led, whole class discussion, shared her apprehensions about her ability to manage small group discussion.

*What if I need them to discuss X, Y, and Z and they come up with A, B, and C... Then what do I do? If there were six groups all discussing on their own, how could I be in all those places at once? I could not make sure their discussion included the targeted information. And how would I know what they were discussing ... or if they were discussing?*

This comment includes several concerns. Her question, “What if I need them to discuss X, Y, and Z and they come up with A, B, and C?” This concern is for the teacher’s loss of control of the delivery of content. In a teacher-led approach, the teacher steers the discussion by asking content questions, and then choosing a student to provide the right answer. In student groups, even if the teacher provides questions, the teacher cannot be present to make sure targeted questions are asked or answered. The comment, “How could I be in all those places at once?” expressed a concern for the teacher’s loss of control over the physical classroom... the inability to be with multiple groups at one time. When WC #1 asked, “And how would I know what they are discussing ... or if they were discussing?” she addressed the concerns related to student assessment and student accountability. This comment also revealed a concern for the potential lack of student buy-in, as content is reached through student discussion and not delivered by the teacher.

Participant WC #4, a seventh grade English and science teacher, expressed his concerns with small group discussion. “There's seven different groups. Some students aren't

*prepared. Some groups are off task. One group may have two members out sick and you want to help them because what's a discussion with two people? You can only be in one place at a time.*" As does the previous comment by WC #1, this comment reveals concern for the loss of the teacher's physical control of the class. His frustration is evident as he notes the seven different groups and adds the concluding statement, "You can only be in one place at a time." He also voiced his concern for the management of students absent from book club and his inability to make up for the loss of content they may have contributed. Again, this raised the concern for the teacher's loss of control over the content, which remains with the teacher in whole class discussion. In small group discussion, students work cooperatively to share their interpretations of the text, question, elaborate and make meaning of the literature.

The same participant, WC #4, continued his rationale against using small group discussion. *"Accountability is a real problem for kids who don't do their reading... who do not buy in... I simply can't count on student groups as a learning approach when that is the case."* This comment by participant WC #4 presented concerns for small group discussion that overlap or impact one another. Students who fail to buy-in to small group discussion may not be prepared with the reading. Students who do not buy-in with the reading or with the discussion may not be able to make meaning of the text, one of the goals of small group discussion. According to WC #4, difficulty to hold students accountable, a necessary reliance on student buy-in, and the potential for a lack of buy-in made group discussion unreliable.

Participant WC #5, a seventh grade English teacher, made comments that reiterated the concerns for student accountability and the loss of physical control of the student activities, as well as the difficulty to assess multiple groups. *"And it's really hard for me to monitor all the groups once they are discussing. So the accountability piece is missing and my ability to gauge how it's going is very limited."* As she considered other ways to assess students engaged in group

discussion, she considered the idea of limiting discussion to one group at a time so she could be present, teacher control restored. She quickly rejected that idea as the group discussing would become a disruption to the whole class. *“It’s hard to have one group in discussion and the others are reading or writing because the room’s too noisy for those readers and writers.”*

The following comment, made by participant WC #3, a third grade teacher who had used teacher-led discussion for over twenty years, was a reflection on her first year with the newly adopted program initiating group discussion. This teacher, like the one making the previous comment, struggled to isolate groups one by one for assessment purposes.

*So, while I’m working with the group, the rest are supposed to be doing one of two things... Read to self, or work on writing. We go over what that looks like and sounds like. We talk about expectations. But they are just not ready for that.*

These teacher comments demonstrated classroom management concerns about teacher control of student activities, student assessment, student accountability, and teacher control of the delivery of content. The following quote by participant WC #4 tied small group discussion to issues with classroom management. WC #4 also presented another concern teachers shared regarding small group discussion: Insufficient teacher knowledge and training.

*I can't teach them to take someone else's questions and extend that idea, even comment on that idea, let alone challenge their idea... to reword or rephrase them, or dig deeper in any way. I've tried this, but can't get by it... My students' conversations are so formulaic and maybe that's my fault, but without a model and process to follow, and with six or seven I different groups, it would be a classroom management nightmare.*

This comment revealed another frustration expressed by all teachers who used whole class discussion: The acknowledgement that they did not know enough about small group discussion to be able to resolve the problems they found with it.

**Teacher lack of education/training for small group discussion.** Teachers

who used whole class discussion recognized that their existing knowledge was not adequate to use small group discussion. Frustrated with his students' lack of engagement, this teacher, WC #4, who used whole class discussion to teach, talked of his failed attempts to engage students in small group discussion.

*That's what makes student led discussion groups so hard... They really don't care about discussing the literature... at best I have sometimes students who attempt to comply with my request. Their own attempts at independent discussion in groups fall short of any of the curriculum goals or my goals.... I don't have another model to turn to... but I need to find ways to better coach, teach, model to help my students make their conversations richer, because right now it's just a task, like everything else I do in English class.*

In comments included throughout these findings, teachers who used teacher-led whole class discussion made comments about the reasons why small group discussion did not work for them. As in the comment above, they often connected their problems with small group discussion with the need for more training. The following table presents teacher comments that expressed either their comfort with whole class discussion, their lack of knowledge about small group discussion or their need for more training/education to be able to use small group discussion. (Table 4.6)

Table 4.6

*Need for Training/Education About Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	Comment
WC #1	I do not have the personal experience to run those (small groups) in my classroom. I have not had any other training in college that I remember, or anywhere since...I wouldn't know what to do and what would happen to my class?
	In a class of 30, I would have six or seven groups... reading different books or stories... How would I do that? What would they do without my direction?
WC #4	(In college) We did learn about and practice some group techniques, but it was more reading about social learning and exposure to some techniques... but I don't recall the kind of training to inform successful use of small group discussion.
	I can't teach them to take someone else's questions and extend that idea, even comment on that idea, let alone challenge their idea... to reword or rephrase them or dig deeper in any way. I've tried this, but can't get by it...without a model and process to follow it would be a management nightmare.
WC #3	...I need to learn how she does that (small group discussion)... It's been a long time since I was in school, but I don't remember anything about teaching kids how to discuss. My learning is going to have to come from our professional development.
WC #5	I don't think there is a transition to get my kids from my teacher read aloud and teacher led discussion to groups independently discussing. I don't think I've used one effectively.
	Maybe we need speaking and listening to be part of every core class and focus class...We need professional development on discussion... We're aware of the benefits but the skills to do it are not there.
WC #2 (1 <sup>st</sup> -year teacher)	There are a lot of tactics, like think-pair-share, that we learned, but I can't recall their names. I feel like I remember seeing my peers coming up with these great ideas, but then you forget them... Maybe that's what we do... we do what works, and keep doing that.

Nystrand's 1995 study of over 1200 classrooms found 94% of class time to be teacher-led, regardless of teacher tenure. Considering the research that demonstrates the historic dominance of whole class discussion, most teachers begin their teaching practice with teacher-led approaches and continue to use those methods. Comments made by the first year teacher in this study who used whole class discussion allow a more in-depth understanding of this. She did not use the term constructivist, but she did recall methods classes where all students in



the class modeled lessons using some type of collaborative group discussion. She was not able to recall any specifics other than the approach she used in her lessons, Think-Pair-Share. She spoke of the group discussion she spent much time preparing for during her student-teaching English assignment. But when speaking of her first teaching assignment, she explained she did not have the time to prepare for small group discussion and found teacher-led, whole class discussion more manageable. Findings from the interviews with teachers who used teacher-led whole class discussion indicated an appreciation for the benefits of small group discussion, as shown in Table 4.5, on page 73 but an inability to use it, frustration with their attempts to use it, and therefore, for instructional purposes, a reliance on whole class discussion. Most of the comments made by these teachers were about their reasons for not using small group discussion.

The fifteen participants made a combined total of 155 negative comments about small group discussion. The five teachers who used whole class discussion made 66 of the negative comments, a disproportionately high number. These comments represented the largest number of comments made in any category by teachers who used whole class discussion. The comments were posed as reasons teachers could not use small group discussion.

To complete the discussion of the third theme, “Teachers who use small group discussion and those who use whole class discussion talk differently about the role of the teacher,” the next section will include a discussion of the findings from comments about the role of the teacher by teachers who use small group discussion.

**Comments about the role of the teacher by teachers who used small group discussion.** Comments by this group of teachers revealed that the beliefs ‘learning is social’ drove their teaching goals and practices. Their descriptions of their goals and practices defined their perceptions of ‘the role of the teacher.’ As discussed earlier, these teachers held

constructivist philosophies and a view of the teacher as one who creates a cooperative environment to support students' engagement in learning. The following two quotes are representative of the philosophical beliefs that underpinned teacher' decisions to use small group discussion. In the first, the philosophical stance is expressly stated.

*It wasn't until college and taking my professional education classes and being introduced to social constructivism, and using it in class, and having teacher and professors use it with us that I began to realize that having discussions with your peers is the best way to learn... I was introduced to social constructivism and Vygotsky and that learning theory. It took me a while to read it and process it and then I came to that moment when I realized, "Yes... this is how learning happens. (SG #2)*

In the following quote is an example of philosophical stance revealed in the rationale for teaching practice.

*... A few of them (her students) may be focused on grades a lot, but that is not necessarily a really positive thing. I want them focused on the learning; the grade takes care of itself. I work to have a good relationship with my kids... and I do think most of them care what I think, but not nearly as much as they care about what their peers think... They really care about what each other are doing and what they think.*

Differences in personally held philosophies between teacher-centered and student-centered approaches influence teacher decisions about practice and therefore, impact teachers' comments about the role of the teacher. Analyzing teacher talk about small group discussion between the two groups revealed more differences than similarities.

All teachers agreed that using small group discussion was difficult to implement. The difference between the two groups of teachers was that teachers who used small group discussion followed up mentions of challenges with their commitment to student discussion and to knowing or finding resolutions to the challenges. Table 4.7 includes comments denoting the challenges and teachers' commitments to small group discussion, despite those challenges.

Table 4.7 *Comments About Classroom Management and Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	Comments by Teachers Who Use Small group
SG#1	So for teachers who can't stand the chaos, the noise... that's when it is all teacher directed... there is no student discussion... Kids are expected to go to their seats and do their work.
SG#2	I'm going into my fourth year, and what I do with literature discussion in my room is far from perfect... but what I know to be true is that everybody, not just students, but in all situations, people are social and they learn from each other... You don't learn from one person standing in front of them telling them what is.
SG#3	I think the one thing teachers have to get used to is the acceptance of chaos. This controlled chaos that happens when kids are directing the classroom talk.
SG#4	But today, many teachers are very concerned about meeting requirements and getting their effective or highly effective, so they do not want to do anything out of the norm. They don't want to do anything with a potential for failure, and it's scary to them. It does take some courage to turn over that much responsibility to the students...It is a chaotic environment at times, where you cannot control the activity, the talk within the different groups.
SG#5	I do think there are teachers who feel stifled, or frustrated, when the discussion between students takes its own direction which is a natural part of any organic discussion.
SG#7	I'm sure most teachers that are uncomfortable with giving student groups the time and chance to talk about their reading... most of us didn't have that experience as a student. Few of us did. I think we have to be sensitive to what we are throwing out at kids, what we're expecting, and make sure that they have the chance to think through and understand things. It's hard, but small group discussion is a real key to helping students become able adults.
SG#8	My room is not quiet... they are sharing, planning, debating, listening to each other, sometimes interrupting each other... but it is not quiet and the talk by kids is for the most part about the work that they are into...This is not for all teachers, for instance, students in my fourth grade class were creating all kinds of noise and projects... and I'm all over helping everyone as they actively learn. And next door, that teacher is just watching...
SG#9	You're going to have some epic fails, where your kids are completely off task... when they're ignoring each other or arguing with each other and you're going to have to be able to see that and say, "Okay, why did this happen on this day?" "Was it the group? Was it the directions? Was it the lack of student preparation? You have to be brave and it probably really matters if you have a partner at your school that's going to also apply this with you... Unless you've really thought this discussion piece through...
SG#10	I think the difficulty with discussion-based classes is not so much in the size, as it is managing the behavior of the children. I am not that person that says, "Oh we have too many, let's do something else." I know discussion is key to learning, so I say, "Oh we have 30... let's figure it out."
	The difference that I have noticed is that when you are in a school where everyone has that kind of set up and the administrators expect for kids to be working together, talking together about what they are doing... Then that is the standard; the kids get used to it and there's no transition to make from class to class.
	You have to expect that discussion is not always going to go well... It does not always go well with adults, so I am very patient and not surprised when discussion is not discussion... And on constant watch and listen so I can stop the action and reteach immediately... and then they can move forward again.

With teachers who use small group discussion, the acknowledgement of the difficulties of using small group discussion and their commitments to small group led to extended explanations of their practices and procedures. This talk included comments about the knowledge and application of skills and strategies they developed to help students engage in collaborative discussion. They described their individual plans and resultant practices. These comments revealed a resourcefulness and a belief in their ability to overcome the challenges they accepted as part of small group discussion.

Table 4.8 provides examples of comments that show how they supported the success of small group discussion. These comments revealed a depth of teacher knowledge and a range of strategies to use, as needed, for the development of their students as emergent discussants. As well as owning this body of knowledge, participant comments indicated their ability to integrate knowledge into their practice. Knowledge and strategies included:

- Multiple strategies for varied issues and unique students,
- A vision of a safe environment,
- Means to create a safe environment, and
- Ways to talk with students to motivate and engage students.

These comments were often delivered with tones that displayed their conviction and passion for their students and their teaching.

Table 4.8 *Teachers Who Use Small Group Discussion Comment About Teaching Practice and Procedures*

Teacher	Comment
SG#1	I use a lot of different discussion methods because one does not fit every class, every student, every need...Kids in my class participate in discussion because they know that I care about them...I will go to their softball games... their basketball games...their dance recital(s). So they know I'm invested in them. I talk with kids. So if you care about what they do, who they are outside your classroom, they'll be more invested in what is going on in the classroom. That connection really helps to move kids from a simple pair and share to get into a deep discussion.
	That's the part where I make adjustments (to the material accompanying reading program) because I don't think it's enough. There are hundreds of books in our middle school library and I took books out of there to use in my class. So I went to the middle school library and started pulling. "I have kids that can read this," "This would make a great book club."
SG#2	It is extremely important to have a safe environment secured if you are going to have legitimate student discussion. To support this, I always speak about our team as a family...
	My students know my expectations for the behaviors they contribute... If you can get five to ten students to buy-in and other students can hear them having genuine discussions or conversations... or just responding with comments in the beginning of the year... when I have whole classroom discussions and they're really saying something... you know, those "Aha!" moments. That can be contagious.
	And then when I respond with, "Oh, that's deep!" My students will giggle, but they like it. They want me to say that about whatever they are saying... And I'll say that, "That blows my mind!" And it gets to the point where my students are writing to get me to say, "That blows my mind!"
SG#3	So, we have conversations about why people don't share... they're shy, they don't know the answer... because then we can better understand each other...
	I do the True Colors thing (personality test), so we all know sort of who each other is... And I'll even bring up things like, "If you're an Orange person and somebody Blue says something and you respond, "Oh yeah... whatever," and you move on, you've just hurt the Blue person's feelings. While that might not have hurt your feelings, but they're not like you, they're Blue."
SG#4	When I am sharing book talks with kids, and I express, "I love this book," many of them will sign up for that book. It's like my feelings for the book are contagious.
	When you model for students a way to ask more in depth questions... I find they use this when a student is struggling to say what he means. For instance, another student may offer, "Did you mean _____?" and the first student may say, "No...." But that may give him enough time or redirect his thinking enough to help him to formulate the response he is intending.
SG#5	What I have found is that having classroom protocols for discussion helps with this...when discussion is not as productive as you wish... students can return to those protocols....
SG #7	To prepare students to work independently in groups, I modeled reading and discussion of a book with a book the whole class shared. We all joined the discussion and people would just spout out conversations---because you have to teach them how to do that (discuss); it doesn't just happen naturally.

This sampling of comments by small group teachers is representative of the ways teachers spoke at length about their implementation of small group discussion. This demonstrates the depth of their knowledge about discussion and their ability to apply what they know to their own practice, and to have the confidence that they can resolve student discussion issues and needs.

Teachers who used small group discussion revealed that they believed it was their role as teacher to provide students with discussion instruction. Teacher SG #1 specifically stated her responsibility to provide discussion instruction. *“We have to teach them those discussion skills... And I don’t think teachers know how to teach this [discussion skills].”* SG #8 also identified the need to instruct and noted discussion instruction as specific content to be knowledgeable of. *“You have to be able to instruct children how to discuss, because they do not have that. There are many adults who don’t know how to discuss.”* Others made comments about the way they provided discussion instruction. SG #2 said,

*For me, I use my own method, of gradual release because I find that when kids enter my class, they have not had experiences with true discussion... they do not know how to hold a conversation about something they have read or written.*

And, SG #9 commented,

*The teachers that I find to be gifted at this (small group discussion), spend a lot of time setting up expectations and making anchor charts... What does it look like? What does it sound like? What is good discussion about text and what is just talking? You have to teach discussion behavior.*

SG #5 shared her sensitivity to the power a teacher has to dominate discussion. She guards against stepping into a group and taking over their discussion, which is easy for a teacher to do, as leader of the class and expert on the content.

*You know, it’s one thing to drop into a group, listen for a bit and then add a question to their discussion to help dig a little deeper... It’s another thing to stand in the front of the class and ask questions... they are waiting on the teacher’s lead again.*

The two groups of teachers spoke differently about their role in instructing students how to discuss. The difference is made clear by two teachers' responses, one teacher who used small group discussion and one who used whole class recitation, to implement the *Making Meaning* program. *Making Meaning* is a Kindergarten through sixth grade program to develop reading and social skills in which students collaborate in literature discussion groups. Teacher SG #3 believed it her role to support her students as they collaborated to actively participate in the *Making Meaning* program. This teacher's view of student learning through small discussion groups was reflected in the research findings of Moeller (2002). After volunteering to work with a fourth grade teacher to engage students in literature-based discussion circles, she found group discussion a dynamic, sometimes tense, arena for students to explore issues they cared about. Of the *Meaning Making* program, teacher SG #3 commented:

*And with our Making Meaning program, we did add more sentence starters... This was especially important for our sixth graders because they are not used to having discussions... truly having intellectual discussions with people yet. So, providing them sentence starters quickly gives them the opportunity to discuss as a group, instead of waiting for the lead from the teacher. You know, it's one thing to drop into a group, listen for a bit and then add a question to their discussion to help dig deeper... It's another thing to stand in the front of the class and ask questions... Then, they aren't having their own ideas and interjecting their own questions... they are waiting on the teacher's lead, again. So till they gain skills at questioning and adding comments... sentence starters provide a temporary bridge to that, without the teacher control piece. Those strategies come from the new program, but the use of News ELA is something I found and incorporated. Making Meaning is a framework, but anything we do to extend that ...that's what I feel I need to bring.*

Teacher SG #3 fit the program to augment her student-centered, discursive classroom. In other comments she explained that fellow teachers felt the reading materials with the program were inadequate in rigor and interest. She responded to this challenge by using the provided texts as practice pieces and then sought out more relevant resources for her students to read and discuss in small groups (*News ELA*). Teacher SG #3 sought out reading materials in *News*

ELA of interest to the students that connected to the passages used in the *Making Meaning* program. This strategy by SG #3 added reading material to the program that supported the kinds of deeper reading and discussion experiences Langer found to be effective. This also exemplifies her vision of the role of the teacher to tweak, to support, to add to instruction to make it work for the students, in this case, going beyond the scope and the materials provided with the program.

Another teacher in this study, who regularly practiced teacher-led, whole class discussion as part of her daily approach, responded to the same literacy program, *Making Meaning*. She provided a different view of the role of the teacher. WC #3 explains,

*We have a comprehension program this year called 'Making Meaning' and that gives us mini-lessons, about fifteen to twenty-five minutes, depending on those different skills... making inferences, asking questions, text features... so that is more direct teaching about text and reading strategies And on non-fiction we work on the different text features. It would be nice if we had time for students to ask each other those questions... Reading groups meet with me in the back corner of the room for discussion. The higher the reading level... Well, the highest groups I may only see once a week...seeing groups take up so much time.... As far as the discussion... I lead most of the discussion. The management piece with all of this is that you have students that struggle with attention and organization... and... it's a lot to manage.*

Teacher WC #3 operated one group at a time so she could continue to lead 'group discussion' to fit her vision of teacher-led groups. WC #3 extended her comments about the program to describe her struggle to meet the needs of students with lower reading levels.

Comments by teachers who used small group discussion indicated their knowledge and resourcefulness to be able to work around challenges related to their chosen approach, small group discussion. They also recognized that many teachers do not use small group discussion and made comments indicating challenges that do not inhibit their use but may deter other teachers' use of small group discussion. SG #2 commented on the potential disruption to



discussion by the negativity students can bring.

*But in every class you'll have one or two kids that will scoff at, roll their eyes just at the mention that we need to have meaningful discussions in class. And without bringing an awareness to this negative attitude, they will make the same gestures when students try to make comments... You just cannot have that negativity because it immediately shuts some kids down and they will not feel comfortable to speak. And then nobody really shares at that point, you are left with comments...statements... made by the same kids that always speak up, but they go into air, with no response by others.*

Another teacher who used small group discussion, SG #3, provided an example of the 'chaos' teachers who use small group discussion refer to.

*Some groups function very well. You look at them and feel great, then turn around and, "Wow, what's going on there?" And they're hitting each other! I honestly had that this year! A boy decided to kick some girl and I'm like... "Oh, noooooo."*

These challenges did not interfere with their use of small group discussion. But each could see how other teachers could choose differently.

### **Findings of Other Factors Related to the Use of Small Group Discussion**

**Teachers who used small group discussion and teachers who used whole class discussion talked differently about small group discussion challenges.** Of the 155 negative comments about small group discussion, teachers who did not use small group discussion made 66 comments. Teachers who did use small group discussion made 89 comments. Among the negative comments, all teachers noted challenges associated with the use of small group discussion. While most negative comments by teachers who used whole class discussion were about the time required of it and their loss of teacher control, teachers who used small group discussion provided more factors that could affect a teachers' use or non-use of small group discussion. Teachers who used small group discussion mentioned these factors; some they experience, others they expressed an awareness of, but none altered their

decision to use small group discussion. These factors included:

1. Limited reading inventories to support small group literature.
2. Lack of time to collaborate with colleagues.
3. Lack of support by administrators.
4. Outside pressures to teach to the test.
5. Pressures to keep to a pacing chart

As noted, mentions of challenges related to small group discussion by teachers who used whole class discussion were limited to time constraints and manage issues. Of the above-mentioned issues presented by teachers who used small group discussion, only the first factor was commented on by more than five teachers. Furthermore, as provided in the earlier cited quotes, some of these were not issues experienced by the teacher, but noted as issues possibly faced by teachers who tried small group discussion but returned to the dominant approach, whole class discussion. For example, speaking of the importance of time to collaborate with colleagues, SG #10 explained that small group discussion didn't work in her classroom, and asked for help.

Table 4.9

*Outside Forces Interrupt the Use of Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	Comment
<b>SG #10</b>	Thankfully, I have never worked for a principal that said, "Okay we have an identified curriculum and on this time of day you will be doing this, and you will do it exactly as it is written up." I can't imagine... I don't think I could ever work in a classroom like that. Teaching by script or a strict pacing chart... In fact, I know a teacher who got written up when an administrator walked in her room at say, 10:35 but they were still discussing the reading and had not moved on with the plan.
<b>SG #7</b>	We will teach kids how to take a test...like with the new state test, we actually are given lessons that we must give to the students the week before the tests...but that lesson does not include the discussion of why those were the right answers or how did we get that answer. The talk about "Why is C a better answer than D" or "Why is the topic 'forgiveness'?" is missing.
	Now, when I'm working with my kids (in test preparation)... the kids identified as needing extra help... I try to include that discussion, but now I'm spending even more time on a test talking about why they got something wrong... and more class time is spent on the test and not on the reading that the teacher has chosen to help them improve their literacy skills. I'm feeling very frustrated for what teachers are being put up against.
	Especially when you consider the increased demands on teachers... I can see why teachers lead and control discussion trying to make sure kids get the grade level content.
<b>SG #4</b>	I believe that some teachers are afraid to do it because what if they do it and their kids don't show growth? With administrators and anyone else checking test scores, if they try it and their kids fail, that is worse than if they do what most everyone else is doing and their kids do about the same as everyone else's.

Comments by teachers indicated the boundaries of 'factors outside a teacher's control' varied from teacher to teacher, dependent upon the teacher's resourcefulness and the extent to which the teacher was willing to make changes to continue to use small group discussion.

Participant SG #7 talked about a challenge to her use of small group discussion that came from a fellow teacher. Teachers at the same grade level often use the same or similar content and lessons. Some teacher associates are more able to allow flexible interpretation of 'curricula' than are others. Commenting on a fellow teacher, SG #7 shared,

*We had a problem because she wanted us to be using the same materials. I used what I wanted, but the struggle burned me out... I left fifth grade because of that. Because I did what I felt best... I used lit circles and I didn't read everything to them because I wanted them to become the readers and I wanted them to talk about their reading. My unwillingness to adopt her approach created a lot of stress for me, even though my kids were great and were doing well. But you have to work with your grade level team and I felt a lot of stress all the time...*

Other teachers may have relented and adopted the practice of the fellow teacher. SG #7 found another way to continue the literacy practice she was committed to, although it meant transferring to another position. Her resourcefulness and flexibility to make this change allowed her to continue to fulfill her perception of the role of the teacher.

**Teachers who Used Small Group Discussion and Teachers Who Used Whole Class Discussion Talked Differently About Teacher Knowledge.** Teacher knowledge, practice, and resourcefulness are elements that fall within the role of the teacher. Teachers who used small group discussion talked about their role as teacher... what they did, how they managed their classrooms, what skills they modeled, and how they taught students to become role models for other students. In contrast, teachers who used whole class discussion did not comment about their use of discussion, other than to say that whole class discussion provided teacher control of students and the delivery of class content, their perception of the role of teacher. Analysis of comments about teacher knowledge and application revealed that teachers who used small group discussion made the majority of comments about those teacher attributes. As previously noted, all teachers made negative comments about small group discussion. The numbers in Table 4.10 reveal that teachers who used small group discussion made nearly all the comments related to teachers' knowledge and abilities to implement small group discussion. Table 4.10 supports the theme that teachers of small group and whole class discussion talk differently about factors related to their role as teacher. Looking at comment totals, Table 4.10 further substantiates the contrasts between the two groups of teachers.

Table 4.10

*Numbers of Comments About Teacher Knowledge by Teachers Who Use Small Group and Whole Class Discussion*

Numbers of Comments	# of Comments by All Teachers	# of Comments by Teachers Using Small Group	# of Comments by Teachers Using Whole Class
Teacher Knowledge & Application	51	50	1
Teacher Practice	49	43	6
Teacher Resourcefulness	21	19	2
Total	121	112	9

In Table 4.10, of the 121 comments related to teacher knowledge and application, teacher practice, and teacher resourcefulness, teachers who used teacher-led whole class discussion made a total of nine comments about their use of whole class discussion. Unlike the teachers who used small group discussion, teachers who used whole class discussion did not talk about the knowledge, skills, or their practice to use whole class discussion.

Table 4.11 shows the differences between the total numbers of positive and negative comments made by both groups of teachers for small group and whole class discussion approaches. Both groups of teachers made strikingly more comments about small group discussion than whole class discussion.

Table 4.11

*Positive Comments About Small Group Discussion By Teachers Who Use Small Group Discussion and Whole Class Discussion*

Discussion Type	Positive Comments About Small Group	Negative Comments About Small Group	Positive Comments About Whole Class	Negative Comments About Whole Class	Total Comments by Teachers:
Numbers of Comments by Teachers Using Small Group	255	89	7	33	384
Numbers of Comments by Teachers Using Whole Class	43	66	43	5	157
Total Numbers of Comments	298	155	50	38	541

These numbers demonstrate that when teachers were asked to talk about discussion in their classroom, regardless of their use of small group or whole class discussion, most of their comments were about small group discussion. The interview sample was comprised of ten teachers who used small group discussion and five teachers who used whole class discussion. Comparing numbers of comments between the two groups, it could be anticipated that when speaking about the discussion approach they regularly used, comments, both negative and positive, would reflect that 2:1 ratio. Their comment totals do not reflect this ratio. The ten teachers who used small group discussion made 255 positive comments about small group discussion, while teachers who used whole class discussion made comparatively fewer positive comments about whole class discussion, only 43, the same number of positive comments they made about small group discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion made more comments about small group discussion (109) than they made for their chosen discussion types, whole class discussion (48). Their positive comments for whole class discussion was

focused on the classroom and curricular control whole class discussion gave them. They did not make comments providing a rationale for its use other than control of curriculum and of students. This limited response by teachers who used whole class discussion about whole class discussion is similar to responses to the online survey by teachers who used whole class discussion; they did not respond to questions about their practice. They left those questions blank and in doing so, chose not to speak about their chosen form of discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion, in either the survey or in interviews, did not talk about their rationale for their discussion use. Teachers who used small group discussion only made seven positive comments about whole class discussion, but 255 positive comments about small group discussion.

In terms of negative comments about small group discussion, the ten teachers who used small group discussion made 89 negative comments, while the five teachers who did not use small group discussion made a proportionately higher number of negative comments (66). Teachers who used small group discussion made comments about small group discussion and those comments were followed up by their explanation of how they resolved the problem or challenge.

A review of the survey data by teachers who used small group discussion also showed some interesting correlations to the responses by the interview participants that used small group discussion. The survey included administrative support, collegial support, personal experience, training, and a list of a range of student benefits. Two reasons for using small group discussion were selected by over half of the online survey respondents who used small group discussion: "It fits with my beliefs" and "It allows students to learn from each other." These survey responses agree with the interview comments made by teachers who used small group discussion. Furthermore, interview participants and online survey participants similarly

chose not to respond to the other benefits and categories as influential in their decision to use small group discussion approaches. Both on the survey and in interviews, teachers used small group discussion because they found it engaged students in collaborative learning.

Lacking support from other teachers or administrators, or the lack of sufficient materials were not challenges sufficient enough to alter their commitment to use small group discussion. In fact, it was their belief that learning is social that drove their use of small group discussion.

### **Advanced Degrees Held By the Two Groups of Teachers**

Interview data indicated that teachers' higher degrees in education, particularly in literacy, enhanced their knowledge of student-centered approaches, which influenced their use of small group discussion. A review of the demographic information for each participant's education revealed differences between the two groups of teachers. Of the ten teachers that used small group discussion, one held a Specialist's Degree in Reading, two held Master's Degrees in Library Science, two held Master's Degrees in Reading, and one teacher held a Master's Degree in Elementary Education. Another teacher had pursued additional hours in a personal area of interest, learning theory. The three remaining teachers who used small group discussion did not have advanced degrees in reading, but had benefit of training or mentorship that supported their use of small group discussion. An elementary teacher with a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education also had in-depth training in project based learning as part of a school-wide program. One teacher with a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary Special Education had the support of a mentor who held a Master's Degree in Reading. The tenth teacher, who held a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary English Education and Math had the lifelong mentorship of his father, a teacher of reading and English. Table 4.12 provides comparative participant demographics.



Table 4.12

*Participant Demographics*

Small Group/ Whole Class	Pseudonym	Education- Highest Degree	Years Service	Grade Level Taught	School Demographics
Small Group	SG #1	Master's Reading	20+	5th-8th	Rural, Public Low SES
Small Group	SG #2	B.A. Secondary English/Math	4	8th Math & English	Suburban, Public High SES
Small Group	SG #3	Master's Elementary Ed	15+	6th-8th Math & English	Suburban, Public High SES
Small Group	SG #4	Master's Library Science	10	7th-8th	Suburban, Public High SES
Small Group	SG #5	Master's Elementary Ed/ Ed Leadership	15+	5th-8th	Rural, Public Low SES
Small Group	SG #6	Bachelor's- Spec. Educ.	4	6th-8th	City, Charter Low SES
Small Group	SG #7	Specialist's Reading	8	3rd-6th	City, Public Low SES
Small Group	SG #8	B.S.'s- +20	8	3rd-7th	City, Public Low SES
Small Group	SG #9	Master's Library Science	20+	1st-6th	City & Suburban, Public Low and High SES
Small Group	SG #10	Master's Reading	6	2nd-3rd	City, Private, Charter Low SES
Whole Class	WC #1	B.A.-Elementary Ed; Master's- Communications	10	7th-8th	Rural, Public Low SES
Whole Class	WC #2	B.S.-Secondary English	1	8th-9th	City, Public Low SES
Whole Class	WC #3	B.A.-Elementary Ed	15+	3rd-5th	Suburban, Public High SES
Whole Class	WC #4	Master's in Issues in Educ.	10+	7th	Suburban, Public High SES
Whole Class	WC #5	Master's in Elem Education	20+	7th	Suburban, Public High SES

Each of these participants made comments about the significance of their ability to use small group discussion because of their education, training, or mentorship. The following table includes sample comments by teachers who recognized the influence of their education or mentors upon their ability to use small group discussion.

Table 4.13

*Comments About Education/Mentorship Related to the Use of Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	Comment
SG#3	When I was taking my classes in teaching English it was all about social constructivism. But I didn't do my student teaching until two years later when I did my student teaching as a graduate student at University. I received my undergrad degree from ABC, but it was strange, because at University, they did not have that focus on social constructivism. The University was very much about assessments... all about the numbers. My belief in learning as a social process... I was committed and my teaching today continues to be based on constructivist beliefs.
	I believe that if you've been educated in the last 30 years, you know about constructivism... You've been taught that learning is social and therefore learning opportunities should be based on student interaction and talk.
SG#7	And I had some great teachers along my K-12 career, but as a pre-student teacher, I had some very special teachers. Great pre-student teaching experiences with an amazing 3rd grade teacher led me to do my student teaching with her. She was so passionate about her work and wanted her kids to read and discuss together what they thought about their reading. She encouraged me to take risks and I got to try things there and she gave me lots of responsibility...
	So when I began my first job, I was confident in my abilities to create good in-depth experiences for kids and I was also confident that the kids could do the work and discuss it together!
SG#8	Our staff received training from XYZ School...Our school model is from XYZ. It is a project based school-wide model and we have all received tons of training in it.... And I could use more (training). The idea is that project based learning provides kids deeper learning experiences across curricular areas and the project production and collaborative process prepare them for advanced studies and to succeed in the workforce.
SG#6	So for her (a teacher colleague she observed)... it was her driven nature and her true mastery...She really understood the books, she knew what was important, and she had that mentor teacher who helped her to be able to foster discussion.
SG#2	My father was a great teacher... And I know of other engaging teachers who have parent teachers. I really think those role models are so important...
	I know watching my dad and hearing his stories had a tremendous influence on the kind of teacher I became. I went to my dad's classroom every year... for as long as I can remember watching him and seeing the way he related to the kids was so good.

In contrast, teachers who used whole class discussion did not have reading related advanced degrees. Two of the five teachers held Master's Degrees in Elementary Education; one held a Master's Degree in Communications; one held a Master's Degree in Issues in Education; and one was a first year teacher who held a Bachelor's Degree in Secondary English Education. They did not comment on their preparation or training in whole class discussion. They did mention the influence of their own experiences as students with teachers who used whole class discussion. Their comments about training were focused on the need for more training in small group discussion approaches. They all commented that they would require additional training in order to use small group discussion. (Table 4.14)

Table 4.14

*Comments About the Need for Additional Training to Use Small Group Discussion*

Teacher	
WC#1	I have not had any other training (for group discussion) in college that I remember or anywhere since. I do what works in my classroom and that is what I am comfortable with.
WC#2	Maybe that's what we do... we do what works, and keep doing that. If I had a list in front of me of the different ways to incorporate group discussion in class, I could probably remember more.
	I'm not remembering much, just that we all had to do it... that we all had to model and do an activity with discussion. We also did a very similar activity in a curriculum class in which was interesting because we were all from different subject areas, like psychology, math, science... the variety made it interesting. I can remember a KWOL... but.... That's all that comes to mind.
WC#4	I don't have another model to turn to... but I need to find ways to better coach, teach, model to help my students make their conversations richer, because right now it's just a task, like everything else I do in English class.
WC#5	We need professional development on discussion... we're aware of the benefits, but the skills to do it are not there.

Like teachers who used small group discussion, teachers who continued to use whole class discussion had earned advanced degrees. All had Master's degrees with the exception of the

first year teacher. It is notable that teachers who used whole class discussion did not have benefit of reading related advanced degrees or knowledgeable and supportive mentors to provide guidance to support their transition from whole class to small group discussion.

### **Summary**

In conclusion, comments by teachers who used small group and whole class discussion revealed differences in teaching philosophy, their view of their students, and their role as teachers. Teachers who used small group discussion held constructivist beliefs, while teachers who used whole class discussion described the use of practices that were teacher-centered. Lastly, comments revealed differences between the two groups with regard to education, training, and mentorship that would support the use of small group discussion. Teachers who had reading related advanced degrees used small group discussion.

The early themes emerged from the data analysis in three areas: student, teacher, and outside factors. Comments related to 'student factors' included how students learn, and comments about student buy-in to discussion, lack of buy-in, engagement, and reading ability or habits. Comments related to teacher factors that influenced decisions to use or not use small group discussion included: teacher philosophy, teacher knowledge, teacher practice, teacher resourcefulness, teacher created climate, teacher modeling, and teacher plan for discussion instruction. Comments related to factors that influenced the decision to use, or not use, small group discussion that were outside the teacher's control included: curriculum, teacher education, standardized testing, administrators and/or colleagues support, and school-wide initiatives. In-depth analysis of these teacher interviews established that of all the factors teachers mentioned that influenced their decisions about the use of discussion, their teaching philosophy, closely related to their education, overrode all these other factors. Reading related advanced degrees may provide for the appreciation and adoption of

constructivist beliefs. Teacher held constructivist philosophies that sustain student-centered learning and the role of the teacher to create and support student-centered learning experiences were key determinants behind a teacher's use of small group discussion.

## CHAPTER 5 IMPLICATIONS

This study was designed to answer one question, “What factors influence teachers’ decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion?” This question arose from a conflict within literacy research literature that supported the practice of small group discussion but also found the perpetuation of traditional, teacher-led, whole class discussion. Research to ask teachers directly about their use of either small group or whole class discussion is absent from the literature. Studies related to discussion are primarily focused on the implementation of particular types of small group discussion, that is Book Clubs, Literature Circles, or Grand Conversations, or on certain aspects of small group discussion, for example, social dynamics, linguistics, semantics, coherence, cohesion. DeFord (1979), created a teacher interview protocol to measure the pedagogical beliefs teachers hold about literacy instruction, however, this tool did not investigate literature discussion. Its focus is upon aspects of reading instruction, including phonics, sight words, fluency, reversals, etc. In the review of literature, no studies were found that investigated that factors that influenced teachers’ decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion. The analysis of the interview data resulted in three themes as well as other factors that did not qualify as themes:

1. Differences in *educational philosophies* exist between teachers who use small group and teachers who use whole class discussion,
2. Teachers who use small group discussion and those who use whole class discussion hold *different views of students*, and
3. Teachers who use small group discussion and those who use whole class discussion *talk differently about the role of the teacher*.

This chapter includes a discussion of the themes as well as the other factors, and their connections to prior research findings, the implications of the findings, limitations of this study, and recommendations for action, policy change, and future study.

### **Discussion of the First Theme: Differences in Educational Philosophies Exist Between Teachers Who Used Small Group Discussion and Teachers Who Used Whole Class Discussion**

The findings suggest that a constructivist or student-centered teaching philosophy was strong motivational factor for using small group discussion. As evidenced in the data, all teachers who used small group discussion either directly stated constructivist beliefs or talked about learning as a social phenomenon. They spoke about the importance of creating a climate ripe for student-grown discussions and were committed to creating a learning environment where each student was actively engaged in the construction of their learning. Some of these teachers talked about embracing a constructivist philosophy as a result of their university studies, while others attributed their adoption of student-centered philosophies to associations with mentors who modeled student-centered philosophies through the use of small group discussion in their own teaching practice. In an essay examining the theoretical and methodological issues related to literacy research and instruction Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) examined the connection between teacher beliefs and practice. They concluded that a teacher's beliefs about how learning happens, and the assumptions teachers make that are attached to their beliefs influence their teaching (p. 96). Research in other content areas has also focused on the impact of teacher beliefs. In a study examining effective teacher education, Cross (2009) found that teacher beliefs influence teacher practice and changing teacher practice requires time and opportunities to change beliefs. "Teachers must be continuously engaged in experiences that challenge their beliefs and cause them to reflect on them; only then can change be lasting" (p. 342). In this study as well, comments by teachers who used small group discussion indicated their use of small group discussion arose from their commitment to the belief that learning is social and therefore, helping students become able discussants was fundamental to the learning they envisioned for their students. Their belief in

the need for students to be engaged socially was made particularly evident by those teachers who taught both English and math. Each described their practices to engage their students in small group discussion in English and also in math, a curricular area not typically associated with discussion. This commitment to the philosophical belief that learning is social was evident in their choice to support student learning through small group discussion in the other content areas as well.

Additionally, Kucan and Beck (1997) talked about the movement to student-centered practices and suggested the use of more flexible discussion-based approaches they referred to as dialogic learning. In their review of the research literature they noted a shift from read-aloud strategies for comprehension development that used short term memory and recall through “individual verbal reports of readers” (p. 291) to comprehension arrived at through students’ deeper engagement in making meaning as discussants in small groups, “a more holistic effort to construct meaning” (p.292). This shift in literacy learning approach discussed by Kucan and Beck was reflected in the student-centered philosophies espoused by the teachers in this study who used small group discussion.

Teachers who used whole class discussion did not speak about the philosophical value of whole class discussion as an approach best suited to student learning. They did not defend their use of whole class discussion based on any philosophical stance; whole class discussion was chosen as a function of classroom management. As noted in the previous chapter, teachers who used whole class discussion made more comments about small group discussion than whole class discussion and in those comments they revealed a regret for not having the ability to use small group discussion and recognized it to be a more engaging and motivating approach. Teachers who used whole class discussion seemed to view the management issues as insurmountable and thus followed the teacher-centered approach. Nystrand’s (2006) review



of the historic dominance of recitation, teacher-led whole class instruction noted the permanency of recitation despite teacher recognition of the strengths of peer-group discussion. Similarly, teachers who used whole class discussion in this study made comments about the strengths or benefits of small group discussion, but continued their use of whole class discussion. They did not express a belief related to how students learn, either socially or otherwise, and it is possible that lacking a philosophy that would support student-centered approaches, attempting to use small group discussion made them uncomfortable with the loss of teacher control. This could propel their continued use of the default discussion approach, teacher-led, whole class discussion. In this study comparing the teachers of two types of discussion-small group and whole class- there is a clear divide in their views about teacher use of discussion. Teachers who used small group discussion noted various struggles associated with small group discussion, however, their belief in learning as a social phenomenon drove them to persist with small group discussion, and find ways around challenges while those who used small group discussion were unable to overcome issues of classroom management and curriculum delivery.

### **Discussion of Theme Two: Teachers Who Used Small Group Discussion and Those Who Used Whole Class Discussion Held Different Views About Students**

The findings suggest that teacher' perceptions of their students is a strong motivational factor for their choice to use, or not use, small group discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion held a fixed view of their students' limited capacity to participate effectively in small group discussion, describing their students as too immature or 'intellectually lazy' to conduct small group discussion. This perception was a major influence on their decision to use whole class discussion. Teachers explained that they needed to control the discussion because the students could not. In this study, all of the teachers who used whole class discussion made

unsuccessful attempts to use small group discussion but found the only effective discussion was the discussion they led, as they found it necessary to guide their students to the content they determined to be important. In a study comparing the discussion of more proficient student groups to less proficient groups, Almasi et al. (2001) found that teachers of less proficient groups kept control of the discussion by guiding the group's action. "Let's find it. Let's find the... you're on the page. Can you read?" (p. 114). After five weeks of discussion, this group had "relinquished any stake they had in assuming that role" (p. 117). This negative influence by the teacher upon effective peer-led groups was also supported by Almasi's (1995) study of 97 fourth graders, comparing teacher-led and peer-led group discussions. Almasi found that when a teacher entered the discussion, the students returned to I-R-E (Inquiry-Response-Evaluation) patterned behaviors seeking to support the teacher's interpretation. In this study, teachers' views of students as unable to independently arrive at deep meaning or be sensitive to the needs of others influenced their decision to maintain control of discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion in this study found it necessary to manage discussion for their students who they believed could not manage it themselves.

Conversely, teachers who used small group discussion envisioned their students as learners with discussion well within their reach. They believed in learning as a social process and their students as social learners needing to be engaged participators in their learning. Comments by teachers who used small group discussion were a reflection of the student-centered philosophy they held that differentiated them from those teachers who used whole class discussion. Teachers holding constructivist beliefs envisioned their students as co-constructors of their learning. Teachers who did not hold constructivist beliefs held views of students as passive receivers of the content they delivered. Much like the teachers in this study who used small group discussion, Goatley et al. (1995) found students with diverse reading

levels could mutually support each other's learning, each providing a 'more knowledgeable other'. Their belief that 'learning is social' simultaneously supported their intent to engage students in Book Clubs and regard their students as able to share their interpretations and make meaning of the books they read. Therefore, if a teacher has a constructivist philosophy, that influences the teacher's expectations of their students as active learners and drives the creation of an environment and learning opportunities that would support small group discussion. Teachers who used whole class discussion held a teacher-centered philosophy, believe their students are passive receptors, and use teacher-fronted approaches like whole class discussion.

In this study, although all teachers made comments about small group discussions that failed, teachers who used small group discussion engaged in a reflective process to re-evaluate and revise the classroom context and discussion tools they used as scaffolds. In this study, teachers who used small group discussion held visions of their students as active learners and these beliefs led them to re-teach, regroup, and revise, but not give up and re-claim the control of the learning. With this 'student as learner' vision, the teacher role became one of providing students with tools and an environment to support their independent learning. Constructivist beliefs were the foundation supporting teacher views of students' transformational role in learning. In Almasi, et al. (2001), more proficient discussion groups were developed when teachers turned the responsibility of the finding solutions back to the students, instead of taking control the situation and resolving issues between students for them.

Teachers in this study who used whole class discussion had a different view of students. Because they viewed the teacher at the center of the learning, as the one who knows and delivers the content, they viewed the student as the recipient of the teacher's transmission of

the content. In their preface to *Theoretical Foundations of Learning Environments* (2012), editors Jonassen and Land explained:

Transmissive instruction [behaviorism] is based on a communications model of instruction that continues to dominate practice in many settings. Educators believe that improving learning is a matter of more effectively communicating ideas to learners by improving clarity of message. The assumption of most educational enterprises has always been that if teachers communicate (transmit) to students what they know, the students will know it as well (p. vii).

This conception of teacher and student was evident in the talk about students by teachers who used whole class discussion. As described in Chapter 4, all teachers who used whole class discussion made comments about their students' inability to independently engage in purposeful discussion and thus, as dependent on the teacher for transmission. For these teachers, an attempt to use small group instruction would be challenging.

Billings and Fitzgerald (2011) found this to be the case in the Paideia Seminars they investigated. In the small group discussions of Paideia Seminars the teacher may participate in, but not to lead or direct the discussion. Upon reviewing a video taped discussion session, the classroom teacher acknowledged that she talked too much and in her talk, she attempted to 'manipulate' the students' discussion. When asked to talk further about that, she explained her belief that her students needed her to lead them to 'truth and relevance" (p. 935). Billings and Fitzgerald also noted that some students would take on the role of the teacher, anticipating and providing the response they felt the teacher would make. This student response they believed confirmed in the teacher's mind that her guidance was needed for the group to advance discussion. Almasi (1995) reported her similar observation that when teachers entered the discussion, students fell back to deferring to the teachers' leadership, anticipating and providing the 'right' answers they anticipated the teachers were looking for. Fitting this

teacher-centered model of instruction, teachers I interviewed who used whole class discussion similarly reported that they needed to lead the discussion because their students would not or could not.

Other student related challenges were noted in a study of students engaged in small group discussion about their reading of the novel, *Shiloh*. In addition to the evidence of higher level thinking Clarke (2007) expected to observe as students engaged in small group discussion, Clarke noted other unanticipated aspects related to the social dynamics between students during discussion. In one group, Clarke found one girl to be silenced by the others, particularly the result of the male gender dominance of the group. The boys marginalized one of the girls by interrupting her, by ignoring her comments, and by talking over her comments. Analysis of the comments by the boys indicated they were intentional about silencing the girl and knew how to “sideline” other members to maintain control of the discussion. I anticipated that teachers I interviewed who did not use small group discussion would identify these social risks as a major factor in their decision to maintain control of discussion, but only one of the five teachers raised social issues as a deterrent to their decision to not use small group discussion. She was also the one who described herself as a constructivist, but then continued to describe her teacher-centered practice. Her view of her students was that some would exercise their dominance over others and therefore she retained control of whole class discussion to protect students who may be dominated. Teachers who used small group discussion also made comments about the potential for challenging social issues, but saw those not as student limitations, but as an issue related to small group discussion that was their responsibility to amend with positive classroom context and the teacher-student relationships they build to safe guard their environment.

Teacher actions towards small group discussion were influenced by teacher-held

philosophies, student-centered or teacher-centered. These beliefs influenced their vision of their students to function as active learners able to learn collaboratively and independently of the teacher or as students as passive receptors of knowledge to be controlled and delivered by the teacher.

This teacher response to social challenges, either to take control back from students or to guide students in their control of discussion leads to the discussion of the third theme.

### **Discussion of Theme Three: Teachers Who Used Small Group Discussion and Those Who Used Whole Class Discussion Talked Differently About the Role of the Teacher**

The findings suggest that perception of one's role as teacher is a strong motivational factor to use, or not use, small group discussion. When talking about their role as teacher, and particularly how and why they used discussion in their classrooms, talk by the two groups of teachers was very different. The differences implied a great divide between them in two areas: 1) their personally held philosophy that either consciously or unconsciously, drove the action of the teacher and 2) their design of a teaching approach to discussion based upon their educational beliefs.

Comments by all fifteen teachers in this study indicated their recognition of small group discussion as engaging and motivational. Despite this, as noted in the teacher comments in Chapter 4, teachers who used whole class discussion were clear that teacher recitation was their vehicle for instruction. Research has demonstrated that teachers are aware of small group discussion as an effective literacy approach, although many do not use that method of instruction. For instance, Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) noted that when teachers were interviewed, most of them recognized the importance of discussion, though classroom observations "revealed that what teachers called discussion was almost always what one teacher described as 'question-and-answer' moves by the teacher involving a prescribed

teacher-set exchange—in other words, an elaborated form of recitation” (p. 2). Christoph and Nystrand (2001) also identified the conflict between most teachers’ talk about the strengths of discussion and their lack of use of it. “In short, despite teachers’ considerable lip service to ‘discussion,’ Nystrand and Gamoran (1991) observed little discussion in any classes in the sense of an indepth exchange of ideas not dominated by teacher evaluation” (p. 2). Teachers who used whole class discussion in this study made comments that revealed a perspective of their role as teacher as deliverer of content. As in the findings by Christoph and Nystrand (2001) and Nystrand and Gamoran (1991), the whole class teachers in my study retained their place in the class as content deliverer, and while they recognized the benefits of student led discussion, they did not alter their practice to allow it to happen.

All teachers commented on the time necessary to teach small group instruction. Time, and decisions about one’s use of the time available, are related to teachers’ visions of their role as teacher. Literacy approaches that include small group discussion require time for students to practice and adopt discursive skills. In this study, teachers, regardless of discussion approach, knew about small group discussion approaches and knew using discussion would take time. A consistent finding across varied studies on topics related to small group discussion was the length of time needed to support student acquisition of skills as well as the gradual release of responsibility to student groups to conduct small group discussion (Almasi et al., 2001; Alvermann & Hayes, 1989; Billings & Fitzgerald, 2002; Clarke & Holwadel, 2007; Fecho, 2000; Juzwik et. al., 2011; Kong & Pearson, 2003; Maloch, 2002; 2004; Michaels, et al., 2007; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Wood et al., 2001). In this study, it was the philosophical differences about how students learn, as well as teacher knowledge about how to teach students to discuss that separated the two groups. These two views are found in a multi-case study of students engaged in small group literature discussion. Alvermann et al. (1996) noted, “It [small

group discussion] may present a fundamental challenge to teachers who are focused on maintaining control over curriculum, class routines, and specific outcomes” (264). They noted that for those teachers who held a constructivist philosophy, the need to engage students in their own learning necessitated a flexible approach to classroom, student, and content management. These findings by Alvermann et al. (1996) were reflected in the comments made by teachers in this study. Those who used small group discussion described it as instrumental in terms of its ability to engage and to meet content demands and they found the time to teach students how to discuss because they viewed it as critical to the way students learn. Conversely, teachers who used whole class discussion believed they knew the content and they needed to transmit it to the students and did not have the time to teach students how to discuss. Though they recognized small group discussion as engaging, that experience fell outside their vision of classroom, teacher, and student.

Teachers who use student-centered approaches are constantly engaged in reflection and revision of their teaching practice. They grow libraries of activities, materials, and strategies to support their students’ success as readers, thinkers, speakers, listeners... all things put to work in small group discussion. This is supported by the work of Langer (2001) in her study to investigate teacher practices that lead to high student performance. Speaking of one teacher whose instruction led students to “Beat the Odds,” Langer wrote,

In addition to connectedness of goals, skills, and experiences across the day and year, she also wanted to ensure that her students could learn to make connections across the literature they were reading as well as connections from literature to life. She wanted her students to learn to read the text and the world (p. 32).

In Langer’s (2001) study about English programs that ‘beat the odds’ on large-scale assessments, she found effective discussion-based approaches included an emphasis on depth rather than breadth of knowledge and the use of discussion to develop complex



understandings (692). Teachers in this study found that student led discussion engaged students in deeper, more critical discussions. To support the deeper levels of learning, identified by Langer, teachers in this study who used small group instruction felt it their role, their responsibility, to find additional reading material that students could more critically think about and discuss.

Similarly, teachers in this study who used small group discussion sought additional materials that students could engage in and connect with. Their choice of materials was driven to support another 'role' they took ownership of... to teach students how to engage in meaningful discussion. They spoke about modeling, scaffolding skills, creating a safe environment and using protocols to discuss materials students would find engaging. Accepting these responsibilities as part of the teacher's role is another finding that is supported by the existing research. Galda and Beach (2001) used a novel set in the Middle Ages about a girl whose father planned to marry her off as was customary at the time. The teacher provided modeling to help the students, all girls in this book club group, to connect the character's trials with their own social conflicts they personally experienced. Galda and Beach found the discussions of the social themes the girls connected to their own made for deep and complex discussions. Teachers who used small group discussion in this study anticipated the need for discussion instruction, like the modeling by Galda and Beach, and took action to make it part of their regular instruction. Teachers interviewed in this study who used small group discussion commented about students' needs for discussion instruction and their need to provide that instruction.

Teachers who used whole class discussion commented that students did not know how to discuss, but did not talk about providing that instruction except to indicate that it would take too much time. They did not see discussion instruction as part of their role as teacher

and their previously noted fixed assessment of their students' limited abilities made discussion instruction an inefficient use of class time. Teachers who used whole class discussion continued their course of recitation counting on its management merits. In the "Beating the Odds" study, Langer (2001) found that teachers in more typically performing schools did not envision their role as a change agent leading to their students' success. Speaking of teachers in a more typically performing school they focused on their students' failures, and did not see their role as a part of the change that would lead the students to success. "They did not believe they could make difference" (p. 28). Speaking of one teacher Langer wrote, "He did not seem to feel personally accountable for ensuring his students possessed the underlying knowledge and skills to do well" (p. 28). This is similar to the comments teachers who used whole class discussion in this study made about their students.

When teachers accept the responsibility to teach students to discuss, they locate the site of learning with the students as a by-product of their active role. The teachers who used whole class discussion in this study saw their role as teacher differently, and talked about their responsibility as teacher to identify and know the content to be learned and to deliver that content.

### **Discussion of Other Factors Related to the Use of Small Group Discussion**

**Mentoring, collegial support, and effective use of teacher personnel.** In this study, teachers who did not use small group discussion, but saw the value in it did note the need for additional training. Five of the fifteen teachers who used small group discussion talked about the benefit either mentors knowledgeable about the use of small group, or the benefit that ongoing collegial support could provide to a teacher's use of small group

discussion. However, these five teachers could represent the opinions of other teachers I did not have the opportunity to interview. Semeniuk and Worrall (2000) view mentoring as a bridge to help with new teacher assimilation and teacher retention. They suggest, based upon their own experience, a close relationship where both teachers share in potentially daily support of each other. Mentors would not be assigned, sight unseen, but selected with input by both teachers. “Relationships which arise spontaneously and gradually allow teachers to enter more deeply into considering what it means to be teachers, to teach better, and to engage more fruitfully with students” (p. 424). As noted in Chapter 4, speaking of the potential success of small group discussion, one teacher commented upon the value of support for ‘someone who is doing this with you.’ This implies a collegial relationship, where both teachers are going to confide in each other and discuss freely the ups and downs of trying to navigate the potential challenges of small group discussion.

This leads to a creative search for other ways teachers might support one another. Two of the teachers in this study that used small group discussion were librarians. As noted in Chapter 4, both talked about their desire and work to support teachers attempting to use small group discussion. Librarians are not only knowledgeable about literature and literature curriculum, as certified teachers they are also well positioned to collaborate with teachers. Giorgis and Peterson (1996) described a three year project based on the collaborative efforts of librarians, administrators, and teachers in a large urban, ethnically diverse school district to more effectively support the literacy development of young students. After a slow start, more and more teachers began to invest in a range of joint projects with the librarians, including changing school and library schedules to facilitate use of the library and the librarian in book making and book sharing groups. Sharing what they learned, Giorgis and Peterson write, “We realized that a collaborative environment grows slowly. There are risks to be taken and

mistakes to be made, but working through these problems is a part of collaboration that helps make the school a community” (p. 482). Again, teachers I interviewed that used small group discussion were committed to it and did it regardless of the support they did or did not receive from others. But several did comment that mentorship, and collaboration with colleagues would support the use of small group discussion. The librarians I interviewed talked about the benefit of working together to share the weight of implementing small group discussion. Considering the potential for collaborative efforts leads to the question of who to invite to collaborate. The principal of Fairview Elementary decided to invite all members of a school to invest in a change toward constructivist practices, specifically small group literature discussion, or as they refer to them, literature circles.

### **Supporting Small Group Discussion: A School Designed Around Literature Discussion**

Incorporated into a teacher’s perception of his or her role as teacher are their visions of what instruction looks like, what a classroom looks like, and what their students are doing while in their classroom. It follows that the role of the teacher would be to fulfill the visions they have of instruction, their classrooms, and their students. In this study, teachers who used small group discussion held visions of their students as doers and thinkers, able to collaborate in meaningful small group discussions. At Fairview Elementary, the constructivist vision of individuals collaborating to make meaning in literature circles became the model to build the school around. Following the successful engagement of her teachers’ participation in collaborative book clubs, their school mission became “creating a community that extended beyond classroom boundaries and beyond the shared interests of grade levels and special programs” (McNair & Nations, 2000, p. 34). The principal of Fairview Elementary led the transformation of her school to a community whose practice was centered around small group

literature discussion and did so by building upon their shared visions of literature circles. While the teachers who used small group discussion that I interviewed talked largely about their own vision, their own process and their own procedures, all purposes and positions at Fairview Elementary were reconfigured to support a social learning school-wide culture of literature circles. This would represent the highest level of administrative support of the teachers' collaboration to implement small group discussion.

### **Teacher Training**

Findings in this study suggest that constructivist teaching is dependent upon teachers who have adopted constructivist philosophies and that takes more time and study than basic undergraduate reading instruction classes provide. As schools attempt to implement student-centered programs like *Making Meaning*, given the data in this study, one can hypothesize that the program will be successful only in classrooms where teachers hold constructivist philosophies. The demographics of this study also suggests that if teachers have not earned advanced degrees in literacy, they may not have acquired constructivist philosophies. Therefore, given the shift to student centered approaches, like small group discussion, it is reasonable to consider the difference between training and teacher education. In an analysis of the training of reading teachers, researchers Hoffman and Pearson (2000) found two distinct categories: teacher training and teaching teachers. Training approaches were limited to the instruction of specific reading skills or strategies. These were reliant upon the identification of reading routines that were to become the focus of a reading intervention (p. 32). Teacher training approaches were designed for efficiency in training that resulted in conformity in teacher practice. The advantages of teacher training were based upon their efficiency. Aspects of teacher training were 1) ease in communication to the public, 2) no reliance on teacher prior knowledge, and 3) no need for supervisor expertise due to the clarity of the training

targets (p. 40). Teacher teaching was more abstract. It included training, but the training would be part of the development of teachers' more broad and complex understanding of reading instruction.

Training as a strategy, nested in a larger construct of teaching and learning to teach as reflective practice is a more powerful and compelling vision for a future in which teachers are more likely to encounter change, not routine" (p. 40).

Hoffman and Pearson anticipate the continuation of this debate as well as the political demand for training, as teacher teaching would involve "substantial commitment of resources" (p. 40). In this study, the implementation of the *Making Meaning* program provides an example of the issue raised by Hoffman and Pearson. The teacher in the study who used small group discussion was able to not only implement the program as intended to engage students in small group discussions, but she was able to extend the program by adding additional resources to deepen student engagement. In her implementation of the *Making Meaning* program, the teacher who used whole class discussion altered the program to run one small group at a time so she could direct the group discussion. Whatever the teacher-training piece that went with this program, it was not sufficient to change the practice of the teacher who used whole class discussion.

This study suggests teachers be provided with professional development that is in line with teacher teaching, allowing teachers ongoing support to help acquire constructivist philosophies.

### **What This Study Contributes to the Literature**

Existing research about discursive literacy approaches largely comes from two sources: large scale national studies, which include teacher training and support and doctoral dissertations, which frequently involve teachers who volunteer to be trained to use a particular form of discussion (Langer & Applebee, 2006). This research study provides

something not included in the prior research by examining what regular classroom teachers know about small group discussion and why, and under what conditions, they chose or chose not to use it as part of their regular classroom instruction.

Current literature suggests that there are multiple factors that influence teachers' use, or non-use, of small group discussion, for example, student engagement (Almasi, 1995, Almasi et al. 2001; Certo, 2011), reading comprehension (Murphy, et al., 2009; Wilkinson & Son, 2010), high level thinking (Alvermann, et al., 1996; Gambrell, et al., 2011; Kong & Pearson, 2003), and administrative and collegial support (Giorgis & Peterson, 1996; McNair & Nations, 2000). However, this study found that the determining factor that influenced a teacher's use of small group discussion was their personally held educational philosophy, theory, or beliefs. Those philosophies and beliefs also determined aspects of instruction including how teachers view their students, how they perceive their role as teacher, and other factors related to the use of small group discussion. The connection between philosophical beliefs and practice has been established as discussed in Harste, et al. (1984). For those who chose to use small group discussion, the extent to which constructivist philosophical beliefs impacted their use of small group discussion was noteworthy. Researchers in prior literature noted in their reviews of the literature that small group discussion was based on student-centered learning theory, but did not address reasons teachers used, or did not use small group discussion (Nystrand, 2006). Findings in other studies revealed some reasons for some teachers' use, or non-use, of small group discussion. Their reasons for using or not using small group discussion included other factors like benefits (for example, depth of student discussion Fountas & Pinnell (2001) and challenges (for example, the social issues between students) (Chinn et al., 2001; Clarke, 2007). Teachers who used small group discussion in this study did identify the challenges and benefits other researchers had raised, but those were not the determining factors in their decision to

use small group discussion. Teacher comments consistently identified their commitment to beliefs in learning as social as the driving factor behind their decision to use small group discussion. Conversely, teachers in this study who did not use whole class discussion did not talk about any learning philosophy that drove their decisions, although one could be inferred from what they did say. Their comments revealed that their choice to use teacher-led discussion was based upon their perceived role of teacher as 'deliverer of content' and to secure their control of their classroom, as well as control of their students and the curriculum. They did make comments regretting the inability to use small group discussion, but all persisted in the use of whole class discussion. When given the opportunity to implement a school-wide program to engage students in discussion, one teacher adapted its implementation to fit her regularly used teacher-fronted approach, teacher-led discussion. In this study, constructivist philosophy was critical to teachers' use of small group discussion, and absent that philosophy, teachers maintained the dominant form of discussion, teacher-led whole class discussion. Teachers in this study held clear views of teacher, student, and school roles and those visions directed the daily decisions they made that shaped student learning experiences in their classrooms. Teachers with constructivist beliefs envisioned students engaged in deep discussion that would be the source of their learning. Teachers who used whole class discussion had clear visions of their responsibilities to 'teach-to' their students and this vision is incompatible with small group discussion.

The significance of philosophy leads to another finding that is not represented in the literature: the impact of higher degrees of education in areas of reading and literacy. In their comments, teachers in this study who used small group discussion attributed their adoption to the philosophy that 'learning is social' which supported their use of small group discussion to either a mentor or to their education classes. In addition, more of the teachers who used small



group discussion had earned advanced degrees with several having literacy related higher degrees. It is typical for advanced courses to include more discussion of philosophy, so it is possible that the philosophies that drove their use of small group discussion were acquired as the higher literacy degrees were earned. Higher degrees alone did not necessarily result in the adoption of student-centered philosophies because several of the teachers who used whole class discussion had higher degrees, but not in literacy related areas.

The importance of administrative and collegial support for small group discussion was supported by comments by several teachers who used small group discussion in this study. This is important because these comments indicate a pathway for teachers without a constructivist philosophy to arrive at one, without earning higher degrees in literacy. Researchers Giorgis and Peterson (1996) found the significance of collegial support and the Fairview Elementary (McNair & Nations, 2000) effort to build a school around literature discussion demonstrated the powerful impact committed administrative support can have on the success of small group discussion. Only several teachers in this study mentioned the benefit of such support and those were teachers with higher literacy related degrees in literacy. Teachers who used small group discussion did not do so because of the support they received from others, but as a result of their philosophical beliefs that committed them to small group discussion. This study reveals that when supported by personally held constructivist beliefs, teachers can and will find ways to create a classroom environment where students engage in their learning through small group discussion. Without a student-centered philosophical belief system, teachers will defer to teacher-led recitation. The limited literacy coursework in undergraduate teacher preparation exposes education students to constructivism, but it can be hypothesized that that exposure is not enough to support its adoption. Therefore, teachers repeat the teacher-led practices they experienced as students.

This is supported by the research of Nystrand (2006), who documented the historical and continued dominance of whole class recitation. Because it is not likely that most teachers will return to school for higher degrees in literacy, administrative and collegial support at the schools they teach in may be the only way to help teachers make the philosophical shift to student-centered practices.

To summarize, this study did support existing findings about small group discussion, however, findings went beyond those of previous research in two ways: 1) the inclusion of teacher voices about small group discussion, and 2) the addition of information new to the research that helps us understand why teachers make the choices that they do about literature discussion. Interviews with this study's subjects allowed deeper insight into their world, their rationale for their teaching practice, and for beliefs that direct their actions as teachers. Their extended comments allowed a view into their world beyond what would be available through observation or survey. Their comments revealed the impact to teacher practice of teaching philosophy and literacy education.

### **Implications**

As noted in the previous discussion of the factors that influence teachers' use, or non-use of small group discussion, the findings of this study are supported by and found similar to the findings of previous research related to small group discussion. However, the findings indicate that teachers' personally held philosophy of education, as well as their education were significant factors in a teacher's choice to use either small group discussion or traditional teacher-led recitation.

Findings of this study suggest that teachers' advanced reading related education is a strong factor influencing their choice to use small group discussion. Even in the early analysis of teacher demographics, it was clear that teachers who used small group discussion had reading

related advanced degrees, while teachers who used whole class discussion either did not have advanced degrees or had advanced degrees in areas other than reading. This implies that teachers should be encouraged and rewarded for earning more advanced degrees in literacy. Michigan is an example of a state that does not include many reading courses at the pre-service level and no longer requires additional graduate work, a move indicated as counterproductive by the findings in this study. Recurrent research provides evidence that teacher-centered and recitation-recall formats continue to dominate classroom activity (Caughlan, Juzwick, Borsheim-Black, Kelly, & Fine, 2013; Nystrand, 1997, 2006). The interviews of the teachers in this study demonstrate that teachers who deliver units of study using the dominant approach, teacher-led whole class discussion, have not developed the philosophy, the skills, or the materials to implement small group discussion. This implies both that teachers should be required to have advanced degrees in literacy and that those programs should include coursework sufficient to the adoption of constructivist philosophies. Comments by teachers who used small group discussion in this study suggest that it is not just the knowledge of, but also the philosophical commitment to this belief that drives teachers to persevere and make small group discussion work.

Requests for training by teachers in this study who did not use small group discussion indicate their acknowledgement that they do not have the knowledge base to implement small group discussion. Their persistent view of the role of the teacher as deliverer of content and manager of the classroom environment inhibited any attempt they made to implement small group discussion, even when provided a program based on student discussion. Therefore, this study indicates that any professional development must provide sustained engagement in reflective thought and practice that is beyond the scope of introductory literacy education courses, otherwise, teachers will continue to do what they have always done before.

Given the absence of sufficient reading courses in teacher education, and given the continued prevalence of whole class discussion, school administrators should take action to support the use of small group discussion by their classroom teachers. In addition to the current decline in reading education required for teacher certification, there are generations of teachers in the field who have 'completed' their university education and hold traditional teacher-led philosophies. School administrators need to provide support for teachers to engage in collaborative literacy approaches that include small group literature discussion.

This study indicates that school principals who wish to see constructivist based teachings in their school could support teacher practices of small group discussion, as did the principal in the Fairview Elementary case. Scheduling to allow teachers to collaborate daily and the use of teachers in innovative ways to support one another helped Fairview teachers make the transition to constructivist practices. Principals could support the shift to constructivism by creating an infrastructure of teachers who can work as teammates to share the trials, successes and failures of small group discussion. Librarians, in this study, made comments that demonstrated their support of other teachers' use of small group discussion. Administrators should support creative and flexible use of staff, as was done at Fairview.

This study also indicates administrators need to reconsider professional development. Teachers in this study did not make comments about the impact of professional development, though every school is mandated to provide it. Typically, standard professional development is scheduled monthly, not able to support a teacher dealing with the day-to-day struggles of making a change as extensive as the move from whole class to small group discussion.

In this study, teachers who used small group discussion recognized the importance of collegial support, but their comments about their use of small group discussion in their classrooms identified them as independent agents. Their comments revealed that they did not

enjoy the kind of building wide support provided by the principal at Fairview Elementary, and they did not need this level of support to implement small group discussion. Therefore, findings in this study support teachers as masters of small group discussion, and best able to provide the most effective learning opportunities for students when given the autonomy to work as independent agents. No singular representation of small group discussion emerged in this study. Therefore, findings of this study are at odds with adherence to literacy programming with scripted text. As noted previously, teachers customize programs to fit what they can and cannot do. Findings from this study support teachers who use small group discussion as knowledgeable, reflective, and best suited to making instructional decisions in their classrooms. Therefore, administrators and curriculum specialists should work with teachers who engage students in small group literature discussion and embrace their expertise as decisions are made regarding the selection and implementation of literacy programming and curricula, as well as professional development for teachers not experienced with small group discussion.

### **Limitations**

One of the limitations of face-to-face interviews is the extensive amount of time they require of both the interviewer and the interviewee. This limited the number of subjects willing and able to participate in the study. The restricted number of interviews meant this qualitative study should not be generalized. However, the rich descriptive narratives provided may be transferable to the experiences of others who read this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 215).

I overestimated the response to the invitation to participate in this study. A challenge and a limitation to this study is that only forty-three teachers participated in the online survey, less than the fifty hoped for. Furthermore, the teachers that used whole class discussion that

responded to the online survey did not complete the any of the responses about whole class discussion. I also received a much lower number of respondents willing to interview who used whole class discussion. Having completed in-depth analysis of all the interviews, it could be that teachers who do not use small group discussion may not be interested in talking about discussion.

Perhaps fewer teachers than anticipated responded due to the increasing demands teachers face, being overwhelmed with day-to-day responsibilities and therefore not able to respond to a survey. The invitation was delivered in the spring, an even busier time for teachers.

Ideally, I would have had an equal representation of teachers who use small group discussion and whole class discussion, but only five teachers who used whole class discussion volunteered to participate. Despite this, I believe the depth of the interviews and the common themes that emerged from both groups of teachers revealed new insights about why teachers do or do not use small group discussion. These were explained through the meanings expressed in detail by the participants, in their own words.

As an eighth grade English teacher who works to implement small group discussion in my own classroom and has made this interest the focus of my doctoral dissertation and my classroom practice, I brought my own biases and subjectivities to this study.

Based on the literature review, I created the online survey and the bank of interview questions. Other questions could have been asked. In retrospect, there are questions I wish I had asked but did not. I did not specifically ask teachers about their philosophy of education and if that was a factor in their decision about discussion. I did not anticipate teacher-held philosophy as a factor. Though, in retrospect, I realize that studies discussed in the literature review reported their fundamental basis on constructivist or socio-cultural theories, but did

not address them in their discussion of findings. Therefore, I did not anticipate philosophy as a finding and did not create questions about philosophy.

### **Future Research**

As an individual researcher, my access to participants was limited by distance to travel to an area within a reasonable drive. I was also limited by the time it takes to conduct, analyze and process interview data. Future research could be conducted in collaboration with multiple literacy researchers elsewhere in the country. This study could then be extended to include a much wider sample of teachers, a limitation of this study. Extending the study also would provide insight into factors other than those presented in the limited sample of this study. For example, teachers in this study who did not use small group discussion did not attribute that decision to factors outside their control. Each had made the decision to use teacher-led whole class discussion. However, teachers did make comments about other teachers known to them whose decisions were affected by outside forces. One teacher mentioned a teacher who was reprimanded by her principal for continuing to take time for group discussion, and not move on with the directed activity on the grade level pacing chart. Expanding the reach of this study to a wider sample could reveal additional factors that influence teachers' decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion and would extend the validity of this study.

A valuable addition to this study would have been classroom observations of the teachers interviewed. This would require additional time and investigators, but would substantiate or clarify the perspectives they present of their classrooms. The observations would also lead to additional interview questions.

Small group discussion skills have been identified in Common Core as curricular targets to engage students in literature and develop more in-depth reading practices and

communication skills necessary for 21<sup>st</sup> century jobs. As indicated in this study, curriculum specialists and administrators are adopting literacy programs, like *Making Meaning*, to support the use of small group literature discussion. Where there has been school-wide implementation of these programs, research could be done to assess the success and failings of these programs to move teachers away from teacher-led whole class discussion. In addition, studies of schools that have been re-structured to support small group discussion building-wide, like Fairview Elementary, would provide data about the successes and shortcomings of a range of programming and school-wide initiatives designed to support small group discussion.

A significant finding of this study is that the adoption of a constructivist philosophy requires literacy education beyond that provided in bachelor level teacher education programs. It would be informative to interview teachers about their personally held education philosophies, first as graduating teacher education students and then again at the end of their first year of teaching. The first year teacher who used whole class discussion in this study realized half way through the interview, despite her education, she preferred and employed teacher-centered methods because she was overwhelmed and found ‘they worked.’ Data that reveals what happens to teachers’ philosophical stances as they leave university and begin to teach would inform teachers, teacher educators and school administrators about how teachers adopt, or fail to adopt, constructivist philosophies so critical to the implementation of student-centered instruction.

## **Conclusion**

This study was designed to find out what influenced teachers decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion. For over thirty years, literacy theorists have developed and supported dialogic approaches, a move away from the historic use of teacher-led recitation. Despite the shift to constructivist, student-centered learning, recitation has remained the



dominant teacher practice. From this study, I conclude a constructivist philosophy is the determining factor that influences teachers to use small group discussion. Furthermore, participant demographics and their comments about their philosophy indicate that literacy education, particularly higher degrees with a focus on literacy, are the source from which teachers acquire constructivist philosophy. Teachers need more literacy education to provide both the understanding of constructivist beliefs and the range of social, language, and reading skills that are the basis of small group discussion in order to effect change in their practice. In the absence of higher literacy degrees to support constructivist approaches, teachers need other supports, like administrators who structure schedules to facilitate collegial collaboration.

SG #9 commented,

*You're going to have some epic fails, where your kids are completely off task... when they're ignoring each other or arguing with each other and you're going to have to be able to see that and say, "Okay, why did this happen on this day?" "Was it the group? Was it the directions? Was it the lack of student preparation? You have to be brave and it probably really matters if you have a partner at your school that's going to also apply this with you..."*

Undergraduate teacher preparation does not provide the depth of reflective experience for new teachers to adopt a constructivist philosophy. This suggests a requirement for additional coursework in literacy education, and school structures that encourage collaboration between teachers as they make the shift to student-centered practices like small group discussion.

**APPENDIX A**

(Invitation to University Students with QR code).

To: WSU Graduate Students in RLL

Re: A request for your participation in a brief online teacher survey.

Survey: What Teachers Say About Literature Discussion

My name is Julie Snider. I am a teacher in the Dexter Community Schools and doctoral student at Wayne State University. To fulfill requirements for that degree, I am conducting a research study. I am asking your help to complete a short anonymous survey. The survey will take approximately twenty minutes to complete.

There is thirty years of research on a wide range of literature discussion approaches. These studies are largely the work of literary specialists engaged in large-scale literacy initiatives. The existing research literature is missing teacher voices about factors that influence their decisions related to literature discussion. The purpose of this study is to find out what literature discussion approaches teachers are using and why they use those approaches.

At the end of the survey, you will also be asked if you would like to volunteer to participate in two interviews to provide more in depth information. You can choose to participate in the survey alone, participate in the survey and volunteer to participate in the interviews, or not at all. You may withdraw at any time.

In compensation for the time contributed to this research study, the fifteen interviewees will be awarded \$25 in recognition of their valuable time and expertise.

Thank you for your consideration. Your knowledge and experience could help advance teacher education and professional development. If you have any questions you can contact me at [sniderj@dexterschools.org](mailto:sniderj@dexterschools.org).



Scan this QR code to take the survey!

Sincerely,

Julie Snider  
Doctoral Student  
Wayne State University

**APPENDIX B**

(Informal invitation sent to teacher emails with link to online survey.)

Survey: What Teachers Say About Literature Discussion

My name is Julie Snider. I am a teacher in the Dexter Community Schools and doctoral student at Wayne State University. To fulfill requirements for that degree, I am conducting a research study. I am asking your help to complete a short anonymous survey. The survey will take approximately twenty minutes to complete.

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In compensation for the time contributed to this research study, the fifteen interviewees will be award \$25 in recognition of their valuable time and expertise.

Thank you for your consideration. Your knowledge and experience could help advance teacher education and professional development. If you have any questions you can contact me at [sniderj@dexterschools.org](mailto:sniderj@dexterschools.org).

Sincerely,

Julie Snider  
Doctoral Student  
Wayne State University

Please click on the following link to the online survey:

[https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1OFnnluLhpHYGfqD7U2a7NCt7bGV7MnwIBORzTpgDvYI/vi  
ewform?usp=send form](https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1OFnnluLhpHYGfqD7U2a7NCt7bGV7MnwIBORzTpgDvYI/viewform?usp=send form)

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Questions Drawn from the Literature Review

#### Personal Training and Experience that Influence your Discussion Choice

##### Description of What Discussion Looks Like

- Describe what discussion looks like in your classroom.
- What do your students' interpretations of literature sound like?
- Do you use different approaches to discussion to result in different student outcomes?
- How do students respond to interpretations of other students?
- How does group discussion affect student and teacher talk?
- Discuss your perception of assigning 'roles' to guide student participation?
- How does training/personal experience affect the discussion approach you choose?

#### Preparation for Discussion

- How do you implement literature discussion? (modeling; grad release of responsibility)
- How do you move students from teacher-led to group discussion?
- What skills enable students to discuss?
- In what ways does the text selected influence student discussion outcomes?
- What factors do you consider when creating small groups?
- How do you determine readiness for student-led discussion? (meta-talk, turn-taking)

#### Rationale for Discussion

- Goals:
  - What do you want your students to gain or experience from discussion?
  - What type of response to literature is your 'ideal'?
  - What are the student behaviors, works, or outcomes that lead you to that selection?
  - Is seeing themselves as co-creators of text one of your student goals?
- Describe your ideal of literature discussion.
- If you do, how do you model literature discussion?
- Do students who practice literature discussion become more thoughtful and/or engaged questions of text? Explain.
- Do new standards by CCSS influence your decisions about literature discussion?

#### Factors that Create Problems with Discussion

- Does discussion preparation inhibit reading pleasure?
- How do you move students from reading and discussion development to their personal application of those skills?
- Discuss interruptions, distractions, or impediments to students' personal responses to literature? (Gender issues? Social dominance? Non-dominant approach?)
- Discuss factors outside your classroom that affect your approach to discussion.
- Discuss group discussion results that led you to teacher-led discussion.
- How does peer led discussion support and/or inhibit a safe classroom environment

## APPENDIX D

(Information Sheet that Precedes the Online Survey.)

Principal Investigator (PI): Julianne Snider  
Wayne State University-Graduate Education  
(734) 649-3514

### **Purpose:**

You are being asked to be in a research study of factors that affect the decisions you make about your classroom approach to literature discussion because you are a teacher of reading, English, or language arts, grades two through eight. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University but this survey will be conducted online.

### **Study Procedures:**

If you take part in the study, you will be asked to complete the survey that is focused on classroom literature discussion practices. Questions will center on why you choose the discussion format you use. For example, survey items list a range of discussion type and associated strengths, benefits, fit with the curriculum, etc. There are four short answer questions for teachers to clarify their responses. Completing this survey should take twenty minutes or less. Enter the survey by clicking below. Participation in the survey is anonymous.

Teachers who complete this online survey will be given an opportunity to volunteer for two one-hour interviews with the primary investigator that will provide more in-depth data about factors that influence teachers' decisions about their use of literature discussion. You may participate in the survey alone and your completion of the survey does not indicate your interest in participating as an interviewee.

### **Benefits**

The possible benefits to you for taking part in this research study are that you will be given the opportunity for your voice as a teacher to be heard and added to the research literature, in which it is presently not included. Furthermore, findings from this study may impact future teacher education and professional development in the area of reading and literacy education.

### **Risks**

There are no known risks at this time to participation in the online survey of this study.

### **Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in the survey. Fifteen survey respondents who volunteer and are selected to participate as interviewees will be compensated \$25 for their time and expertise.

### **Confidentiality**

All information collected about you during the course of this study will be kept without any identifiers.

### **Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Julie

Snider at the following phone number (734) 649-3514. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

**Participation**

By completing this survey you are agreeing to participate in this study. Additionally, participation in this research is for residents of the United States over the age of 18; if you are not a resident of the United States and/or under the age of 18, please do not complete this survey.

**APPENDIX E**

*(Document: Information Letter that appears at the END of the online survey)*

Thank you for taking time to complete the survey. As the expert in the field, your voice is important, and unfortunately absent from the research literature.

All survey respondents are invited to volunteer to be part of the next phase of this study: two one-hour long interviews. Fifteen volunteers will be selected to participate as interviewees. The purpose of these interviews is to provide more in-depth information to explain the factors that influence teachers' decisions about the literature discussion approaches they use.

Interviewees will be compensated \$25 in recognition of their time and expertise. Would you be interested in taking part as an interviewee?

My purpose is to bring teacher voices to the research literature. Interviews will be flexible...open to the inclusion of your questions and the elaboration of your thoughts. Both one-hour interviews will be one-on-one with me, the primary investigator, at a place and time convenient to you, but away from the school in which you teach.

The interviews will be completed within a two-month time frame. At any time, volunteers may opt to withdraw from participation in this study.

To volunteer, click 'yes' and leave your contact information. I will contact you to discuss your participation as an interviewee. To protect your anonymity, your name and contact information will be removed from your survey results and replaced with a pseudonym, to be used throughout the study.

I appreciate your time and look forward to talking with you. Click below to accept this invitation and leave your contact information.

Thank you, again,  
Julie Snider  
Doctoral Student  
Wayne State University  
sniderj@dexterschools.org

## APPENDIX F

(Written consent to be signed by interviewees at the first meeting with the PI)

Principal Investigator (PI): Julianne Snider  
Wayne State University  
Teacher Education: Reading, Literature, & Language  
(734) 649-3514

Thank you for completing the online survey and volunteering to be one of fifteen interviewees in this study. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before signing this form, your written consent to participate in this study.

### **Purpose:**

These interviews allow you, the literacy teacher, to give detailed descriptions of literature discussion approaches used in your classroom and factors that influence your use of those approaches. Interviews will be flexible... open to the inclusion of your questions and the elaboration of your thoughts. The goal of this study is to gain a greater understanding of the factors that influence teachers' decisions about literature discussion approaches.

### **Interview Procedures:**

You have been chosen as one of fifteen interviewees who comprise a sample varied in terms of demographics, grades taught, and discussion approaches used. Both one-hour interviews will be one-on-one with me, at a place and time convenient to you, like a public library or food court of a mall, but not the school in which you teach. Interviews with you will be digitally recorded and transcribed. You will be given copies of interview transcripts for your review. All interviews will be completed within two months of the first meeting.

### **Compensation and Benefits:**

Interviewees will be compensated \$25 in recognition of their time and expertise. Benefits of this study are that it provides you a chance to have your voice heard and added to the research literature. Findings may impact future teacher education and professional development.

### **Risks and Confidentiality:**

Your personal identification has been removed from your survey results and replaced with a pseudonym. The pseudonym will be used in all aspects of the research to protect your anonymity. All personal identifiers will be kept in a separate location. As the primary investigator, I will be the only one with access to your name and contact information. These lists and the digital recordings of interviews will be destroyed upon the completion of the study. Despite these measures, you may experience the possible loss of confidentiality. It is possible that someone may read the findings and identify your school or classroom by the descriptions you provide. To avoid loss of confidentiality, I will omit any data provided by you that you wish not to be included.

### **Study Costs**

Participation in this study will be of no cost to you.



### **Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to withdraw from participation at any time. During the interview process, you may decline from answering any of the questions.

### **Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact me at (734) 649-3514. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call (313) 577-1628 to ask questions or voice concerns or complaints.

### **Consent to Participate in a Research Study**

To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. If you choose to take part in this study you may withdraw at any time. You are not giving up any of your legal rights by signing this form. Your signature below indicates that you have read, or had read to you, this entire consent form, including the risks and benefits, and have had all of your questions answered. You will be given a copy of this consent form.

Julie Snider, Primary Investigator  
 Doctoral Student  
 Wayne State University  
[sniderj@dexterschools.org](mailto:sniderj@dexterschools.org)  
 (734) 649-3514

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of participant / Legally authorized representative \*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed name of participant / Legally authorized representative\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of witness\*\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed of witness\*\*

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Signature of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Printed name of person obtaining consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
 Date

**APPENDIX G****DATA CODING SCHEME****CODING: Isolated by Level (n=139)****1<sup>ST</sup> LEVEL (n=6)**

Ev	Evaluative	Statement (to judge /determine the significance/worth/quality)
B	Belief	A trust, faith, confidence in someone/something
Rt	Rationale	A reason for an action
Ex	Example	
Rf	Reflection	
Obs	Observation	

**2<sup>nd</sup> LEVEL (n=21)**

ICD	Curriculum Design
Lit	Literacy – Reading, Writing, Speaking In General
Id	Discussion (in general)

**Small Group**

LC	Lit Circles (Different books)
SG	Small Group Discussion
TL Grp	Teacher-Led Group Discussion
SG WCBk	Small Group Whole Class Reading Same Book
I to I	Teacher and One Student Discuss

**Whole group**

TL WCD	Teacher-Led Whole Class Discussion
--------	------------------------------------

**SG-W Switching between Small Group and Whole Class  
(Factors Related or Particular to Student Discussion)**

SL	How Students Learn
Rdr H	High Readers
Rdr L	Low Readers
RdrH-L	Wide Range of Readers
SEng	Student Engagement
Cli	Classroom Climate

**(Factors Related to Teacher Use of Discussion)]**

TKn	Teacher Knowledge
TRs	Teacher Resourcefulness/Creativity ICD
TPs	Teacher Passion
TTr	Teacher Training
TPr	Teacher Practice

## Factors Related to Teacher Choice of Small Group or Whole Class Discussion

### 3<sup>rd</sup> LEVEL (n=21)

#### FACTORS OUTSIDE TEACHER / CLASSROOM

Prs	Pressures Upon Teacher (from teachers, admn's., St. Tests)
SWide	School Wide Approach
LRcyl	Literacy Programs/Approaches Recycle

#### FACTORS RELATED TO THE DISCUSSION APPROACH (WHOLE CLASS OR SMALL GROUP)

Chal	Challenges to Teaching Whole Class or Small Group Discussion
Ben	Benefits to Teaching Whole Class or Small Group Discussion
Lis	Listening
Rdg+	close reading-deep, comprehensive, analytical reading
Rdg-	surface reading-little depth of reading
R-W-D	(Reading, Writing, Discussion) Blended Instruction

#### TEACHER FACTORS (INSTRUCTION, KNOWLEDGE, TRAINING)

EdPh	Personally Held Philosophy of Education
Cli	Classroom Climate
IT/S	Teacher / Student Relationship
TP	Teacher Plan to support discussion learning
GR	Gradual Release of Responsibility to Student
TKn&A	Teacher Knowledge and Application of Discussion Instruction
Hist-	Teacher Discussion Strategies Limited
NdTr	Teacher Training Needed
IUG-	Undergrad Discussion Training not recalled; inadequate
IUG+	Undergrad Discussion Training Supports Instruction

#### MISC. COMMENTS

2d	discussion
2CD	curricular design

## Factors Related to Teacher Choice of Small Group or Whole Class Discussion

4<sup>th</sup> LEVEL (n=52)

### Challenges and/or Benefits Particular to Whole Class or Small Group Approaches

AbMx	Use of Ability Mixed Groups
2Acc	Access for All Students
As	Hard to Assess/Hold Accountable
BI	Positive Buy-In
BI-	No Buy-In
Ch	Student Choice of Reading Selection
Ch-	No Student Choice of Reading Selection
CL	Critical Literacy
Cli	Climate
CMgt	Classroom Management
C	Comprehension
Co	Connections
Cr	Cross Curricular
CC	Common Core Curriculum
De	Deep Level Thinking
Dev	Immature
DI	Discussion Instruction
Di	Differentiation
Eng	Student Engagement
Go+	Meets Teacher Goals
Go-	Does Not Meet Teacher Goals
IL	Intellectual Laziness-Work Ethic
Mat	Adequate Reading Materials
Mat-	Inadequate Reading Materials
Mo	Modeling
OM	Open Mindset-Life Learning
Off	Off Task
Rel	Relevant to Students
Rel-	Not Relevant to Student
Roles	Lit Circle Roles
SS	Skills and Strategies Instruction
Soc	Social Issues
SCTr	Student Centered
StMo	Students Model for Students
Sup-	Lack of Support
TCTr	Teacher Centered
Ti	Ti Constraints
Tmwk+	Ability to Function as Team
Tmwk-	Unable to Function as Team
TL	Teaching Tool

TTwk Teacher adapts programming

### Teacher Factors

K-12H K-12 Personal Experience  
 2UG- Undergrad: not recalled or inadequate  
 2UG+ Undergrad: supports instruction  
 CIDif All classrooms are Different  
 MO Teacher Modeling  
 PD Professional Development  
 TS Teacher Strategy  
 Tr Teacher Training Effective  
 Tr- Teacher Training Not Effective  
 2T/S Teacher/Student Relationship

### 5<sup>th</sup> LEVEL (n=19)

IAcc- No Access for Some  
 IAcc+ Access for all Students  
 ccs Makes copies of materials  
 Tr- engagement  
 Eng engagement  
 G Gender  
 Grp Arranging Students/Groups  
 Hi High Readers  
 Lo Low Readers  
 lis Listening  
 MB Multiple Books  
 MG Multiple Groups  
 MT Multiple Tasks  
 Non P Non-Participants/Passive  
 OPart Over-Participants  
 Rsk Requires Risk Taking  
 Rel relevant  
 Rfoc refocus  
 Saf safety  
 3T/S Teacher/Student Relationship

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**ABSTRACT****FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE TEACHERS' USE, OR NON-USE,  
OF SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION**

by

**JULIANNE SNIDER****August 2016****Advisor:** Dr. Karen Feathers**Major:** Reading, Language, and Literature**Degree:** Doctor of Education

This qualitative study explored teacher answers to one question: What factors influence teachers' decisions to use, or not use, small group discussion. Research supports a variety of small group discussion approaches to meet a range of curricular goals. Despite the philosophical move to student-centered discussion approaches, and research supporting small group discussion as an effective literacy approach, teacher led whole class discussion continues as the dominant approach. An online teacher survey about teacher use of discussion generated fifteen teachers, grades two through eight, who were interviewed to gather data on their perspectives about student discussion.

Three themes emerged from the interview data: (1) Teachers' perspectives about their philosophy of education differed between teachers who used small group discussion and whole class discussion, (2) Teacher's talk about students differed between teachers who used small group discussion and whole class discussion, and (3) Teachers' talk about the teacher's role or purpose differed between teachers who used small group discussion and whole class

discussion.

Based on the findings, the implications suggest that teachers who are successful at implementing small group discussion have reading related advanced degrees, they have adopted constructivist philosophies, perhaps through their advanced degrees in reading, and they benefit from administrative and collegial support. Without the reading education and the philosophy to support student-centered approaches, teacher comments revealed that even when school-wide literacy programs, designed to engage students in small group discussion, were implemented, teachers manipulated the program activities to fit their teacher-led style.

**AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

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Julianne Snider was born in Detroit, Michigan. After completing her work at East Detroit High School, she entered Michigan State University and transferred to Wayne State University the following year. At Wayne State University she received her Bachelor Degree in Education, with certifications in physical education K-12 and secondary science. She was employed as a physical education teacher at Royal Oak Kimball High School. After two years, she was employed by the State of Michigan House of Representatives.

Snider returned to teaching after eight years when she was employed as the Treasurer/Office Manager of Fuller Commercial Brokerage Co., in Houston, TX. Upon her return to Michigan, she earned her Master's degree in reading at Eastern Michigan University. Since 1994 she has been a middle school teacher with Dexter Community Schools. She taught seventh and eighth grade science until 2006, when she changed curricular areas to English. In 2005 she entered the Doctoral Program at Wayne State University in the Reading, Literature, and Language Department.