

# Comprehension strategy use during peer-led discussions of text: Ninth graders tackle “The Lottery”

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Secondary school students’ comprehension strategy use during small-group, peer-led discussions of literary texts is reported in this article.

We (Berne and Clark) are teacher educators and literacy researchers interested in the ways that students make meaning during peer-led discussions of literary text. As we have worked with teachers to organize classrooms for this kind of literacy learning, we have collected data on the ways that these groups influence students’ literacy. One of our most interesting data sets was collected in a ninth-grade English class as students engaged in small-group, peer-led discussions of Shirley Jackson’s short story “The Lottery” (1948/1982), a provocative story we vividly recall from our own days in high school English. In “The Lottery,” villagers gather to randomly select an individual for ritual stoning. Tessie Hutchinson, a wife and mother, is chosen. Her fellow villagers, including her family, pro forma pelt her with rocks to her death. The following exchange about the story occurred as Kristine, Austin, and Lee (all student names are pseudonyms) engaged in a spirited discussion about the motivations and culpability of the lottery participants.

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- Kristine: He threw rocks at his mother.  
Austin: I know, he helped to kill his mother.  
Lee: How do you know she was killed?  
Kristine: Because that’s the whole point of it. Why [else] would you throw rocks at someone?  
Lee: To get them mad?  
Kristine: Well, it wasn’t fair that they were all upon her. They were all there.  
Austin: Well...Tessie was right...it isn’t right...it isn’t fair.  
Lee: Then she shouldn’t come.  
Austin: They all had to...they had no choice.  
Lee: What about the family who didn’t come?  
Kristine: They had to have someone pick for them.

As proponents of collaborative, constructivist literacy learning, we were delighted to see that these students could sustain talk about the text in small, peer-led groups. In addition to sustaining talk, we noted the ways that Lee asked questions to help clarify his understandings of the text and the way that Kristine and Austin responded to those questions. As we thought more about this collaboration among the students, we began to wonder exactly what processes of literacy learning and what products of literacy understanding might be occurring for all the students in this group and others like them.

In a previous analysis of these data, we examined the ways that students responded to one another's questions during their discussions (Berne & Clark, 2005). We found that students responded by either co-constructing meaning with the questioning student or by sharing their understanding didactically. We defined co-construction as collaboratively thinking through text ideas. That is, when students co-construct meaning, they invite one another into a dialogue in which they puzzle through ideas together. For example, consider the following exchange.

Vera: I wonder if [Tessie] just stands there and gets thrown rocks, or if they run after her and throw the rocks, 'cause one girl said they would have to wait cause she couldn't run very well 'cause her leg hurt. So did they run after her, or did she just stand in the middle and have them throw rocks at her?

Maria: I think that they had just crowded around her.

Vera: Yeah, but then that lady said that they would have to wait because she couldn't run.

Maria: I don't think she could run because the whole town was there.

In this excerpt, Vera is unsure of the stoning procedure. Maria explains her view of the event using the tentative rhetorical structure, "I think." In this way, she frames her understanding as a possibility open to discussion. Vera subsequently reconsiders the textual information, which we can interpret to mean that Vera did not take Maria's response to be definitive. Maria's next statement reinforces her position but keeps the interpretation open by using the words, "I don't think." In this example, Vera and Maria negotiate meaning. Maria and Vera puzzle through the text collaboratively and work together to co-construct meaning.

In contrast, in didactic sharing, students fill in information for one another rather than negotiate meaning collaboratively. In the following excerpt, Carol didactically shares her understanding with Sophie.

Sophie: I didn't understand the drawing, like what was the first thing they did and what was the second thing they did? Like the first drawing, how did they do it? Was it the man of the household?

Carol: The first time it was the whole town, and the man of the household came up. The man of the household represented his whole family. The second drawing was just family, just the people in the family.

Sophie: So the second household, who was in it, the Dunbars and Hutchinsons?

Carol: No, just the Hutchinsons.

In this exchange, Carol and Sophie discuss the process by which an individual is selected for stoning. In the story, there are two drawings. The first selects the target family, the second identifies the target individual within that family. Sophie is confused about the procedure. In her response, Carol uses no tentative rhetorical structures to invite further consideration of the events. Rather, she tells Sophie the order of events.

In our previous study (Berne & Clark, 2005), we argued that co-construction and didactic sharing helped group members to build more complete understandings of the text. Furthermore, we hypothesized that when students co-construct meaning they are developing their ability to comprehend, the practice of which might transfer to future reading tasks as part of their arsenal of comprehension strategies. Thus, we began to think about students' talk in relation to comprehension strategies. We recently reanalyzed our ninth-grade data to inquire into the ways that the students used comprehension strategies during their discussions. We share that analysis here. We briefly review peer-led discussion, describe the present inquiry, present our conclusions, and discuss instructional implications.

## Peer-led discussion: What is it? How does it benefit students?

In the past decade, peer-led discussion has become a popular instructional practice (Evans,

2002; McMahon & Raphael, 1997; Paratore & McCormack, 1997). Such discussion groups are consistent with sociocultural models of learning (Vygotsky, 1934/1978) and response-based theories of comprehension (Rosenblatt, 1978). It is believed that students help one another construct meaning, and fill in missing background information, (McMahon & Raphael). Roser and Martinez (2003) argued that both the quality and the quantity of student talk about text can improve if the teacher plays a less dominant role. Researchers have lauded the way that small-group discussions help to engage students in their own learning and in developing their own ideas (Raphael & McMahon, 1994). Au (2003) argued that literature discussion groups give students ownership of literacy by giving them the opportunity to shape their own conversations.

Variouly called "Book Club" (McMahon & Raphael, 1997), "Literature Circles" (Daniels, 2002), "Conversational Discussion Groups" (Wiencek & O'Flahavan, 1994), or "Transactional Literature Discussions" (Dugan, 1997), each posits itself an alternative to the "empty vessel" paradigm of instruction (Freire, 1970) in which students are thought to be passive recipients of teacher knowledge. Instead, in this model, students are considered active constructors of their own knowledge and understandings. Ideally, they work through understandings in reciprocal relationships rather than as the receivers of knowledge.

Studies of literature discussions have provided evidence of their benefit to students. In an early study in which teachers participated but did not lead discussions, Eeds and Wells (1989) showed that students of differing abilities were able to participate in rich discussions in which they not only shared their ideas and insights but also altered these in response to those of others in the course of the discussion. Almasi (1995) subsequently found that, in peer-led discussion contexts, students engaged in greater amounts of student-directed talk and questioning than in teacher-led contexts. In a further study, Almasi and her colleagues (Almasi, McKeown, & Beck,

1996) demonstrated that in peer-led contexts, students engaged in higher level thinking about texts, increased their motivation to read, and better comprehended the texts under discussion.

Other studies have focused on the effect discussions have on students' engagement, self-confidence, and quality of discourse (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Evans, 2002; Keefer, Zeitz, & Resnick, 2000); on the relationship between classroom expectations and student expectations of behavior in the groups (Lewis, 1997); on the nature of student and teacher development in more and less proficient discussions (Almasi, O'Flahavan, & Arya, 2001); and on gender differences in discussions (Evans, Alvermann, & Anders, 1998). To date, no study has specifically focused on comprehension strategy use in these groups. However, interest in the way that these discussion groups facilitate comprehension strategy use is emerging. In collaboration with a sixth-grade teacher, a reading specialist (Lloyd, 2004) linked these groups with specific instruction in questioning during guided reading lessons and noted that students were able to use questions to prompt higher level thinking about texts following instruction. Our current inquiry extends this exploration.

## Research questions

This was an initial inquiry into the potential of these discussion groups to serve as forums for comprehension strategy acquisition and practice. Our goal was to explore students' use of comprehension strategies in their existing discussion practice. In the inquiry, we asked two questions: Is there evidence of students' comprehension strategy use during small-group, peer-led discussion of text? If so, what is the nature of this use?

We returned to these transcripts because Jackson's (1948/1982) story is a particularly good text for pursuing these questions. Not only is "The Lottery" a text that ninth-grade students typically read, but also it is one that requires readers to activate many kinds of knowledge and

employ many comprehension strategies in order to understand and construct a coherent mental representation of the text. In order to understand the text, students must activate knowledge of ritual sacrifice and stoning. In addition, they must adapt their understanding of a lottery as something good with the increasingly negative proceedings of the lottery in the story. Furthermore, as Jackson leaves many ideas and events in the story unstated, students must draw inferences between and among pieces of textual information and between and among these pieces of information and their prior knowledge. To understand the story then, students must employ multiple strategic comprehension processes.

## Original data collection

The ninth-grade classroom in which these data were collected was in an economically diverse, yet ethnically homogeneous small city in the U.S. Midwest. There were 29 students in the class. The teacher, Ms. King (a pseudonym), was a graduate student enrolled in a literacy methods course that explored the use of peer-led discussion of literary text. She invited us into her classroom to assist her in teaching students to work in peer-led literature discussion groups and to inquire into the influence of these groups on students' comprehension.

Prior to the data collection, the students had participated in whole-group, teacher-led discussions of literature as an important part of the work of this English class. The students in this classroom also had significant experience working together in small groups for a variety of other tasks within the class. In order to prepare the students for this specialized form of small-group work, the teacher asked us to assist her in teaching and modeling for her students the small-group, peer-led discussion context.

To prepare students for functioning independently in groups, we modeled the process and reflected on it with the students. First, we read a short story, Alberto Moravia's "The Chase" (1988),

aloud to the class as they followed along in their own copies. After finishing the text, we described the form and purposes of literature discussion groups, attempting to build a model that would help students work productively within the framework. We gave examples of questions to ask and comments to make that our experiences had shown generated rich discussion. Following this, together with the teacher, we modeled a small-group, peer-led literature discussion group. In this group, we role-played productive and unproductive talk. We attempted to ask our real questions about the text, but also to exhibit less desirable behavior that can occur in these groups. As we did so, the students analyzed our discourse substance and style. We then led a whole-group discussion in order to debrief our talk and behavior as group members. Subsequent to this modeling and debriefing session, the students agreed that they were ready to try their own discussion groups with another text.

The next class period, the students independently read Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" (1948/1982). The following day, they participated in 20-minute, small-group (four or five students), peer-led discussions. The teacher had constituted these groups to be heterogeneous for reading ability and gender. Prior to gathering in the groups, we reminded the students of the desirable kinds of talk and behaviors that we had modeled and discussed two days prior. While students talked, the adults took field notes (on three groups) and audiotaped each of the six groups. The transcripts of four of the six audiotaped discussions served as data for this inquiry. The remaining two audiotapes proved inaudible because these two groups had been placed together inside the small classroom, and it was difficult to distinguish student voices in transcription. The four groups for which the tapes were audible had been placed in available offices and conference rooms.

## Data analysis

In this reanalysis, we fully coded the discussion transcripts. That is, we identified comprehension

strategies, nonstrategic comprehension-related talk, and other talk. Our procedures were as follows.

**Identifying comprehension strategies.** To guide our analysis, we generated a list of strategic comprehension processes culled from Block and Pressley (2001). We realized that some of these strategies would not be present in the context of postreading discussion, so we categorized strategies that were likely to happen prior to reading, or as internal talk during reading, separately from those that might be practiced in discussion following reading. For example, we determined that setting a purpose and predicting were not strategies that readers would engage in during postreading discussion, but rather were ones they might engage in either alone or in groups before or during the act of reading. In contrast, questioning is a strategy in which readers might engage prior to, during, and following reading, so we might expect to find evidence of it during postreading discussion. Similarly, summarizing is a strategy that a reader might engage in only during or following reading.

After reading the transcripts many times with our list of postreading comprehension strategies at hand, we noted evidence of the following strategies: *Comparing/contrasting*, *contextualizing*, *questioning*, *searching for meaning*, *interpreting*, *engaging in retrospection*, and *summarizing*. In addition, we found three other kinds of talk that we identified as comprehension strategy use that were not on our list culled from Block and Pressley (2001). The first of these we labeled *stating a confusion*. *Stating a confusion* is student talk that expresses a query in narrative form. For example, during discussion one student remarked, "I'm not sure what that box was doing all that time," thus stating his confusion about the box's role in the story. This is distinct from the statement's interrogative form, "What was that box doing all that time?" The latter we would identify as *questioning*, a different, if related, comprehension strategy. Second, Block and Pressley identified *interpreting an author's intentions* as a comprehension strategy. While we did not specif-

ically see evidence of this in the transcripts, we did see evidence of students noting or alluding to the way in which the author's text construction influenced their reading. This we identified as *noting author's craft*. For example, during discussion one student remarked, "When I first read it I thought [the author] was trying to make [the lottery] seem like a good thing." We designated this an instance of *noting author's craft*. Finally, when students attempted to make meaning by imagining their participation in the story, we termed it *inserting oneself in the text*. An example of this is one student's comment, "If I lived in that town, I would be out of there."

Following multiple readings of the transcripts, we situated the noted strategies in the context of postreading discussion. To do so, we determined what kind of talk characterized a particular strategy use. For instance, we defined the strategy of interpreting as calling upon an explicit or implicit piece of text (paraphrased or directly quoted) and assigning it meaning. An example would be when one student told another student, "The black box was there as a symbol of the day. It meant that this was lottery day." The student took a piece of the text, the black box, and assigned it a meaning—the symbol of the lottery day. We defined the strategy searching for meaning as talk in which a student conjectures about the underlying reasons why characters act as they do, even when there is no definitive implicit or explicit answer in the text. An example is one student's remark, "I don't know why they did it, why they would throw stones at people, I thought maybe it was for fun or entertainment." This is a conjecture about the underlying reason for the lottery proceedings. While this meaning making is not verifiable in the text, it is an attempt to understand the larger reasons for the lottery participants' behavior. We continued in this manner for each of the strategies. We summarize these in Table 1.

**Identifying nonstrategic, comprehension-related talk.** Students also engaged in other comprehension-related talk about text. This talk

**Table 1**  
**Comprehension strategies in which students engaged**

Strategy	Description	Examples
Comparing/contrasting	Making a comparison between the story and information from one's existing fund of knowledge (accurate or inaccurate knowledge).	"In the 1900s this would have been acceptable." "In [developing] countries this is the way they do things."
Contextualizing	Situating story elements in time and space or in a larger milieu.	"Are they talking about recent times, or back in the 1950s?" "It says this was written in 1948, so this was after WWII."
Questioning	Questions about text-based events or ideas.	"What happened first?" "Did little Davy throw a rock?" "What about the person with the broken leg?"
Searching for meaning	Inquiring into or hypothesizing about the underlying reasons for the events in the text—why characters are acting as they are.	"Why would they throw stones at people?" "I thought maybe it was for fun or entertainment." "Maybe it was originally to find witches in town...like [the witches'] powers would bring the black dot to them."
Noting author's craft	Directly or indirectly referencing the ways the author constructed the text.	"She made it seem like it was going to be a real nice story and then wham!" "In the beginning of the story she led you to believe the town is normal."
Interpreting	<i>Taking information and <u>assigning it meaning</u>.</i>	"It's not her fault <i>she got the black dot</i> , but <u>she has to pay for it anyway</u> ." "I think <i>it's</i> [the lottery's] <u>almost a religion or a ritual</u> ."
Engaging in retrospection	Students relate thoughts that occurred to them as they read the text.	"And when I read that I knew that the lottery wasn't going to be about money." "At first I thought it was going to be a [sentimental] story or something."
Stating a confusion	Student states a confusion about the story.	"I didn't get it at all." "I don't understand how they drew."
Inserting oneself in the text	Students place themselves in the story.	"I would want my daughter out of it." "Like we all draw a piece of paper and one has a black dot...and she got it. Even though she's our friend, we're going to kill her because she got the black dot."

included sharing text-explicit and text-implicit information and sharing misreadings of text. For example, one student stated text-explicit information when she talked about Tessie Hutchinson's behavior following the lottery drawing: "Tessie wasn't objecting to it until she got picked [for stoning], and then she objected to it. She never objected to anyone's piece of paper until she got hers with the dot." Another student shared text-implicit information during an exchange about Tessie's small son's participation in her stoning: "He threw rocks at his own mother." Jackson does not state this in the text. It must be inferred from the following sentence: "The children had stones already, and someone gave little Davy Hutchinson a few pebbles" (Jackson, 1948/1982, p. 301). In order to understand Davy's participation in the stoning, this student made an inference as he read. The activity of making this inference was certainly a comprehension strategy, yet sharing it with a group member was not. The student was merely filling in a needed piece of information when queried. In this discussion, we focus upon comprehension strategies practiced during discussion, thus, sharing information gleaned through inference (what we label text-implicit information) was coded as nonstrategic. Finally, in an exchange about when the lottery occurred, a student shared a misreading of text: "The lottery was an every month thing." His reading was incorrect. The lottery was an annual event, occurring every 27th of June. These kinds of talk, while contributing to meaning making in the groups, do not reflect comprehension strategy use in our view.

**Identifying other talk.** Not all talk was related to comprehension in these groups. Because we wanted to fully code the transcripts, we identified talk directed at beginning (e.g., "Who wants to start?"), maintaining (e.g., "What do you think, Bob?"), and ending ("I think we're done") the conversation as discourse moves and talk that digressed from the text ideas as off-task (e.g., "That bin Laden guy is crazy").

**Coding the transcripts.** Armed with our lists of comprehension process strategies, nonstrategic

comprehension-related talk, and other talk, we fully coded the transcripts of the discussions. To do this, we first divided the transcripts into student turns. The boundaries of a turn were defined as when a student began and ended speaking. We next analyzed each student turn for evidence of comprehension-related talk (strategic or nonstrategic) and other kinds of talk (i.e., discourse moves and off-task talk). When a student showed evidence of multiple kinds of talk, we divided that turn into talk segments. There were 70 student turns and 73 talk segments in Group 1, 88 student turns and 97 talk segments in Group 2, 134 student turns and 144 talk segments in Group 3, and 147 student turns and 155 talk segments in Group 4. Having divided the student turns into segments, we then coded the transcripts separately. We achieved an agreement of 92% in our coding and were able to resolve the 8% of differences. In addition, an independent rater coded 30% of the transcript pages selected at random and achieved an agreement of 86%.

## Results and discussion

Our first research question sought to determine if there was evidence of comprehension strategy use in students' peer-led discussions of "The Lottery." Our analysis of the transcripts revealed that a majority of student talk about text in each discussion group was comprehension related. This talk ranged from a low of 72% in Group 3 to a high of 94% in Group 1. Within comprehension-related talk in each group, we found that a majority of talk segments were strategic—that is, they employed comprehension process strategy use. Talk segments reflecting comprehension strategy use ranged from a low of 47% to a high of 71% in Groups 2 and 1, respectively. These data are summarized in Table 2.

Our second research question sought to determine the nature of students' comprehension strategy use, were it to be found, in these discussion groups. Looking within strategic talk, across groups, the most prolific strategic talk related to

**Table 2**  
**Percentage of comprehension-related and other talk per group**

Nature of talk segments	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Comprehension-related talk	<i>N</i> = 69	<i>N</i> = 73	<i>N</i> = 103	<i>N</i> = 131
Strategic talk segments	71	47	57	57
Nonstrategic talk segments	23	28	15	28
Total comprehension segments	94	75	72	85
Other talk	<i>N</i> = 4	<i>N</i> = 24	<i>N</i> = 41	<i>N</i> = 24
Discourse move segments	6	22	24	15
Off-task talk segments	0	3	5	0
Total nonstrategic talk segments	6	25	28	15

the strategies of *interpreting* (taking information and assigning it meaning) and either *text-based questioning* or its narrative analogue *stating a confusion*. In each group, there was evidence of some attention to *contextualizing* the story in time and place. In Group 2, we noted that approximately a quarter of student talk reflected *noting author's craft* and *engaging in retrospection*, two strategies that are related because of their attention to text construction and a reader's self-identified textual processing given the construction.

Although not key to this inquiry, we noted that students' nonstrategic comprehension-related talk ranged from 20% to 33% of talk in the groups. Looking within this category, the majority of this talk involved students sharing text-implicit or text-explicit information with one another. Table 3 summarizes the percentages of comprehension strategy use and nonstrategic talk segments per group.

Although the coded data revealed significant amounts of strategy use, the data is most meaningfully explored, in our view, in the context of students' discussion. Following are four excerpts of student talk and our analysis of the ways that comprehension strategies were being used in these groups.

In the following conversation from Group 1, the students work together to puzzle through a single topic, whether the children in the town had to participate in the drawing. Textual inferences are required to understand that all citizens, regardless of age or health, participate in the lottery.

Tina: Why does everybody, like have to draw...like even the little teeny kids?

Lance: Why would you want to kill a kid?

Josh: Even the 2-year-olds and stuff have to draw.

Tina: How old was the youngest one?

Josh: He was young enough so that he had to have somebody else draw for him.

Alisha: What they're saying is about how they would draw and have the head from every household draw for the rest of the family. I think that it was because the more kids they have the more chance they would get.

Lance: I don't think they would hit the little kids. That's why they had the adults draw.

Josh: I know that the kids drew, too.

Tina: Oh...did they?

Josh: Yeah. Originally every head of a family drew out of the box and, if you got like this slip of paper that said it was your family, every person in your family had to draw from the box. Whoever got the little black thing, then, you know, got stoned.

**Table 3**  
**Percentage of strategic and nonstrategic comprehension-related talk segments**

Nature of talk	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4
Total comprehension talk segments	N = 69	N = 73	N = 103	N = 131
Strategic talk segments				
Comparing/contrasting	0	0	9	0
Contextualizing	17	5	10	2
Questioning	19	10	15	20
Stating a confusion	13	1	2	9
Noting author's craft	3	11	2	3
Searching for meaning	4	8	7	5
Interpreting	16	15	34	20
Engaging in retrospection	0	12	0	4
Summarizing	1	0	0	1
Inserting self into the text	1	0	2	5
Total strategic talk segments	75	63	80	67
Nonstrategic talk segments				
Sharing text-explicit and text-implicit information	23	33	18	32
Sharing misreadings	1.5	4	2	1
Total nonstrategic talk segments	25	37	20	33

The comprehension strategies invoked in this excerpt include text-based questioning, searching for meaning, interpreting, and summarizing. Tina's initial text-based question, "Why does everybody have to draw, even the little teeny kids?" prompts this entire exchange. Lance then inquires as to the larger reasons for the characters' behavior as he wonders, "Why would you want to kill a kid?" This kind of query we refer to as searching for meaning because it goes beyond the text base. In response, Josh presents his interpretation. He takes information from the text (i.e., the drawing procedures) and assigns it meaning. He believes that the reason everyone participates is because "the more kids they have, the more chance they would get" (presumably, not to become the sacrificial object). This exchange concludes with Josh summarizing the drawing procedure for group members.

In the next excerpt, three students from Group 2 entertain three topics. The first topic under discussion is that the lottery is not a good thing. The second topic is a potential reason for the lottery. The third addresses which villagers wished to continue the lottery.

Rob: The beginning was kinda of confusing, but when it ended, in the end, I thought it was cool in the end.

Mark: In the beginning of the story, I thought the lottery was a good thing, 'cause like all the villagers were there. They were like subtle and everything, and then in the end, like, somebody dies.

Sarah: That's what I was thinking, too. Aren't lotteries usually a good thing? Then, all of a sudden, she opens her thing and she gets pelted in the head with a rock.

Mark: Yes, that's like what I thought. Because the author makes the lottery sound like a good thing, like everyone was there to do it, and then in the end, I found out it was a bad thing. Everyone just didn't want to get picked.

Rob: I think it's kinda a cool that the author... umm...left a reason why they did the lottery kinda up to your imagination, 'cause maybe they did it like for tradition, 'cause some people do it. They did it way back when, so we got to do it, too. Maybe they need to lower the population or something.

Sarah: No...they don't need to lower the population 'cause they have something like 300.

Mark: I thought that they extremely stressed the tradition 'cause if you read it, it sounded to me a lot like nobody really wanted to keep the lottery going.

Rob: Except for the old man.

Mark: Yeah, except for the old man. Yeah, but nobody really enjoyed doing the lottery. They were all afraid and stuff like that.

Sarah: Maybe, except for the kids. They were all excited. They were running around picking up rocks.

Rob: That's wild.

The strategies the students used to discuss these topics include engaging in retrospection, text-based questioning, interpreting, noting author's craft, and searching for meaning. Rob and Mark begin the discussion by engaging in retrospection about their reading process. When Rob says, "The beginning was kind of confusing, but when in the end, in the end I thought it was cool in the end," he is considering, and allowing other students to glimpse, his initial confusion and subsequent evaluation of the text. Sarah asks, "Aren't lotteries a good thing?" This text-based question invokes her, and perhaps others', schemata for lotteries. Mark comments on the manner in which the text is put together, what we identify as noting author's craft. As he continues, he engages in retrospection about his reading process by noting, "then in the end I found out it was a bad thing." Rob also notes author's craft by evaluating it as "cool that the author" left the reason for the lottery open to the reader. Following this conclu-

sion, Sarah searches for meaning, positing that it could be for reasons of "tradition" or to "lower the population."

In the next excerpt, students in Group 4 discuss two topics, Tessie's cry of unfairness in the lottery drawing procedure and the disconnect between the characters' affect and the circumstances of the gathering.

Lara: Yeah, they were like, "It's unfair," which is mean 'cause I'd prefer to be stoned rather than one of my friends, because think about it. Saying that it's unfair and they redid it, and someone else picked it or got it or whatever. And then having to live your whole life knowing that they got stoned because you said it was unfair.

Cory: Which I don't understand...why everyone was happy about getting there...in the beginning?

Lara: I know.

Cory: Like in the beginning...we didn't know what it was about, but [the characters in the story] did.

After a student interjects the recurring notion of population control (to which nobody responds), Cory and Lara begin to speak about another topic—what they would do if given this same situation.

Cory: Yeah. I know...and like when that lady came, the Mrs. Hutchinson lady, and she came in, and she was like, "I slept in or whatever and I found out this was today and I had to come." Well, why couldn't you just stay home?

Lara: I know, I'd stay home, too.

The comprehension strategies in this passage include interpreting, inserting oneself in the text, noting author's craft, and text-based questioning. After an initial interpretation of Tessie Hutchinson's action as "mean," a student inserts herself into the text by relating how she would respond to the sacrifice of a friend after initially being selected, protesting, securing a redrawing, and in so doing escaping death. Following, Cory notes the author's craft by commenting, "Like in

the beginning...we didn't know what it was about but [the characters] did." She goes on to ask a text-based question, "Why couldn't you just stay home?" (In the story, staying home does not preclude participation. Even those who do not attend, typically for reasons of health, have someone draw for them. Participation is a requirement for all citizens.) At the close of this excerpt, Lara again inserts herself into the text by responding, "I'd stay home, too."

In this final excerpt, students in Group 2 discuss four topics: Whether young children could be killed, the reactions of those not selected for stoning, physical placement of characters during the lottery, and when the story occurred in time.

- Ryan: When they're drawing names in the end, when they draw the name of the little kid, do they kill the little kid?
- Jean: But they all have faces of relief or something when they saw his paper was blank.
- Ryan: Who would want to kill a little kid?
- Jean: Who would want to kill a little girl? That's so dumb.
- Ryan: There's nothing that she can do. I feel really bad.
- Jean: When they first got there, like all the men were in one place, and all the women were in one place, and all the little kids were in one place.
- Ryan: In the beginning, the men were talking and making jokes. The thing I don't understand was why were they laughing and just smiling and the children were just kinda running around and going crazy. And the women were just talking quietly and basically gossiping.
- Victoria: Another thing that I noticed is, right when I started reading it, I don't know why, but like I thought it took place in some time period close to the present, but then as I went on they had the men draw the cards or they wanted the men to draw the cards, so it made me think that it had to take place a long time ago.
- Jean: Well another thing is, according to the time is that the girls wore sweaters and skirts, so

that would be more like the present. So this made me think more, now, instead of like another time period like in a village square in, like, old towns. And no other towns are stopping them so it can't be in the present time.

In this excerpt, students engage in text-based questioning, searching for meaning, and contextualizing. In attempting to discuss whether the villagers would want to stone a young child, Ryan asks a text-based question "when they draw the name of the little kid, do they kill the little kid?" He follows with the query, "Who would want to kill a little kid?" This addresses the underlying reasons for the characters' behaviors, what we identify as searching for meaning. In the latter part of the discussion, two students attempt to contextualize the story in time. Jean shares, "they wanted the men to draw the cards, so it made me think that it had to take place a long time ago," and Victoria adds, "the girls wore sweaters and skirts, so that would be more like the present."

In this inquiry, we were gratified to find that students did in fact use multiple comprehension strategies, as we defined them, as they engaged in sustained talk about the text. In reviewing students' talk and strategy use, however, we noticed a number of patterns that were of concern.

First, students' voices were not equally heard in the discussions. Each group was composed of four students. In each of the groups, three of the students contributed fairly equally to the conversation with respect to student turns. However, in each group, one student did not contribute to the discussion beyond rendering an occasional general evaluative comment (e.g., "That's stupid" or "Wow, twisted") or agreeing with others' comments.

Second, students moved quickly from topic to topic rather than delving deeply into ideas. We noted that their talk often resembled serial monologues more than true conversation. That is, students talked about the text but did not necessarily engage with one another in connected

consideration of their ideas. Thus, the discussion lacked sufficient attention to the topics that were introduced and to the interrelation between and among the ideas on the table. We were particularly concerned that important questions posed by a student were often left unaddressed by other students, as was the case in the final excerpt of discussion from group 2.

Third, the students employed comprehension strategies, but it seemed that their strategy use was largely incidental and done with little forethought. Students might interpret, question, contextualize, or search for meaning, yet there was no evidence that they were doing so intentionally with the purpose of together using comprehension process strategies to create more complete and richer understandings of the text.

## Conclusions and implications

For these groups to optimally serve as vehicles for developing students' strategic comprehension processes, we conclude that the following must occur: All students must be held accountable for fully participating in the discussions, students must engage in connected talk with one another about their ideas, and students must intentionally employ their strategic comprehension processes to better make meaning. For these things to happen, we believe that students must be taught two literacy skills explicitly. First, students need to be taught how to engage in dialogue with one another about text, so that they know how to contribute. That is, they need to be taught to actively listen to group members' ideas and questions and to thoughtfully respond to those ideas and questions before moving on to other topics. Following this instruction, they can be held accountable for maintaining their participation and substantively contributing to the group's connected conversation. Second, students need to be taught how to employ comprehension strategies to assist themselves and group members as they collaboratively puzzle through ideas in the text. Absent explicit attention to these two literacy skills, peer-led dis-

cussions cannot exploit their full potential to increase students' understanding of texts under discussion and, just as important in our view, develop strategic comprehension processes that will transfer across texts and time.

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