American Educational Research Journal

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Bringing the Background to the Foreground: What Do Classroom Environments That Support Authentic Discussions Look Like?

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Authentic discussions are dialogically oriented classroom interactions where participants present and consider multiple perspectives and often use others' input in constructing their contributions. Despite their instructional effectiveness, authentic discussions are reportedly rare in classrooms. This qualitative case study examines the features of the environment of a fifth-grade classroom community where authentic discussions were frequent. The examination used recorded class sessions, interviews, and field notes to identify seven aspects of the classroom environment that appeared to be essential to the presence of authentic discussions: physical environment, curricular demands and enacted curriculum, teacher beliefs, student beliefs about discussions, relationships among members, classroom procedures, and norms of classroom participation.

Authentic discussions about literary text are often exalted by educational theorists, researchers, and practitioners as highly desirable. The language that characterizes such classroom discourse has been studied and described through various perspectives, and authentic or dialogic classroom discussions have often been identified as a distinctive type of interaction or *speech genre*. As Holquist (1990) notes, speech genres are situated constructs. In other words, they exist in a dynamic relationship with the features of the linguistic community that uses them. Therefore, when examining a type of interaction used by a specific community, it becomes important to study the characteristics of the environment of that community and consider how they may function in shaping the speech genre of interest.

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This article examines a fifth-grade classroom community where the speech genre of authentic classroom discussions was commonly used. The study presented here is part of a wider qualitative research that sought (a) to analyze the texture of talk in the authentic discussions of the community under study, (b) to explore participant perspectives, and (c) to examine the classroom environment of the community. Here the focus will be on the portion of the research that examined the question, "What were the features of the classroom environment of this discourse community, which frequently used authentic discussions?"

Authentic Discussions

Authentic classroom discussions are a classroom-based speech genre in which participants commonly explore issues of interest by articulating ideas and opinions. During such interactions, participants have opportunities to express opinions and ideas, and contributions are often built on ideas expressed by other participants (Hadjioannou, 2003). Authentic discussions often have no one preordained conclusion to be reached. Rather, they are motivated by authentically dialogic purposes, and the objective is to reach new and more sophisticated understandings. Such interactions have been described as *substantive* (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993), *interactive* (Nystrand, 1997), *dialogic* (Nystrand 1997), and *responsive-collaborative* (Gutierrez, 1994). In a discourse analysis of transcripts of authentic classroom discussions, I found that (a) both the teacher and the students of the classroom community studied had substantial and diverse roles in the interactions; (b) expressing opinion, reflecting, providing information and clarifications, and making connections with experience were common; and (c) conversations gravitated to the exploration of ambiguous issues (Hadjioannou, 2003). The exploratory nature of authentic discussion renders it a socially demanding speech genre, as participants are expected to share a lot of who they are, to offer ideas that can be negotiated or questioned, and to query others' contributions without offending them.

Rosenblatt (1995), Langer (1995), Gambrell (1996), and Wells (2000) agree that literature discussions of this kind can greatly enhance student understanding. Furthermore, dialogic classroom interactions reportedly foster critical thinking (Applebee, 2002; Gambrell, 1996), improve students' communication skills (Almasi, 1996), have a positive effect on interpersonal relationships between class members (Langer, 1995; Slavin, 1990), and help prepare students for participation in a democratic society and its processes (Applebee, 2002).

Despite the well-established pedagogical value of authentic classroom discussions, research in classroom interactions repeatedly shows that such interactions are rare in classrooms (Lindfors, 1999; Newkirk & McLure, 1992; Nystrand, 1997; Short, Harste, & Burke, 1996). This situation highlights the need to study classrooms where authentic discussions do take place and to examine the characteristics of the classroom communities that develop and use such interactions. A more complete and thorough view of

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such communities can offer educators possibilities as to how they can foster the development of authentic discussions in their own classrooms.

Speech Genres and the Communities That Use Them

Social constructivists propose that language is an instrument, complex in both its structure and its functions, that is governed by an intricate web of social conventions and understandings, that enables the construction and the negotiation of culture, and that is closely related to cognition (Donaldson, 1979; Halliday, 1975; Holquist, 1990; John-Steiner, 1997; Lindfors, 1987,1999). In describing the intricacies of language use, Bakhtin (1986) recognizes that utterances are not completely free acts of choice and suggests that every sphere where language is used is associated with "relatively stable types" of utterances, which constitute a speech genre (p. 60). Authentic classroom discussions are one such genre, as they are characterized by the frequent presence of a set of stable discourse moves (see Hadjioannou, 2003). Successful participation in any interaction, and therefore in authentic discussions as well, requires correctly "reading" that particular interaction to identify the speech genre enacted and to shape one's verbal behavior according to the expectations it signifies (Goodwin & Duranti, 1992; Lindfors, 1999). In other words, the environment within which language is used substantially shapes the nature of interactions by providing guidelines as to what can be said, how, by whom, to whom, and for what purpose.

The significance of the environment of language use indicates that the speech genres manifested in the interactions of a linguistic community are closely related to the nature of that community's life (Gee, 2000). The environment of language use, created through the ever-evolving communal life, coexists in a dynamic relationship with the speech genres used by the community members. The community's life supports and nurtures the development of certain types of speech genres, and in turn, the interactions supported by those speech genres provide the material that build and rebuild the construction that communal life is (Bakhtin, 1986; Bruner, 1990; Duranti, 1988; Goodwin & Duranti 1992).

Classroom Environments as the Contexts of Classroom Life

Classroom communities are social entities that exist within a number of wider spheres that influence their nature and the communal life they support in many ways. The schools where classroom communities are located, the home communities of the students and the teachers, the professional communities of the school faculty and other personnel, the curricular demands, and the state and federal policies are only a few of the various interconnecting contexts within which classroom communities are created and shaped. At the same time, classroom communities themselves are the context for the teaching, the learning, the talking, and all the other workings of the classroom community life.

Following an emerging trend in psychological theory and educational practice that recognizes "that the learning self is constructed and develops *within* the relationships of classroom life" (Raider-Roth, 2005a, p. 19), the issue of classroom communities as learning environments has been widely studied since the 1930s. Basing their work on models describing group climate ,such as Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, Lewin's (1997) field theory, and Bronfrenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, educational researchers have examined classroom environments, have sought to identify the elements that define them, and have explored the relationship between the nature of classroom environments and student learning.

In a conceptualization that is closely related to Bakhtin's theory, Lindfors (1999) proposes two different views of classroom environments as contexts of classroom life: the *surround* view and the *weaving* view. The surround view refers to the idea of looking at context through a location metaphor. Through this metaphor, classroom environment is perceived as the setting within which events and interactions between class members occur. This environment, both physical and social, "provides the resources for and also the constraints of interaction" (Lindfors, 1999, p. 276). On the other hand, the weaving view looks at classroom environments as something the participants create as they are participating in social work. The possibilities and resources provided by the surround context operate as repeatable threads, which the participants have available to them during any given interaction. As each interaction event develops, the participants select and weave these threads in unique ways.

In her work, Raider-Roth (2004, 2005a, 2005b) places the focus of the examination of classroom environments on their relational aspects. Espousing the sociocognitive view of knowledge as socially constructed and utilizing relational psychology theory, the author proposes that the interpersonal relationships that exist within a classroom community can profoundly affect the children's learning as well as their self-assessment processes. In her analysis of the relational learning self, Raider-Roth (2005a) identifies as important the individual's relationship with self as well as the relationships with others. The author suggests that trust is a fundamental component of human relationships in school and proposes that trustworthy teaching–learning relationships hinge on "(1) the teacher's capacity to be connected to the student, (2) the teacher's genuine interest in nurturing students' own ideas, (3) collaborative study on the part of teacher and student, and (4) an environment in which trust can prevail" (p. 30).

Lindfors (1999), Dyson (1993), and Guthrie and Cox (2001) state that identifying a set of features that sufficiently describes classroom environments is an exceptionally challenging task because such environments are both tremendously complex and ever changing. Guthrie and Cox (2001) and Guthrie (2001) report that the multifaceted nature of classroom environments and the interrelationships of their elements have led researchers to create long lists of descriptive features. Their own categorization includes seven descriptors of "a classroom context that fosters long-term reading

engagement" (p. 287): learning goals, real-world interaction, interesting texts, autonomy support, strategy instruction, collaboration support, and evaluation.

Similar to Guthrie and Cox's (2001) work, substantial research on classroom environments has focused on the environments' potential to positively influence student learning by motivating students to earnestly and thoughtfully participate in instructional activities. In a case study of three "slow progress students as they engaged in embedded word studies," Anderson, O'Flahavan, and Guthrie (1996) found that participation in a variety of interpersonal interactions within different social contexts during class work appeared to bolster the students' involvement and success with their tasks (p. 1).

Ryan and Patrick's (2001) study of 233 eighth graders indicated that the composite construct of classroom environment was closely related to students' engagement and motivation for learning. Specifically, their findings suggest that students are more engaged and motivated when they believe that they are encouraged to work collaboratively with peers, when they perceive their classroom as a place where their ideas are valued, when they view their teachers as caring and supportive, and when their performance is not publicly compared to their classmates' performance.

Majeed, Fraser, and Aldridge (2001) and S. Fraser (1996) report that various studies have examined the relationship between students' achievement and their satisfaction with their classrooms' environments. In their own studies, both sets of researchers found (a) that students perceived a positive learning environment in terms of high student cohesiveness, low friction, and low difficulty; and (b) that there existed a positive relationship between classroom environment and achievement. As S. Fraser noted, "Overall, a class that enjoys greater cohesion among its students and sees less friction contributes to a conducive classroom environment that enhances student achievement and attitudes."

The issue of friction was also addressed by Allodi (2002) in a study where she examined classroom climate in relation to the school's social context, the presence of a diverse student population, and the formation of differentiated instructional environments for children with special needs. Allodi found that "classes with children with disabilities are associated with lower levels of friction/competition and individualism and higher levels of cohesiveness" (p. 269). This, according to Allodi, creates a more positive classroom environment with favorable conditions for the learning of all students.

In this study, my effort was to identify the elements that seemed to shape the environment of the classroom community under study and to describe how those elements functioned as repeatable threads woven to create the fabric of the classroom's social life. Among other considerations, I was particularly attentive to elements that appeared to be related to the students' involvement in classroom activities and to the social relationships among community members.

Methodology

This article presents a qualitative case study of a fifth-grade public school classroom where book talks often involved authentic discussions. The community under study was a fifth-grade class of 24 students and their teacher. Data collection included observation, participant interviews, and audio and video recording of class sessions.

I observed the language arts block of the classroom under study for a 5-month period (January through May) on an almost daily basis. The field notes include detailed depictions of the class conversations as well as thorough descriptions of the physical environment, nonverbal events, unofficial conversations with participants, and classroom climate features. In addition, I conducted a series of interviews with the classroom teacher (Ms. Enthis) and four focal students who were selected to represent different student types (Sapfo, Jay, Mechanic, and Natalia). Each individual was interviewed four times, using a flexible interview protocol. During the interviews, the participants were asked exploratory questions regarding their beliefs about literature and learning and about their perceptions of the environment of their classroom community and their class's book talks. I also asked questions specific to the recorded book talks while the participants reviewed the relevant video clips. Finally, I audio- and video-recorded four book talk sessions, which were transcribed verbatim and analyzed through discourse analysis. This analysis focused primarily on the purposes the interaction participants appeared to be pursuing with each one of their utterances (move analysis, as described by Lindfors, 1999 and Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). The findings of the discourse analysis were used primarily for describing the texture of talk in authentic discussions (see Hadjioannou, 2003) but also for capturing the elements of the classroom environment in action.

The process of identifying the major elements of the classroom environment was a generative one, and it began with the initial coding of the field notes and the interview transcripts. As per Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (1995) recommendation for open coding, the goal of this initial scrutiny was to use databased, highly contextualized descriptors to systematically illustrate the content of the data. The initial list of codes was reexamined, and the codes pertaining to the classroom environment, as described in the relevant literature, were isolated. Through repeated scrutiny, the original contextualized descriptive codes were reworked in an effort to produce progressively abstract and limited-in-number constructs. By merging descriptors and rethinking and refining categories, a list of seven major environment features emerged: physical environment, curricular demands, teacher beliefs, student beliefs, relationships between members, classroom procedures, and norms of class participation. Even though the categories themselves originated from the field notes and the interview data, when considering each category, I also drew information from the classroom session recordings to triangulate the interviewees' claims with what was happening in interactions and to derive possible connections between the classroom environment and authentic discussions.

The Environment of Authentic Discussions in
Ms. Enthis's Classroom

Physical Environment

The fifth-grade classroom community under study was part of Grassroot Elementary School (pseudonym), a quintessentially middle-class school in a midsize town in Florida. Housed in a fairly new building and surrounded by wooded niches and neighborhood houses, Grassroot looked clean, tidy, and orderly. Configured in quads design, the building allowed for all the classrooms of each grade level to be accommodated in the same area and to have a common centrium in the middle. Walking through the corridors of Grassroots, one could not help but notice the student work exhibited on the walls. The welcoming atmosphere created by the display of student work was heightened when entering Ms. Enthis's classroom. Generally orderly but with some homey clutter, the physical environment of the classroom exuded an air of belonging to its denizens rather than to the school. Students' art and writing decorated the walls along with some posters charting the historical events the class had been studying in social studies.

The teacher's desk was placed at the far left corner at the front of the room, next to the board. Rarely used by Ms. Enthis during class time, the desk was cluttered with books, stationery, and other class materials. The student desks' configuration is challenging to describe because it changed every few weeks. As Ms. Enthis stated in our unofficial conversations, the different configurations were always structured to accommodate students' access to lessons and to allow her the ability to circulate around the class effectively. She added that she was also seeking to help quiet students be more verbal and to keep problems from arising between incompatible neighbors.

Books and other reading materials were abundant in the classroom. A number of thesauri, atlases, and other reference materials were stored in shelves around the room, and two large bookshelves full of children's literature books were located at the back of the room, right next to what the class called the "comfortable area." The comfortable area was a reading niche made up of an assortment of old but comfortable-looking reclining chairs and bean bags. Another area that appeared to be significant to the communal life of Ms. Enthis's class was a patch of shaded grass located outside the classroom. Occasionally, on beautiful, warm days, the class's book talks were held there, and along with the comfortable area, this appeared to be a favorite spot for reading, as students excitedly asked to go there during reading time.

In general, the physical environment of the classroom community can be described as exuding an air of comfort, belonging, and coziness. Such an environment seems to have a great potential for fostering interactions that are socially demanding and that require individuals to allow themselves to be vulnerable by offering opinions, sharing personal experiences, and reflecting, all of which are common in authentic discussions (Hadjioannou,

2003). At the same time, the fact that, most of the time, class members had direct visual access to each other also probably facilitated the exchange of ideas and the collaborative meaning-building authentic discussions involved (Townsend, 1991).

Curricular Demands and Enacted Curriculum

Akin to every other fifth-grade public school class in the state of Florida, Ms. Enthis's class was bound by the demands of the Sunshine State Standards for the fifth grade (Florida Department of Education, 1986). The grade-level expectations delineated for fifth-grade language arts comprise an extensive list of specific performance objectives regarding reading; writing; listening, viewing and speaking; language; and literature. Ms. Enthis mentioned that she was attentive to the standards and stated that she made an effort to work on them with her class but added that they only constituted a portion of her curriculum.

In our conversations, Ms. Enthis said that she also had to consider the fact that her students would be taking the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT) in spring. Talk about the FCAT came up during the very first stages of data collection. Ms Enthis said, "I am starting to feel the weight of the testing. We are starting to have meetings about it," and making a face mixed with fatigue and discontentment, she continued,

> We have the math and the reading test coming up and it's just so heavy . . . plus we have two field trips before that and . . . argh . . . That's the thing with testing. It makes you feel that any moment you spend doing something else is a moment wasted.

Despite the stress of the high-stakes testing culture and the financial consequences associated with students' test performance, Ms. Enthis maintained that testing "should not be your whole teaching" and refused to pressure her students into becoming overly invested in the test. Therefore, explicit test preparation was minimal in her class. It is indicative to note that between the beginning of the spring semester and the FCAT test (March 11), I observed only four instances of filling in worksheets in preparation for the test or discussing test-taking techniques. In those situations, Ms. Enthis explicitly identified the activities as test preparation and, on occasion, expressed her frustration at nonsensical test items. Also, she reminded her students that they needed to do just their best and to "remember that [they] are not supposed to answer everything correctly on a standardized test."

Beyond the external mandates Ms. Enthis had to negotiate when constructing the language arts curriculum for her class, she maintained that she and her grade-level team enjoyed considerable decision-making power. She said that the year before, the fifth-grade teachers' team had decided to create a literature-based curriculum for language arts by building its instruction around a collection of novels instead of using a county-recommended basal series. With their principal's support, the teachers crafted and implemented a literature-based curriculum, making sure to address the requirements of the

Sunshine State Standards (Florida Department of Education, 1986). Their curriculum included exceptional children's books, such as *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, by Scott O'Dell (1960); *The Witch of Black Bird Pond*, by Elizabeth George Speare (1986); *Holes*, by Louis Sachar (1998); and *Artemis Fowl*, by Eoin Colfer (2002).

The fifth-grade teacher team's ability to shape its curriculum around quality literature was probably important in fostering authentic discussions about literature. Even though Ms. Enthis did not make the connection explicitly, the literature suggests that the kinds of interesting, well-written, and complete stories used in literature-based curricula tend to produce much deeper and richer responses from the students and more dialogic interactions (Avery, 2001; Martinez et al., 2001). Authentic discussions were also possibly facilitated by the low priority test preparation occupied in the classroom community's life. The nature of test preparation materials combined with the high levels of stress present when test preparation has high priority often disallow interactions that go beyond issues determined by test items or where the goal is speculation and exploration rather than getting to "the one correct answer" (Shelton, 2003).

Teacher Beliefs

According to Brody (1998), "Teachers' beliefs may have the greatest impact on what teachers do in the classroom, the ways they conceptualize their instruction, and learn from experience" (p. 25). Teacher beliefs provide a framework based on which teachers judge enacted or proposed practices, comprehend experiences, and make instructional decisions. Given the significant relationship between teacher beliefs and instructional practice, it seems imperative to examine those beliefs when studying the environments of exemplary practice.

Ms. Enthis's beliefs about learning and the nature of knowledge. Ms. Enthis considered learning a process where learners actively construct meaning and stated that she believed that student learning was greatly facilitated by active participation in a community that (a) allows students to put forth their ideas and perspectives and (b) responds in honest but kind ways to those ideas. Ms. Enthis's statements and practice indicate that she viewed knowledge as a product of thoughtful exploration by the learner, and often in collaboration with others, views that align with the social constructivist paradigm. In general, she encouraged conversations and negotiations, and she accepted and was actually delighted by the expression of various ideas and opinions but placed heavy emphasis on having and articulating a rationale for each idea or opinion. On this issue she stated,

> I guess it's teaching comprehension skills and it's teaching being able to make inferences . . . being able to find details in the reading to support what they're saying and maybe being able to infer from what they're reading.

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Consistent with her view of learning as an active process of meaning making, Ms. Enthis stated that she avoided presenting her students with ready-made knowledge. Instead, the general design of her lessons sought to problematize and render salient certain issues and invited students to consider them. Ms. Enthis asserted that when students are given the opportunity to engage their minds in active explorations, the learning or product of those explorations is more meaningful and is of a more permanent quality. Thus, in one of her interviews, she mentioned, "I want them to find it out on their own. And they'll remember it better that way."

Ms. Enthis occasionally opted for direct instruction approaches to teaching. Even then, however, Ms. Enthis tried to make the subject relevant and comprehensible to the students by connecting it to previous classroom experiences and by inviting students to think of other pertinent examples. In one such instance, Ms. Enthis started to introduce an eight-item list for writing the first sentence of a narrative. As she begun by relating the first item to previously read texts, the students picked up and started offering their own examples and strategies. As a result, the instructive activity evolved into a conversation in which the classroom community took the list of strategies and made it part of the class culture by infusing it with communal meaning.

Ms. Enthis's beliefs about literary analysis and literature. Ms. Enthis's view of knowledge as socially constructed also permeated her view of literature and literary analysis. Instead of looking for the one correct interpretation of literary works, through both her statements and her teaching practice, Ms. Enthis indicated that she held a stance of openness to different interpretations of texts, even accepting and validating construals that came in direct contrast to her own views. In our conversations, she frequently maintained that competent readers "interact with the text" to make meaning of it. For this reason, Ms. Enthis encouraged students to reflect on the literary works they were reading and often reminded them that there is no "one correct answer" to their reflective inquiries.

Furthermore, Ms. Enthis appeared to accept a broad definition of literary analysis. Rather than limiting classroom discussions to strictly analytical comments regarding "the meaning of the book," Ms. Enthis encouraged and even modeled the presentation of personal responses that included making connections with other literary works and connecting the text under study with personal experiences.

Ms. Enthis viewed quality children's literature as an excellent way of teaching language arts. She asserted that the sequenced presentation of skills in basal readers is not necessarily the best approach. Rather, she said, all skills can be successfully taught through great books. In this way, students can have the benefit of enjoying a quality piece of literature while learning and applying the skills of effective readers.

Ms. Enthis' beliefs about literature in general and about the potential of high-quality children's literature for teaching students undoubtedly had an effect on both her curricular choices and her instruction. The high

value she placed on literature definitely influenced her decision to adopt a literature-based curriculum, and her espousal of a response-based approach to literary analysis probably influenced the presence of authentic discussions in the book talks of her class.

Ms. Enthis's beliefs about teaching. According to Lindfors (1987), teachers' philosophical orientations toward learning and the nature of knowledge and their perceptions of the subject matter being taught constitute a primary foundation of their view of teaching. Perceptions of learning as a process of transmission locate the teacher at the center of the instructional process where he or she assumes roles such as knower, transmitter of information, and model-to-be-imitated. On the other hand, perceptions of learning as an active and fundamentally social meaning-making process lead to roles such as demonstrator, responder, learner, observer, and provider. As Ms. Enthis's perceptions of learning seemed to align with the social constructivist view, it is not surprising that her beliefs about teaching and her actual teaching practice also reflected roles consistent with that paradigm.

Ms. Enthis appeared to be a firm believer in the idea that saliency, personal interest, and involvement play an enormous role in learning. The interviews and other conversations with Ms. Enthis revealed that she often made sure to direct the class toward explorations of issues students brought up or appeared to be interested in. She stated that pursuing students' ideas was one of her great prides in teaching and noted that this was one type of instructional freedom that she would never give up.

Also, Ms. Enthis exalted the importance of encouraging students to freely express their opinions. In her interviews, she indicated that her aspiration was not to get students to learn what the teacher "knows" the book means but to facilitate the development of the kind of discussions adults have when talking about books they like:

> I feel that that's a more mature way to discuss books. It's what adults do sitting around in a book circle. And, yeah, I want them to be able to feel comfortable enough to offer their opinions or to just disagree with others. I mean, as long as they're respectful about it . . . I want their input.

Ms. Enthis not only recognized that different individuals can have different responses to the same text but also appeared to rejoice in such diverse responses. This was vividly illustrated in a comment Ms. Enthis made while reviewing a videotaped book talk episode on E. L. Konigsburg's (1968) *From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler* during which the class was discussing the question, "Where would you stay if you were to spend a night in the Metropolitan museum?"

> You know, I don't think I've had this discussion before with the novel. I think it was fresh and I was pleased that they weren't all picking the

same one for the same reason. They had different reasons why they were choosing something.

The practice of expressing one's opinions and ideas stood even when those opinions were in direct contrast to what Ms. Enthis thought. The class field notes contain a number of instances where students openly disagreed with an opinion Ms. Enthis had expressed. For example, during one of the rare test-preparation sessions, when a group of students convincingly made a case for a multiple-choice option, Ms. Enthis agreed that they had a point and added that she was no longer sure that the alternative she had originally chosen was correct.

In general, Ms. Enthis's beliefs about teaching appeared to be structured around the principle that teaching involves facilitating student learning. This conviction developed into instructional practices that were sensitive to students' interests and invited and accepted student opinions even when they challenged her personal views. Being in such a classroom probably supported students in their participation in authentic discussions because it provided a safe environment for pursuing personal interests (through initiating themes) and for personal expression (through verbalizing opinions, reflections, and connections to personal experiences).

Ms. Enthis's beliefs about students as learners. Another important aspect of Ms. Enthis's beliefs was her perceptions of students as learners. As a rule, Ms. Enthis appeared to have a tremendous respect for her students and their learning capacities. In her interviews, Ms. Enthis repeatedly stated that her students were very intelligent and that she had high expectations of them. She believed them capable of competent literary analysis; of complex, rational inferences; and of critical thinking. On this issue, she said in two different interviews,

> [laughing] Oh no! Only five or six of them are smarter than me this year! They are smarter than me in some ways. I mean, it's kind of cool that they have different knowledge bases and views.

> [The students] have their own opinions and their own personalities and, I mean, they're intelligent. They're allowed to have that!

As the quoted statements indicate, Ms. Enthis not only respected her students' intellectual power, but she also recognized the value of the background knowledge and of the points of view each one of them brought to the classroom. This belief was probably related to Ms. Enthis's penchant for inviting students to present their opinions and ideas during book talks and to make connections between the book being read and their personal experience and knowledge. In addition, it is most likely linked to the fact that she often sought her students' assistance in making sense of ambiguous issues and graciously accepted information and interpretations students had to offer.

Closely knit with Ms. Enthis's belief that her students were intelligent and knowledgeable was her apparent interest in the students' contributions to classroom discussions. My conversations with Ms. Enthis revealed that even though she felt that she also had to make sure that students could answer surface-level comprehension questions, her enjoyment in teaching mainly came from listening to her students' reflections. Their fresh approaches and ideas were a source of learning for her, as they gave her new ways of thinking about her favorite children's books, thus opening new windows of possibilities and building new understandings. One of Ms. Enthis's statements in an interview nicely sums up how she viewed her students and her role as their teacher:

> But I think they're just ready for somebody to allow them to be interesting. I think it just comes from them and they're just given the freedom to try it out.

Again, the authentic discussions that took place in Ms. Enthis's classroom appear to be intimately related to Ms. Enthis's beliefs. Perceiving students as active meaning makers and treating them as such during classroom interactions could not but assist in the development of a speech genre where students are active participants who initiate and refocus themes, who negotiate their rights, who express their opinions. It is also important to note that Ms. Enthis's acceptance of difference probably played an important role in nurturing students' willingness to take such active roles, as it attested to Ms. Enthis's honesty and demonstrated that this classroom was indeed a safe place for engaging in authentic discussions.

Students' Beliefs About Discussions

When exploring the classroom environment that creates and supports a specific classroom speech genre, it is important to examine the beliefs of the teacher, as he or she invariably is the most powerful interacter within the community, at least during official interactions (Hemmings, 2000). However, especially when examining speech genres such as authentic discussion that allow interactional variability and active participation from the students, it would be a mistake to limit one's examination to the teacher. Therefore, it was essential to also examine the beliefs of the students, especially the ways in which those beliefs pertained to classroom discussions.

The students' cheerful willingness to extensively participate in authentic discussions by initiating topics; expressing opinions; reflecting; making humorous comments; and providing information, elaboration, and clarification seemed to indicate that they were positively disposed toward classroom discussions (Hadjioannou, 2003). This positive attitude suggested by the observational and the audio- and video-recorded data was also supported by the focal students' interviews. All four of the student interviewees stated that they enjoyed their class's book-talk discussions and felt that those discussions were valuable on a variety of levels.

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The most commonly identified benefit of book-talk discussions was enhancing one's comprehension of the written text under study. All of the student interviewees maintained that listening to the diverse contributions of other participants was valuable, as it provided them with alternative ways to view specific story events and helped them expand their own interpretive frames. On this issue, Sapfo stated,

> If lots of those people all thought the same thing, then it wouldn't be really opened up to the other possibilities because usually the person that has an idea, they stick to it and they don't really think about anybody else's ideas. But if somebody else shares their idea then you sort of get to hear about other things and sometimes that changes your mind.

Through this insightful statement, Sapfo explicated an important facet of the intellectual importance of authentic discussions. In the absence of discussion, a reader is left with just his or her own interpretations of the written text. However, by being exposed to other interpretations, one has the benefit of viewing multiple possibilities, of considering the validity of these possibilities, and even of deciding to alter his or her original construal.

In addition, the focal students talked about the significance of active contributions to discussions. Mechanic pointed out that the act of mentally constructing participatory utterances to book talks helped him keep his mind focused on the book: "Sometimes I just raise my hand so I can remind myself to stay focused in my mind, 'cause then I'll be able to be more focused into the book." This statement becomes particularly poignant when combined with Lindfors's (1987) claim that "language aids recall" (p. 269) and that "it is likely that in the struggling act of representing (re-presenting) our understanding in spoken or written from, we render those understandings more precise, give our nebulous ideas a definite shape they did not have before" (p. 268).

Natalia and Sapfo also commented on the function of book talks as venues of personal expression. Natalia pointed out, "[Book talks are] valuable because that way, we can say what we need to say about what's happening." At the same time, Sapfo made a similar point by saying, "I just like to have a say in what we're talking about in class, especially if there is something I have to say or something I've experienced." Both girls' comments suggest that participating in book talks allowed them to express themselves. Classroom interactions as described by researchers examining traditional classroom environments (Cazden, 2001; Dyson, 1993; Nystrand, 1997) would be unlikely to elicit such comments, as they rarely serve the function of personal expression. However, Sapfo's and Natalia's remarks indicate not only that they thought of the classroom as an appropriate environment for personal expression but that it was their inalienable right to say what they "need to say" (Natalia) and to "have a say" in what the class talked about (Sapo). In other words, rather than being dragged into the conversation to serve

the teacher's purposes, the students in Ms. Enthis's class appeared to enjoy and value their class book talks and the opportunities they afforded them.

Relationships Among Members

A number of researchers of classroom environments argue that the interpersonal relationships between the members of a classroom community play a fundamental role in shaping the environment of that classroom (B. Fraser, Anderson, & Walberg, 1982; Hirschy & Wilson, 2002; Raider-Roth, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Therefore, when examining the environment of the speech genre of authentic classroom discussions, it became important to investigate the interpersonal relationships within the classroom under study. In general, the classroom community was characterized by a climate of friendliness and good intentions. With the exception of Yugi, a young boy with significant behavioral problems who was the only cultural outsider, the rest of the class members seemed to have carved out relatively comfortable social positions within the classroom community.

Akin to every other aspect of classroom culture, the members' social positionings were constantly built and rebuilt. As in Dyson's (1993) analysis, the class members were perpetually negotiating their social space within the classroom community. They also seemed to be counting on their common history, their familiarity with each other, and the relationships they had developed to guide their participation in the classroom interactions in general and in authentic discussions in particular.

Ms. Enthis toward students. Ms. Enthis occupied a complex relational position within the classroom community. Among other roles, she understood herself as the leader of the classroom community, who was responsible for the learning of her students and who needed to provide her class with a physical and social environment that was conducive to learning. Ms. Enthis made a point of treating her students as human beings rather than simply as students she needed to teach. In interviews and informal conversations, Ms. Enthis stated that she was interested in her students as individuals and actively sought to get to know them well. This knowledge frequently found its way in references connecting the lesson content with specific student experiences, in invitations asking students to share their experiences, and in friendly, teasing remarks. One such example came from a discussion of E. L. Konnigsburg's (1968) *From the Mixed-Up Files of Ms. Basil Frankweiler.* The setting of the book was the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and Ms. Enthis, who knew that Emma had been to New York with her family, asked,

Ms. Enthis: Were you in New York last year or this year, Emma?
Emma: Last year.
Ms. Enthis: Last year. Did you go to the Metropolitan Museum? [Emma nods yes.] You went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art? Hello! Tell us something!
Emma: [smiling] It was boring. [Laughter]

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According to Calkins (1994) and Dyson (2003), taking the time to get to know students is essential both in establishing rapport with students and in rendering the content to be learned relevant and salient. By showing an interest in students' lives and experiences, and by listening to their stories, Ms. Enthis appeared to be communicating to them that they were important as individuals and that their experiences mattered and had a legitimate position within the school's official world. This level of personal acquaintance was probably fundamental in building a close and comfortable relationship between Ms. Enthis and her students. As Ms. Enthis mentioned in an interview, "And so we're a family. By the end we know each other pretty well, our faults and our strengths. And we kind of feel like a community more."

It seems, then, that in Ms. Enthis's view, the relationships within the classroom community were not simple and sterile business relationships, but they were more akin to the complex and intimate relationships usually characterizing family life. This emotional connection with her students permeated all of Ms. Enthis's interactions with them. In general, she was friendly, caring, attentive, and cheerful and made a point of bringing positive attention to different students' unique experiences and talents. She complimented them on well-performed tasks and constructive contributions, she sought their ideas and opinions, and she shielded them from potentially embarrassing situations. This attitude probably played an important role in positively influencing class members' willingness to engage in authentic discussions. In the supportive and nurturing environment Ms. Enthis promoted, participants were doubtlessly more likely to take substantial social risks, offer tentative contributions, and state controversial opinions.

Students toward Ms. Enthis. The research data include an abundance of evidence that the feelings of caring and friendliness between Ms. Enthis and her students were mutual. In their classroom interactions, the students typically assumed a respectful but warm stance toward Ms. Enthis. This attitude was often translated into affable teasing and to frequent connections between the issues discussed and the students' knowledge of Ms. Enthis, her interests, and her experiences. For example, during the Winter Olympics, knowing that Ms. Enthis was a passionate sports fan, the students often greeted Ms. Enthis in the mornings with questions such as "Did you see the girl who won in figure skating? She was awesome!" Such references are important in building and maintaining relationships, as they indicate an effort to connect personally with the addressee.

The close and genuine relationships between Ms. Enthis and her students were also very compellingly demonstrated by her long-lasting relationships with students. Former students of Ms. Enthis would often drop by her class to share their news with her, amid excited exclamations, smiles, and hugs. The visitors often asked questions about the books the new class was reading and jokingly admonished the fifth graders to be good and to not give Ms. Enthis trouble.

Without exception, my focal students characterized Ms. Enthis as a great teacher. They attributed their positive feelings toward her to her being "good with kids" (Natalia); her humor: "She makes it fun" (Sapfo); her firm but fair classroom management style: "When you're messing up the class when she's teaching, she won't put up with it. . . . [Sometimes] she'll let you slide by and laugh with you. . . . And I think the kids respect her more for that than just saying 'go outside'" (Jay); her knowledge of the students and her willingness to reveal herself as a person in class: "She shares stuff that's happened to her and if she knows that somebody's done something, she will either say it herself or she'll ask them to say it (Sapfo); and her inviting attitude toward students' opinions: "She will respect your opinion and take it and consider it" (Jay).

The reciprocity of positive feelings between teacher and students probably played an important role in establishing a classroom atmosphere where students felt comfortable to engage in socially demanding conversations such as authentic discussions. Truly appreciating and liking their teacher probably encouraged students to follow her lead, respond to her invitations for expressing ideas, and reveal themselves as individuals.

Among students. During my time with the class, with the exception of a couple of playground skirmishes, I never became aware of any significant confrontations between students. Rather, the students appeared to be getting along nicely, collaborating amicably, and laughing together frequently.

Ms. Enthis's lesson plans often provided for active cooperation among students. Beyond working together during book talks, the students also worked together in a variety of other activities, such as science experiments, math problems, and peer editing. My interviewees often referred to their classmates as "my friends" and insisted that the friendly relationships they had with them, as well as the sense of security and trust those relationships generated, were instrumental in rendering their classroom experience an enjoyable one. Also, the interviewees asserted that their classmates' behavior supported their willingness to participate in classroom discussions and to freely express their ideas and opinions. For example, after stating that she felt comfortable saying what she wanted to say in her class, Sapfo went on to discuss what classmate behaviors would act as a deterrent in a different situation:

Sapo: Maybe they would laugh at something I said or something. And that would sort of make it difficult to share. And maybe they're just not the kind of people that you want to tell stuff to 'cause they'll maybe like tell everybody and then you end up having the whole school know something about you. So something like that.
Interviewer: So in general you think that that's not the case with this class?
Sapo: Uh, uh [No]!

Sapo's response indicated that she felt that she could trust her classmates to be discrete and respectful and that this feeling of security made the class a comfortable community to inhabit and within which to interact. As Mechanic

said, "My friends [make it comfortable for me to participate]. Like sometimes, they really make me feel comfortable like that."

As mentioned above, the only class member who appeared to occupy a problematically uneasy social position within the community was Yugi. Yugi, who had transferred schools at the beginning of the year, was mostly reticent and quiet but occasionally exhibited outbursts of participation during which he invariably related shocking or gruesome information (e.g., graphic details of the mummification process) or obviously untrue or exaggerated stories. These attempts were not well received by his classmates, who refused to indulge him, and expressing their disbelief at his exaggerated tales, they challenged the information he put forward. The community's hostile response can be understood as a punishment for norm violation (R. Webb, in press; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). In a community where participants made and seemed to appreciate frequent connections to their knowledge and experience, Yugi's bold attempts to hijack the community's attention with tall tales were seen as aberrant, and therefore they were punished.

It seems then that there is a two-way connection between authentic discussions and member relationships. The general climate of trust and safety enabled the risk taking involved in authentic discussions. At the same time, the demands of authentic discussion regarding social cohesiveness and truthfulness in some ways dictated the types of relationships to be fostered and were intolerant of behaviors incongruent with that process.

Humor and playfulness. An important component of this classroom's relational life that appeared to both reflect and help construct the amicable relationships among class members was the abundance of humor and playfulness. As Bakhtin (1986) put it, "Seriousness burdens us with hopeless situations, but laughter lifts us above them and delivers us from them. Laughter does not encumber man, it liberates him. . . . Laughter only unites" (p. 134). In general, a jovial and playful atmosphere permeated the classroom environment, as humorous comments, friendly joshing, wisecracks, wordplay, and self-deprecating jokes were a daily staple. The abundance of humor appeared to create a cheerful, lighthearted climate, which kept the participants in good spirits without, however, derailing the academic endeavors pursued.

According to Crump (1996), humor is a major component of teacher immediacy, a term that refers to "behaviors which reduce physical and psychological distance between interactants and enhance closeness to one another" (p. 4). It is interesting that in this classroom, the humor originated from both Ms. Enthis and the students, a pattern that indicates that within this classroom culture, the expression of humor was understood as a move appropriate for all participants and not simply as a prerogative of the teacher. On nearly all occasions, humorous comments were related to the thematic content of the interactions at hand, with the remarks referring to the book and its characters or to the experiences of the jokester. Typically, humorous

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comments were well received by the classroom community through responses of laughter and follow-up jokes to the original quip. In addition, there also existed humorous comments that, denoting friendly intentions, focused on teasing class members about their behaviors, their skills, and their habits. One such recurring joke in the classroom had to do with Ms. Enthis's singing. The joke emerged in a variety of situations, with Ms. Enthis threatening the students with singing or with students teasingly urging Ms. Enthis to sing. In those cases, the result was always the same: The students pretended to be terrified at the prospect of the singing and exclaimed that they would do anything to avoid it, and eventually everyone burst out laughing.

Humor appeared to function as a release valve that momentarily discharged some of the pressure built through the class's intellectual pursuits. The presence of humor, and especially of events that directly related to one or more class members, possibly played a significant role in lessening the psychological distance between interactants, an essential prerequisite of authentic discussion. Through the use of self-deprecating humor and the gracious acceptance of teasing comments, class members appeared to be presenting themselves as "good sports" and in that way continually built and maintained amicable communal relationships.

The students seemed to enjoy the presence of humor in their classroom. Some of my informants stated that humor made school much more pleasant, gave them energy, and enhanced their interest to do their work:

Natalia: I think it's good [that Ms. Enthis uses humor a lot] because not a lot of teachers act the same way as Miss Enthis.
Interviewer: What is different about her?
Natalia: She laughs and she just . . . has a different personality.

Sapfo: Well it, it works. Sometimes Ms. Enthis will make a joke and if you're just sort of bored or you're stuck on a problem and everyone will laugh. And it's just sort of a break from it all.

Through their statements, Natalia and Sapfo indicated an appreciation for Ms. Enthis's penchant for humor and clearly connected it with student motivation and learning. In their view, the use of humor reduced the distance between teacher and students, invigorated the class members, and rendered students more motivated to participate in classroom activities. At another point in her interview, Sapfo mentioned,

> Well I think it happens because we have Ms. Enthis as a teacher and she really likes to get people to laugh. She's really nice and she's funny and she always tells jokes or she makes a joke out of something. And even if she sort of like picks on you or picks on me or somebody, it's always funny and she has fun.

Sapfo's statement is telling of the way the classroom community interpreted jokes. To use Goffman's (1974) terminology, the interpretive frame the community used for jokes, even when jokes took the form of attempts to tease a

member, was one that attributed amicable intentions to the joke initiators. Barbs and wisecracks were generally understood as friendly jousting that expressed the closeness between class members and aimed to elicit laughter. Apart from Yugi, the cultural outsider discussed previously, who complained about Woza and Mechanic's teasing him on the playground, I never became aware of anybody getting insulted by the teasing among class members.

In general, humor appeared to act both as an intellectual and as a social catalyst in the classroom. By responding to the books they were reading in humorous ways, the class found fresh ways to transact with literary texts; they used humor as an analytical modality as well as a relief mechanism for intellectual tension. On the other hand, humor functioned as a community-building mechanism; it fostered the building and maintenance of personal relationships between class members and prevented the creation of friction, which as Allodi (2002), S. Fraser (1996), and Majeed et al. (2001) argue, is detrimental to classroom climate.

Classroom Procedures

One other aspect that appeared to be an important element of the class environment was classroom procedures. Within the category of classroom procedures, two main subcategories were identified: explicit rules and classroom management.

Explicit rules. As it is typical of organized communities, social life in Ms. Enthis's classroom was organized around a number of explicit rules that sought to shape the members' behavior by distinguishing between acceptable and unacceptable actions. The explicit regulations that governed Ms. Enthis's class included customary class rules, such as civil behavior, completing school-assigned duties (e.g., morning patrol, attendance monitor) and hand raising. However, what was probably somewhat atypical in the way explicit regulations functioned in Ms. Enthis's classroom was the fact that they were viewed as components of a wider regulation that explicitly and implicitly held center stage in their communal life: the rule of respect. Because of the class-selected rule of respect, all class members had complete ownership of their work and had the right to hold and present their opinions. At the same time, members were expected to refrain from actions that violated the rights of others.

The issue of respect and its significance in the life of Ms. Enthis's class emerged frequently in the field notes, occasionally as a focused command or warning and often as an undercurrent embedded in comments. In addition, the decree of respecting the rights and feelings of others regularly found its way in the instructions Ms. Enthis gave when introducing an activity. For example, when introducing a peer review session, Ms. Enthis said,

> Heads up! This is important and I forgot to say it! Make sure you ask
> [the peers whose paper you are reviewing] if it's OK if you write on

> their draft. You know how sometimes it's easier to mark spelling mis-
> takes and ideas right on the paper when you see them. . . . So make
> sure that your partner is OK with this, and if they are, go ahead and
> do that.

This statement encapsulates a number of significant understandings that appeared to permeate this classroom's life: Collaboration is important and others' ideas and suggestions can substantially improve the quality of your thinking or writing, all class members are knowledge bearers and valid evaluators, the author of a piece has full ownership of it and is ultimately the only person with decision-making power over it, and as a reviewer you have a duty to respect the rights of the author.

It is also important to note that in Ms. Enthis's classroom, respect appeared to be an ideal important to all class members rather than just a behavior rule. The focal students spoke fondly of it in their interviews and stated that the knowledge that their participation would be respected played a substantial role in their willingness to speak up in class, offer their opinions, and express their ideas. Also, on various occasions, I observed students (a) demanding their rights when they felt that those were violated and (b) going out of their way to ensure that they were adequately respectful of other members.

Connecting authentic discussions with the issue of respect as a fundamental rule of the classroom community is not a difficult link to establish. In the absence of a culture of respect, an imposing and personally revealing speech genre such as authentic discussion would be very unlikely to flourish. The frequent presence of moves such as the expression of opinions and reflections, connecting with experience and knowledge, and building community demands respect as a necessary condition (Hadjioannou, 2003). If respect were not an expectation, why would a participant express an opinion and thus open himself or herself up for malevolent criticism or ridicule?

Classroom management. After examining the explicit rules governing the social life of Ms. Enthis's classroom, it becomes important to also examine the way those rules were enacted through classroom management. According to Avery (2001) and Lindfors (1999), often classrooms are characterized by a policing mode, where students appear to always be on the verge of misbehaving and where teachers spend a considerable amount of class time reprimanding students, handing out punishments, or lecturing to the class about instances of misbehavior. However, Ms. Enthis's class did not appear to suffer from such antisocial attitudes, and disciplining episodes were very rare. Nonetheless, classroom management, though mild and transparent, was very much present at any given moment of classroom life, emanating not only from Ms. Enthis but from the students as well. The defining difference was that classroom management here scarcely ever had to take the negative form of discipline.

On most occasions, classroom management was realized as short and explicit instructions on how a particular activity was supposed to be performed

and on how to make sure that the rights of other people would not be disrespected during its performance. Ms. Enthis appeared to be very careful in providing students with precise and adequate information about what was expected of them before giving them independent work or group work time. Most probably related to Ms. Enthis's belief in the reasoning abilities of her students; activities were explicated as meaningful endeavors that sought the fulfillment of valuable objectives. Even when introducing test-related activities, which Ms. Enthis did not believe to be educationally valuable, she still shared her true rationale with the class: Test-preparation activities, even though occasionally not very well constructed and not very meaningful, needed to be worked on for students to become familiar with the test format. In this way, students embarked on completing the activities planned with a fairly clear idea of the activity's goals, of the rules that bound the activity, and of different strategies they might use when working on the activity.

Overt disciplinary events were rare in Ms. Enthis's classroom. Infractions were typically as minimal as speaking out of turn or not following the text in one's book during reading aloud, and they were usually swiftly managed with a reprimanding stare or a mild reproof. With the exception of two isolated instances, I did not witness any serious disciplinary episodes in my 5-month presence in the classroom. Tellingly, both cases overtly violated the paramount principle of respect.

One of these episodes evolved when Mechanic sneered as Craig presented a poster he had created. As Craig continued with his presentation, Ms. Enthis discreetly approached Mechanic's desk and quietly but sternly asked Mechanic to exit the class and wait for her outside. After selecting another presenter, Ms. Enthis followed Mechanic outside. A few minutes later, she returned and continued with the sharing, with no further reference to the event. Mechanic followed, flustered and somber. He closed the door behind him and sat at his desk. A few heads turned to look at him momentarily and right away turned their attention back to Ermis, who was now presenting. In this way, discipline was handled discreetly but firmly, maintaining the student's dignity and without disrupting the class.

Norms of Class Participation

According to R. Webb (in press), the behavior of members of any social group is substantially influenced by sets of cultural norms that describe what is appropriate and inappropriate behavior within that particular group. This cultural knowledge renders individuals capable to successfully operate within social groups and to project the image of productive, well-adjusted members. Ignorance of those social scripts and inability or unwillingness to abide by them leads to identifications such as "outsider," "maladjusted," or "antisocial."

Beyond the explicit class rules, the study of the environment of Ms. Enthis's class indicated that classroom participation was guided by social scripts that defined the types of behaviors that constituted acceptable and

effective participation in book talks. According to Hymes (1972), the task of a classroom ethnographer is "that of making explicit and objectively systematic what speakers of the language, or members of the community, in a sense already know" (p. xv). What follows is an attempt at teasing out the tacit norms that appeared to guide participation in the book talks of the fifth-grade class under study.

The first norm identified was a *standing invitation* to class members for participation. Authentic discussions invited the participation of all classroom members who had something to offer to the conversation. The sense of welcoming member participation is evidenced both by the widespread student participation in book talks and by the student interviews where the interviewees stated that they "want[ed] to have a say" in the class conversations and insisted that they felt comfortable participating because their opinions and ideas were welcomed and valued.

In addition, authentic discussions appeared to encourage *listening attentively and respectfully* to the contributions of other members. During authentic discussions, participants invariably built on each other's ideas. This practice suggests that active listening was in place, as it would be impossible to respond to or add to another person's ideas without first having listened and understood his or her contribution. In addition, the norm of active listening was substantiated by Ms. Enthis's modeling, as she often built her utterances by making explicit references to students' previous contributions.

Another norm that became apparent was that during authentic discussions, students had the right to *raise issues* they were interested in and to influence the direction of the discussion in pursuit of their own interests. In their class's authentic discussions, student-initiated themes were very common, and they frequently led to lengthy conversations (Hadjioannou, 2003).

Yet another important norm was that during authentic discussions, participants were *expected to express their opinions and ideas* about the issues at hand. This norm was inferred by the very high instances of students' expressing their opinions during authentic discussions and by the fact that, often, the class members expressed opinions in disagreement with each other. As discussed earlier, the rule not only applied to contrasting student ideas, but it seemed to also consider as legitimate explicit disagreements with views put forth by the teacher herself.

The norm of expressing one's opinions appeared to coexist with an accompanying amendment. Authentic discussion in book talks was not an "everything goes" speech genre. Rather, as explained both by Ms. Enthis and the focal students, book-related *opinions needed to be supported* by textual evidence. Therefore, Ms. Enthis often prompted students with questions such as "Why do you say that?" In other words, inferences were deemed as legitimate only when accompanied by a rationale that respected the written text at hand.

In their conversations about books, Ms. Enthis and her students often made connections to past knowledge and experience. The frequency of such connections suggests a norm that encourages *bringing the out-of-school lives*

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of class members in the classroom. In contrast to what one would expect in the traditional classroom environments described by Dyson (1993), Ms. Enthis and her students shared stories from their home lives and mentioned knowledge gained in out-of-school experiences. In this way, the classroom culture allowed for the official and unofficial worlds of the members' lives to find legitimate positions in the classroom.

During authentic discussions, the classroom participants often engaged in verbal behavior that acknowledged other participants, complimented their knowledge and their contributions, or assisted them in making their contributions more complete and effective. These frequent community-building gestures suggest the possible existence of a norm that dictated a *genial treatment of coparticipants.* The functionality of such a norm becomes visible when one considers the fact that the speech genre of authentic classroom discussions is a discourse modality that requires participants to engage in socially perilous acts. More specifically, during authentic discussions, a participant (a) renders himself or herself vulnerable by expressing disputable opinions and ideas and (b) has to secure others' assistance in pursuing his or her purposes when he or she initiates a new theme. The use of a social lubricant such as community-building moves can alleviate the perils and make the speech genre possible.

Finally, as discussed earlier, positively charged humor, originating both from Ms. Enthis and the students, was plentiful in the classroom's authentic discussions. This suggests a norm that allowed all participants *the right to produce humorous comments* that were relevant to the conversation at hand and did not violate the rights of other members. Similarly to the norm of being genial to coparticipants, humor can also be characterized as a social lubricant that helped build and maintain a sense of community and probably played an important role in rendering the classroom environment a safe place for authentic discussion.

Discussion

Speech genres are situated constructs, which exist in a close and dynamic relationship with the environments within which they develop. Therefore, to better understand the speech genre of authentic classroom discussions, it was essential to closely examine the environment of the discourse community that used it.

The small number of participants, and the fact that the research examined exemplary practice and not a sample of a population, does not permit claims of generalizability as are understood by quantitative approaches. However, even though the findings of this study cannot be generalized to a particular population, the research does have "extensity" (W. Webb, 1961). By describing, representing, and explaining the classroom environment within which the speech genre of authentic classroom discussion flourished, my purpose was to gain insight into its possibilities in other classrooms.

Ms. Enthis and her active role in shaping the environment of the classroom under study can provide some significant educational implications

especially relevant to educators who wish to foster authentic discussions in their classrooms. A first implication that warrants special attention is the issue of teacher attitudes and beliefs. Because instructional practice is closely linked to teacher beliefs (Brody, 1998), it is reasonable to deduce that the kinds of beliefs Ms. Enthis espoused regarding teaching and learning were an important foundation to her authentic-discussion-friendly instructional practice. This deduction is even further supported by the conceptual continuity between Ms. Enthis's beliefs and the nature of authentic discussions, a speech genre that invites and values all participants' contributions and seeks the coconstruction of understandings. Therefore, it may be important for teachers who wish to encourage authentic discussions in their classrooms to reexamine beliefs that view knowledge as a set of absolute truths and teaching as the process of transmitting those truths. Honest participation in authentic discussions cannot come from a position of indisputable authority. Rather, authentic discussions seem to demand openness to alternative interpretations, a view of teaching as a process of facilitating student learning, and a trust in students' ability and their willingness to think and learn.

Another aspect of this research that has significant implications for practice is the issue of interpersonal relationships within the classroom. Raider-Roth (2005b) hails trusting relationships between classroom community members as elemental to building trustworthy knowledge. The same appears to be true for the development of authentic discussions, a speech genre that calls for participants (a) to make themselves vulnerable by offering their opinions and ideas for consideration and (b) to impose on others by asking them to assist them in their discursive pursuits. Genial interpersonal relationships between classroom members were a fundamental characteristic of the classroom under study and should be a permanent objective of classroom communities that wish to hold authentic discussions. Teachers of such classrooms should work toward knowing their students and should use this knowledge to create positive, trusting, and respectful relationships with their students. At the same time, to cultivate amiable relations between the students, teachers can provide opportunities for student self-expression, lively interactions, and substantive collaboration.

In general, the study of the environment of authentic discussions in the book talks of this fifth-grade classroom community reaffirmed what many researchers of classroom environments such as Lindfors (1999), Dyson (1993), and Guthrie and Cox (2001) have reported—that there are no easy answers in trying to describe the environment of a discourse community. A classroom environment is ever changing, it is comprised of numerous features, and it demands to be treated as a complex entity. This complexity signifies that when trying to create a classroom environment that is conducive to authentic discussion, it is important to remain respectful of the various environmental features and their dynamic interrelationships. As the findings of this study show, all the features identified were essential components of the whole and at the same time influenced each other in substantial ways. For example, humor functioned both as a product of the

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amicable relationships between class members and as a building and repairing agent of those same relationships. The power of interaction between the environment features can be seen in Kachur and Prendergast's (1997) work, where despite the presence of many of the elements expected to be found in an authentic-discussion-rich community, the "magic" was absent because the students perceived the teacher's claims for openness to multiple opinions as insincere.

However, how realistic is it to expect teachers who have skills to teach, instructional mandates to follow, and high-stakes testing to tackle to foster such a complex environment in their classrooms? Educators often approach the issue with a sense of resigned yearning. As a rule, teachers acknowledge the vibrancy and the potential of the classroom environment the community under study inhabited. They appreciate Ms. Enthis's artistry as she worked with her students in building and rebuilding that environment, and they express their yearning for working under similar circumstances. However, this is soon followed by a sigh and depressing recountings of the important things they have had to sacrifice in the face of high-stakes assessment and mandated literacy programs. In an era when teachers are not trusted to make instructional decisions, how can they trust their students to take initiatives in their learning? How can they foster the exciting learning environment described in this research while at the same time achieving the annual yearly progress required and the appropriate averages in the various disaggregated scores?

The findings of this research suggest that the answers to these real and pressing questions may not be easy or simple, but they are hopeful. The class under study was in Florida, a state where high-stakes testing is relentless and the stakes it involves include grade retention, disbandment of consistently failing schools, and significant financial incentives for higher scores. Despite the assorted pressures arriving at the doorstep of this classroom community, the capacity of the classroom environment to support authentic discussions was not hindered. Rather than sacrificing sound pedagogy to teaching-to-the-test practices and decontextualized skills instruction, Ms. Enthis addressed test preparation as a brief process of helping students become acquainted with the test they would have to take. She believed that the comprehension and critical-thinking skills she helped her students cultivate through the class book talks and other lesson activities were immensely significant. The limited explicit test preparation suggests that she trusted that the skills her students acquired would also render them able to do well at standardized tests. And indeed they did; all but one of her students passed that year's FCAT, and the school overall did significantly better than the year before.

It is important to note, however, that Ms. Enthis did not stand alone in this effort. She was a member of a highly collaborative grade-level group of teachers who were passionate about teaching and who were determined to not teach to the test. In addition, she worked at a school whose principal appeared to trust teachers' professional knowledge and supported their initiatives. Even though they worked in a state where basals are extensively used and in a

county where a number of schools had adopted scripted literacy programs to ascertain high test scores, the teachers proposed the adoption of a literature-based program they developed. And the school principal, after studying their proposal, extended her approval and her support to this venture. In such situations, teacher collaboration and enlightened school administration can definitely go a long way in protecting teachers, allowing them to unfold their professional knowledge and ensuring that the educational system does not lose sight of its goal of providing quality education to students.

On a final note, it should be added that precisely reproducing the environment described in this article in another classroom would not only be impossible, but it would also be ill advised. The environments of communities are in constant flux, and they are shaped by the personalities and the agendas of community members as well as by the unique circumstances of each community (Goffman, 1974). Classroom communities that aspire to foster authentic discussions must find their own rituals, norms, and balances. However, the analysis of the environment of this particular classroom provides valuable directions to be adapted and adopted.

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