

## **Discussion in the elementary classroom: How and why some teachers use discussion**

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*Discussion is a multi-faceted, invitational classroom practice that presents possibilities for classroom teachers to engage learners in academic content while developing their discussion skills, deliberating social and political issues, and preparing solutions to common problems. It provides a democratic location for students to construct learning together and learn from each other. Discussion can be used in many different ways and with the youngest schoolchildren. Current scholarship related to discussion in the classroom is primarily situated within secondary education, providing a unique opportunity for developing research that explores discussion in elementary classrooms. This study uncovers how and why three elementary teachers use discussion in the classroom, and how discussion is similar and different in kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade.*

“That’s something I want my students to walk away with is being able to think and challenge themselves and challenge others.” -Tess, third grade teacher

School is a remarkable location for rich discussion, affording countless opportunities for young people to engage in shared discourse. Classroom discourse is a complex, ever-changing system that includes all dialogue in the classroom (Cazden, 1988). One form of classroom discourse is discussion, which is a shared dialogue between two or more individuals; it may include multiple perspectives, and may or may not include the classroom teacher (Parker, 2003). To understand the utility of classroom discussion, it is critical to begin with traditional classroom discourse. Cazden (1988) discusses traditional classroom discourse; from there, she moves to discourse that does not fit this mold, and examines how discourse varies across classrooms and among teachers. One of the most important principles of Cazden’s work is the impact of peer talk in the classroom. She posits that peer discourse during school gives students the unique opportunity to engage in academic discourse. These very basic principles of traditional classroom discourse provide a foundation for research in classroom discussions, demonstrating the potential for children to learn by talking with one another.

Discussion has recently been examined in secondary social studies education. As a multi-dimensional teaching and learning tool, it develops unique opportunities for students to engage in classroom discourse about academic content and controversial issues while developing their discourse skills, learning to create solutions to shared problems, and even honing their own positions towards contentious problems (Damico & Rosaen, 2009; Henning, Neilsen, Henning, & Schulz, 2008; Hess, 2009; Larson, 2000; Parker & Hess, 2001). It creates a unique location for students to develop their own ideas and learn from each other, while engaging the academic content. Clearly, discussion is a widely beneficial and promising classroom strategy.

## **Conceptual Framework**

Current educational research related to teaching with discussion is primarily situated in secondary social studies education (Hess, 2002, 2008; Hess & Posselt, 2002; Stoddard, 2010). For example, Hess examines its utility to approach and deliberate controversial public issues (Hess, 2009). Although much of contemporary educational research about discussion is located within secondary social studies, teacher educators are beginning to research its use in elementary classrooms. There is a small amount of recent research about teaching with discussion in the elementary classroom (Allen, 1997; Beck, 2003, 2005; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000; Damico & Rosaen, 2009; McCall, 2006). These projects are primarily concerned with studying individual teachers and how they use discussion in the classroom, and none of these research endeavors address how it is similar and different across elementary classrooms. This represents a gap in the literature related to teaching with discussion in elementary classrooms.

Contemporary scholarship reveals the diverse opportunities for teaching with discussion. Teaching with discussion can involve more formal discussion strategies like seminars and deliberations (Beck, 2003; Parker, 2003) or less formal discourse about shared experiences and classroom activities or written and oral narratives (Henning et al., 2008). It can be used to teach academic content (Parker & Hess, 2001), and frequent discussions can promote tolerance of others (Beck, 2003). At times, teachers may even use discussion to develop shared discourse skills (Parker & Hess, 2001). Because of the opportunity for active participation and shared dialogue, discussion affords a location to foster democracy in the classroom (Allen, 1997; Parker, 2003; Rossi, 2006). Current scholarship seems to reveal the diverse utility of discussion in classrooms, yet less is known about how teachers implement it, particularly teachers in elementary education.

Through synthesizing the literature related to discussion in secondary and elementary classrooms, multiple benefits for using discussion with students are identified. Good discussion urges students to recognize diverse perspectives, dialogue about abstract and multilayered problems that are relevant to their lives, participate in a democracy, learn from others' knowledge, and co-construct knowledge with fellow classmates (Beck, 2003, 2005; Brophy & Alleman, 2009; Cazden, 1988; Damico & Rosaen, 2009). This series of experiences creates the opportunity for students to listen to points of view that are different from their own and even see varying perspectives on controversial issues (Allen, 1997; Beck, 2005; McCall, 2006). Students who participate in classroom discussions are more likely to make connections outside of the dialogue to their personal life and community (Hemmings, 2000) and become empowered through sharing in the classroom dialogue with others (Rossi, 2006). Moreover, students can develop civic competence as they take part in structured conversations with others (Hess, 2009; Kelly, 1989), and through the process, active listening skills can be honed (Parker, 2006).

Discussion, like any teaching strategy, presents obstacles. At any grade level, teachers must make decisions about what will be discussed when planning for and implementing discussions with their students (McCall, 2006). Teachers teach differently. Even when teaching the same content, the questions that precede discussions are different from teacher to teacher (Beck, 2005; Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000). The difference in the way that teachers teach demonstrates the potential to guide students into meaningful and empowering dialogue, as well as the danger of simply recapping facts (Chilcoat & Ligon, 2000). Furthermore, teachers must decide if they will discuss topics that are controversial and sensitive (Camicia, 2008), and if so, if they will disclose their personal position on public problems (Hess, 2009). The complexity of teaching with discussion demonstrates the importance of planning for such opportunities and thinking through what the focus of the discussion will be. Because of the complexity of classroom discussions, spontaneous discussions are often less meaningful and engaging for students than intentional discussions that the teacher has prepared for (Henning et al., 2008; Holden & Bunte, 1995; Lockwood, 1996).

Current scholarship about teaching with discussion demonstrates that planning and implementing discussions begins with the teacher (Lockwood, 1996; Parker & Hess, 2001). The teacher's role in utilizing classroom discussion includes assessing what students know (Bolgatz, 2005), and scaffolding the skills that students need to enter shared dialogue and remain engaged (Hess, 2009; Kelly, 1989). A teacher must understand the capacity of the students to engage in dialogue with others. Teachers can use discussion to help develop students' understanding of larger and more abstract concepts by making connections between content and big ideas during classroom discussions (Bolgatz, 2005). Moreover, the teacher can use discussion to help develop students' understanding of larger and more abstract concepts. When teachers implement discussion, learners have the opportunity to hone expert discussion skills through repeated participation (Flynn, 2009; Parker & Hess, 2001).

Through examining educational scholarship devoted to teaching with discussion in secondary education and the small body of current literature related to elementary classroom dialogue and discussion, the need for further research related to understanding discussion in the elementary classroom is revealed. Furthermore, there are no current studies of elementary discussion that look within and across multiple elementary teachers to understand the role of discussion in specific classrooms and across elementary classrooms. As only a small number of studies examine why teachers use discussion with young learners, there is an opportunity to further explore its utility in elementary classrooms. This exploratory collective case study explores how and why three elementary classroom teachers teach with discussion.

### **Research Methods**

To gain a more detailed picture of the three individual teachers, an exploratory collective case study was developed (Creswell, 2007; Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2002). Purposeful and convenience sampling was employed to identify the three participants (Maxwell, 2005). Three separate bounded systems were examined within this study: a kindergarten teacher, a third grade teacher, and a fifth grade teacher (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2003). Although the three bounded systems were studied as unique, separate cases, this study also surveys three cases to understand the use of discussion in kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade.

The study was conducted at a suburban K-5 elementary school in the Southeastern United States. The school boasts more than 40 classroom teachers and 800 students, and has consistently been recognized as meeting achievement standards. The student body demonstrates increasing ethnic diversity, and there is a growing community of English Language Learners. Nearly half of the students receive free or reduced meals. 12% of the predominantly Caucasian and female faculty have earned advanced degrees and 9 classroom teachers are NBCT certified. The participants were recognized as highly effective classroom teachers who fostered student-centered classrooms and classroom discussions. Table 1 illustrates the three teachers' demographic data.

**Table 1. Teachers' Demographic Data**

Characteristic	Katherine	Tess	Faith
Current grade level	Kindergarten	3	5
Years of classroom teaching experience	5-10	5-10	15-20
Gender	F	F	F
Age range	50-60	30-40	40-50
Race	Caucasian	Caucasian	Caucasian
Highest level of education	M. Ed.	M. Ed.	B.S.
Area(s) of certification	Birth-K, Counseling	K-6, Gifted Education	K-6, Gifted Education
National Board PTS	Candidate	Yes	Candidate

Katherine is an outgoing and outspoken career kindergarten teacher. Katherine's background and experiences in counseling and early childhood development influence her teacher vision and instructional strategies. She shared that discussion was a large part of her graduate coursework, and her undergraduate program stressed the role of conversation in children's language development. Katherine strongly believes in listening to what children have to say. She readily welcomes current and former parents and community members to contribute to her classroom, and discussion is most frequently used in her classroom in regular whole group class meetings.

Tess is an introverted and motivated career third grade teacher. Her prior experiences as a fifth grade teacher and in gifted education influence her teacher vision and instructional strategies. As a student, Tess was very quiet and rarely engaged in classroom discussions. Extra-curricular experiences provided an outlet for her to develop her discussion skills and during her graduate work, she learned about using Socratic seminars, which she now implements frequently across content areas. In Tess' class, students are most often engaged in small group discussions during guided reading.

Faith is a candid and cheerful career fifth grade teacher. Her prior experiences as a third grade and gifted education teacher has contributed to her ideas about developing classroom opportunities for shared discourse. It is important to Faith to be heard in discussions. As a student, she experienced lively classroom deliberations with her favorite teacher, Mr. Costeo. Faith is particularly passionate about cultivating and sustaining discussions in her classroom, and she enjoys using current events and controversial issues as opportunities for engaging students in deliberations.

There are five research questions for this study:

1. Do elementary teachers use discussion? How?
2. Why do elementary teachers use discussion?
3. How do elementary teachers use discussion in social studies?
4. How is discussion similar across kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade?
5. How is discussion different across kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade?

These research questions guided the study design and implementation (Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2003). Three qualitative research methods were employed: semi-structured classroom observations, participant interviews, and a focus group. Data collection began with classroom observations. An observation protocol focused on teacher behaviors was created to use for classroom observations. Observations included field notes and researcher bracketing (Creswell, 2007; Spradley, 1979). The observations were followed by participant interviews and data collection concluded with a focus

group. Interview and focus group protocols were used. The observations and researcher bracketing informed the subsequent participant interviews. Participant interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. After listening to the interviews and creating inductive codes (Hatch, 2002), focus group questions were designed and participants engaged in a focus group discussion. The focus group was also audio-taped and transcribed. The semi-structured design of the interviews and focus group allowed the data collection process to move with the ebb and flow of the participants' discourse. Table 2 illustrates the relationship between the research questions and the data collection methods (Maxwell, 2005).

**Table 2. Crosswalk of Research Questions and Data Collection Methods**

Research Question	Observations	Interviews	Focus Group
Do elementary teachers use discussion? How?		X	X
Why do elementary teachers use discussion?	X	X	X
How do elementary teachers use discussion in social studies?		X	X
How is discussion similar across kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade?	X	X	X
How is discussion different across kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade?	X	X	X

Data analysis began with inductive coding (Hatch, 2002), where initial codes for the observations, interviews, and focus groups were identified. Afterwards, domain specific analysis was used to create matrices for each classroom observation, participant interview, and the focus group discussion (Spradley, 1979). The matrices demonstrated the relationship or function between the codes and themes, and allowed me to organize quotes and researcher bracketing by code. After developing a matrix for each piece of data, the sources were grouped by participant to create a participant matrix. Constant comparative analysis was used to develop themes within each single case and again to identify similar and different themes across the three cases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Stake, 2006). The data was interrogated to understand what was not said or seen; this contributed to a more descriptive account of how and why teachers use discussions and what differences and similarities are present in discussions across grade levels, uncovering the power dynamics that affected the three teachers and their teaching. Furthermore, as the study design continually returned to the literature, I considered whether what was seen and heard in observations, interviews, and in the focus group was represented in the body of related literature. This process contributed to the overall credibility and dependability of the exploratory collective case study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To minimize threats to the trustworthiness and credibility of the study, I frequently returned to and revised the study design. Additionally, using three data collection sources allowed for triangulating the data sources, which increased the trustworthiness of the study (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2005). Because the role of the researcher is central to the design and implementation of a research study, I purposed to continually consider the presence of my own experiences and positionality (Glesne, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 2002). With this understanding, I addressed the trustworthiness of the study by implementing three reflexive practices: member checking, peer auditing, and researcher memos.

## Findings

### Defining Discussion

Katherine, Tess, and Faith are three elementary classroom teachers who deliberately and frequently implement discussion in their teaching. Each teacher defines discussion in a unique way. Katherine defines discussion as a chance to listen to what other people have to say, taking turns with one another, and talking about things that mean something. Tess defines discussion as wholly interactive; a sharing of ideas about a lot of different topics. She believes that it is more than just answering questions, that it involves challenging your ideas and the ideas of others. She posited, “For me, discussion is really more about things that are thinking questions, things that multiple answers can be shared for.” Faith defines discussion as a personal outlet, an opportunity for people to bring out issues and perspectives that might often be overlooked.

### Similarities Between the Three Teachers

The three classroom teachers in this study share both common beliefs about discussion and the role of the teacher in developing and implementing shared discourse. They share common teaching and learning strategies for teaching with discussion. Table 3 illustrates the cross case analysis of participants’ common beliefs about collaborative dialogue and the role of the teacher, as well as common skills and strategies across the three teachers.

**Table 3. Cross Case Analysis of Katherine, Tess, and Faith**

Theme	Example
Teacher Belief	It is essential to develop children as thinkers Successful discussions come from relevant topics I would like to have more frequent discussions Discussion can be used to teach academic content
Role of the Teacher	Pushes critical thinking Embrace multiple perspectives Models discussion skills Provides guided practice in discussion skills To provide specific feedback during discussions
Discussion skill or strategy	Open questions Class meetings Structured peer talk Use text to elicit discussion Use visuals to elicit discussion

### Teacher Beliefs about Discussion

Katherine, Tess, and Faith share a common belief that children should be heard and everyone has the right to an opinion. This is perhaps the cornerstone of their confidence in shared classroom discourse. Throughout the data collection, each of the teachers continually returned to the idea of developing students as thinkers, and identified discussion as one critical method for engaging student thinking. It was never employed in isolation, but always within the location of academic content. In thinking about how discussion can be used to teach academic content, Katherine reasons “I think that if they discuss it and voice it the chances are they’ll retain it more.”

Each of the participants believes that the most successful discussions originate from issues that are important and relevant to students’ lives. This belief materializes during class meetings,

where their kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade students are allowed and encouraged to discuss and even deliberate shared problems and issues that affect their lives. In thinking about using shared dialogue to approach relevant issues, Faith alleges, “it opens them up and makes them look at their life. Discussion and debate can come from their own personal life.” Faith’s position towards discussing shared problems and issues was demonstrated as I observed Faith teaching one part of a larger unit on immigration. During the observation, she facilitated a small group deliberation about illegal immigration in the US as other groups engaged in their deliberations of illegal immigration in the US either with the teacher assistant or independently. She described these discussions as deliberations because students were engaged in developing a resolution for illegal immigration in the US.

Later in an interview, Faith shared that she frequently facilitates discussions and deliberations with students and that students regularly engage these opportunities without an adult facilitator. Faith likes discussion because “it brings out issues that I don’t think about or in a way that I’ve not looked at.” Katherine believes that for her kindergarteners, the home is a vital part of how collaborative discourse skills develop, and that it is never too early to begin teaching children how to discuss. She believes that for many children, these skills are encouraged when someone says, “oh, I want to hear your ideas!”

Because of their shared utility of discussion, it is not surprising that Katherine, Tess, and Faith would like to implement more frequent discussions in their classrooms to teach academic content, promote students’ as thinkers, and develop students’ collaborative discourse skills. In fact, Faith proposes that “discussion should be a part of every lesson” and that it is a particularly effective strategy to elicit prior knowledge in science, social studies, and math. As Katherine, Tess, and Faith shared their ideas about discussion and their personal experiences, it became clear that these teachers believe in the power of deliberate shared dialogue, and that they work to facilitate such possibilities with their students.

The teachers’ core discussion methods are similar across the three grades. All three teachers use discussion across content areas. The teachers shared during the focus group that the most recurrent location for classroom discussions was class meetings. In Katherine’s class, daily class meetings are a springboard for student derived discussions and deliberations, especially about problems that arise throughout the school day. Outside of regular class meetings, each of the teachers utilize unstructured and structured peer talk throughout the day. When asked what instructional supports appear to advance their use of discussion, Katherine, Tess, and Faith revealed that texts and visuals provide support for eliciting student initial participation and sustained engagement in discussions. Posing open questions and providing explicit feedback seemed to encourage student engagement in whole group discourse, and all three teachers believe that small group discussions are more inviting and successful in elementary classrooms than whole class discussions.

### **Differences between the Three Teachers**

Katherine asserts that whole group discussions are critical in kindergarten. Developing such opportunities to talk about shared problems and to build classroom community is important to Katherine. She believes that discussion is most valuable for teaching conflict resolution and decision making. Continual assessments and mandated math and literacy programs have impacted her instructional planning and liberty to develop whole group discussions. Katherine feels that her autonomy as a teacher to develop authentic and meaningful instruction, including frequent shared dialogue, has been impacted by influences outside of the classroom, and that she doesn’t have the time to listen to her students and really hear what they have to say.

Tess uses discussion to complement her math and literacy instruction. She believes that her instruction is more meaningful when shared dialogue is a part of students’ learning, and she most

often uses discussion in small group teacher-directed instruction. She feels that there are too many students to allow everyone time to share and really listen to each other, resulting in a constant struggle to engage whole group instruction efficiently. Instead, Tess prefers small group dialogue to whole group, and works to develop active listening skills and discussion skills in her daily guided reading groups.

Faith alleges that deliberations and shared group thinking are the most important opportunities for discussion that she can implement in her classroom. Most often, she uses current events or controversial issues in her social studies instruction as a springboard for whole group deliberations. Although Faith believes that deliberations are critical experiences for fifth graders, she feels that time constraints and mandated schedules prevent her from being able to teach with discussion as part of every lesson as she would like to.

### **The Role of the Teacher in Planning for and Implementing Discussion**

During the classroom observations, a map for each teacher's intentional planning for whole and small group dialogue developed. It was evident that the students were familiar with the whole and small group format, and teacher expectations seemed to be well established. Whole and small group collaborative conversation developed seamlessly, and students were continually engaged throughout the discussions in kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade.

The role of the teacher in developing discussions was similar in all three classrooms. In their individual interviews, each participant illuminated the role of the classroom teacher in planning for and implementing discussions. Tess posits, "You want to be prepared as a discussion facilitator with not only one but multiple good questions. You need to be a good listener and to be able to ask appropriate follow up and thinking questions that may come up in the discussion." In thinking about how she develops lessons that incorporate deliberate shared dialogue, Tess shared, "What's my goal for my students? It's well beyond third grade." This became evident as I observed Tess in her classroom and listened to her responses in interviews and the focus group. She continually referred to the larger context of the lessons, the role of the teacher in developing discussions and discussion skills, and her vision of developing students as thinkers. Part of her role is to assess what the students learned and then use that information to plan for future lessons. Tess talked in great detail about how for her, planning is the foundation of her classroom. She uses collaborative dialogue during small group reading instruction, in science partners, to share math journals, and in regular whole class meetings.

Katherine acknowledges the fundamental role of the teacher in modeling and scaffolding instruction for students, including how to dialogue with others and how to listen. At times, she uses purposeful groupings to help develop students' shared discourse skills. Faith implements discussion across content areas and in whole group dialogue about controversial issues. Together with her students, Faith developed community expectations for discussion. Prior to beginning whole or small group discussion, she reviews community expectations and strives to purposefully model active listening and foster it among students.

These teachers asserted that as they plan for and facilitate class discussions, they are intentionally and continually preparing students as active listeners and thinkers. Classroom observations and individual interviews revealed that the three teachers purposed to develop classroom opportunities for students to develop such skills within whole group and small group dialogue. Moreover, their roles as teachers who promote successful collaborative dialogue through asking thoughtful questions were repeatedly discussed. Tess asserted, "If I can develop them as thinkers, they can get a lot of that information without me." They understand the critical role of the teacher in planning and implementing discussion, particularly in modeling skills and providing guided practice. Though the role of the teacher and the discussion strategies vary across the three classrooms, each teacher had a clear vision of how and why they use discussion in the classroom.

They are reflective and purposeful in their instructional planning, and all three teachers reported that they strive to teach academic content while continually developing students' discussion skills.

### **Advantages and Complexities of Discussion in Elementary Classrooms**

The teachers talked openly about their experiences in teaching with discussion in both their interviews and during the focus group discussion. They had all experienced both successful and lackluster discussions, and openly shared their beliefs about the benefits and barriers of discussion with young learners. The teachers agreed that most successful discussions are relevant to students' lives, and that having more frequent discussions helps develop discussion skills (Parker & Hess, 2001). They share a common goal of developing tolerance by providing an outlet with shared dialogue for students to express themselves and respect others.

Katherine, Tess, and Faith overwhelmingly agreed that small group discussions were more realistic and often more beneficial than whole group. In their experiences, small group discussions allow for more students' to be heard more often, a more comfortable place to share, and take less time to implement than whole group. As Katherine shared, "It's just time consuming. Sometimes I just don't feel like I have that much time to give." Faith has experienced that for some students, small group discussion is less intimidating, especially when students are deliberating common problems.

The most common barrier of discussion that these teachers encountered is time. Katherine discussed how time became a real issue even in primary grades, where mandated programs and the impact of standardized testing were felt in the classroom. Katherine was particularly vocal about the impact of standardized testing and mandated programs on schooling, stressing "some of the most creating things have fallen by the wayside, and I'm sad about that." Tess talked often about the impact of time and class size on instructional planning and classroom discourse, particularly when trying to engage a whole conversation. "With a large group, in order for everyone to share something, it just takes so much longer and you lose their attention. They are not as interested and engaged in the discussion in a large group setting." Faith felt like creative instructional strategies like discussion are neglected when standardized testing is in the horizon. The teachers described the culture of the school and how it has been impacted by testing and scheduling. For these teachers, time heavily influences what instructional strategies are used or not used, including discussion.

Student behaviors are also a common barrier to classroom discussion. A lack of mutual respect, failure to take turns, or poor listening skills all contribute to unsuccessful discussions. All three teachers addressed the importance of teacher modeling and guided practice of these skills to develop students' discussion skills and foster more successful classroom discussions. They shared that students often do not embrace the ideological diversity within a small or whole group, and this can hinder successful discussions. The ability to listen deeply seemed to impact the entire process of discussion. Katherine, Tess, and Faith believe that learning to engage in discussions is a continual process.

### **Discussion in Elementary Social Studies**

I entered this study to research and understand how and why elementary teachers use discussion in social studies; however, through field observations and interviews, it became evident that the three teachers were implementing discussion in their classrooms, but not exclusively in social studies or even frequently in social studies. The teachers did not discuss social studies or discussion in social studies unless the interview or focus group questions directly addressed social studies. All three observations of classroom discussion were completed in the context of social

studies, but when we conducted the interviews and the focus group, the teachers did not talk about using discussion in social studies.

As the study progressed, I found that the teachers were trying to teach social studies as much as possible, but their teaching conditions were not conducive to teaching social studies effectively or even regularly. The teachers' experiences with required testing and mandated academic programs demonstrate how social studies instruction has narrowed and why instructional autonomy in elementary education is quickly perishing. In thinking about her instructional autonomy, Katherine shared, "You really have to have a sense of responsibility to say what makes me 'me?' what makes it different for somebody to come to Room 117?" The teachers felt that unless their social studies instruction was integrated into literacy instruction, it was not likely to be taught. Their collective outlook confirms recent findings that increased literacy instruction is replacing social studies instruction in elementary schools (Boyle-Baise, Hsu, Johnson, Serriere, Stewart, 2008). Faith admitted, "I know teachers at this school, good teachers, who are not teaching social studies." Their schedules were highly managed, with math and literacy instruction at the forefront of their school's vision. New, system mandated programs in math and literacy brought scripted texts, rigid formats, and little opportunity for teachers to think on their own. They imagine that with the state and national testing programs focused on math, reading, and science, it is unlikely that social studies will return to many teachers' lesson plans (Boyle-Baise et al., 2008; Rock, Heafner, O'Connor, Passe, Oldendorf, Good, & Byrd, 2006). This dilemma illuminates the power dynamics of standardized testing and mandated programs (Heafner, Good, O'Connor, Rock, Passe, Groce, Byrd, & Oldendorf, 2007; Rock et al., 2006), and demonstrates the struggle for teaching social studies with authentic methods in elementary classrooms.

When disclosing their ideas and beliefs about teaching with discussion in elementary social studies, Katherine, Tess, and Faith shared that social studies is an ideal location for teaching with discussion. They stressed the utility and practicality of using collaborative dialogue in their social studies instruction, yet found the school and district focus on reading and math to heavily limit and at times diminish their overall social studies instruction. When describing how discussion is actually used in their classrooms, each of the three teachers lamented their restricted use of discussion, pointing to teacher directed reading groups and small collaborative learning groups as their most frequent use of discussion and very limited use of discussion across the curriculum. In other words, the teachers described a pedagogical mismatch between what they believed to be sound instructional practices and the reality of time restrictions and testing pressure. This reaffirms prior research by Rock et al. (2006) and Heafner et al. (2007) alleging that social studies instruction is being minimized or depleted in the wake of increasingly stringent testing and accountability in elementary schools.

### **Conclusion**

This study is the story of how and why three teachers use discussion in the classroom. It is designed to illuminate the role of the teacher in discussion, why some teachers use discussion, and the benefits and barriers that impact discussion in the classroom, while encouraging classroom teachers to think about how to design lessons that utilize discussions for different purposes. It reveals their experiences in teaching with discussion in social studies while negotiating the time restrictions of mandated programs and schedules. It identifies and addresses the gap in contemporary scholarship about discussion in the elementary classroom (Creswell, 2007; Glesne, 2006). This study can help elementary teacher educators develop discussion as a component of their teacher education coursework, preparing pre-service teachers to use discussion in their own, future classrooms. Implications for future research include exploring how elementary students understand classroom discussion and how teaching with discussion has impacted student achievement.

As Rock et al. (2006), Heafner et al. (2007), and Boyle-Baise et al. (2008) have previously demonstrated, the presence of social studies education in elementary classrooms appears to steadily decline as the pressure of standardized testing increases. Clearly, as the social studies provide fantastic content for discussion-rich instruction, the decline in elementary social studies instruction represents the loss of valuable opportunities for remarkable whole group and small group discussion in elementary classrooms. These three teachers believe that the power dynamics of standardized testing and mandated programs have pushed the elementary social studies curriculum into obscurity and diminished instructional autonomy. This is critical to recognize, because prior research regarding discussion in the elementary classroom is situated within social studies education (Beck, 2003, 2005; Bolgatz, 2005; Damico & Rosaen, 2009). Yet, these teachers provide evidence for positioning and facilitating discussion in other content areas.

We must continue to examine the role of discussion in the classroom, and the reality that though elementary social studies provides a optimal location for utilizing discussion, teachers are not articulating the use of discussion social studies. We must further examine the role of discussion in the elementary classroom, and consider whether the lack of discussion in social studies is linked to the decline of social studies instruction in elementary classrooms (Rock et al., 2006). Perhaps these two realities are related? This study examines how and why some teachers use discussion with young learners, providing an account of three elementary classroom teachers' experiences with discussion. It demonstrates how three elementary teachers use discussion in their classrooms, their role in planning and implementing discussions, and the perceived advantages and complexities of classroom discussion. This study contributes to lessening the gap in current literature about teachers who use discussion with young learners, while illuminating the utility of classroom discussion and recognizing the decline of elementary social studies instruction and opportunities for using discussion as a platform for social studies instruction. This research endeavor advances the literature related to utilizing discussion in the elementary classroom, yet demonstrates the need for more research about how and why elementary teachers use discussion. This study contributes to the field of elementary education research, and is a springboard for future collective case studies of elementary teachers and discussion.

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### **About the Author**

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This study uncovers how and why three elementary teachers use discussion in the classroom, and how discussion is similar and different in kindergarten, third grade, and fifth grade. “That”™s something I want my students to walk away with is being able to think and challenge themselves and challenge others.” How to Use the Socratic Method in the Classroom. Role of the Teacher. During Socratic questioning, the teacher is a model of critical thinking who respects students' viewpoints, probes their understanding, and shows genuine interest in their thinking. The teacher poses questions that are more meaningful than those a novice of a given topic might develop on his or her own. When a teacher asks discussion based questions, they are directing the conversation towards a domain. The goal is to teach doctors about dopamine, business majors about strategic thinking, or English majors about symbolism. More specifically, it teaches someone how to talk and what is acceptable in a field of study. Some teachers use this strategy to have students teach one piece of content to their fellow students, making it less of a discussion strategy and more of a peer teaching format. In fact, many of these protocols could be used for peer teaching as well. Conver-Stations >. For a deeper discussion of how this kind of tool can be used, read this thoughtful overview of using backchannel discussions in the classroom by Edutopia™s Beth Holland. Talk Moves >. a.k.a. Accountable Talk.