

Students “Latch On”: Rethinking Applications of Vygotskian and Bakhtinian Theories for  
Teaching and Learning in an Untracked English Class

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Early in the school year (sept & Oct) I wasn't fond of all of your [Verda Delp, the teacher's] ideas. Most of them sounded wacky because I didn't understand them. Also I don't think I was the only one. I think most of the class was confused with your ideas.

Late in the school year (May & June) I understood better the ideas your where teaching us at the beginning of the year. I also think late in the year I gained a larger perspective of ideas in life.

Damien, Excerpt from his final

Little is known about teaching and learning in classrooms with students from diverse backgrounds. The usual structural solution to handling diversity in schools has been to track students by "ability level." The theory behind ability grouping was to create classrooms of students who were similar in achievement levels so that teachers could teach everyone more or less the same thing at the same time. As our schools have become more and more diverse, this mythical ideal of homogeneity and teaching homogeneous groups of students has become increasingly more unrealistic. Even students with somewhat similar achievement levels are likely to differ along other important dimensions, including race, ethnicity and culture; socioeconomics; gender; artistic talents; interests; ways of learning; and on and on. If we are to reach the laudable goal of No Child Left Behind, as a profession we will have to begin to think about teaching and learning inside our increasingly diverse classrooms in very different ways. The overly standardized teaching and testing that seems to follow from the legislation is flawed if students like Damien are to move from confusion to understanding en route to gaining "a larger perspective of ideas."

This study of Verda Delp's teaching and her students' learning in her untracked English class shows what is involved in getting students with diverse backgrounds to "latch on" to the curriculum and then to move forward. In Delp's class we study how Damien and his fellow students "latch on" in varied ways and at varied points in time.

## Research on Tracking

The research literature has shown that ability group tracking has many problems-- including negative effects on student achievement and self-esteem, and on educational equity for different social classes and ethnic groups. A study of differences in the curriculum available to students in high and low-tracked classes shows that students in the higher tracks are exposed to "more complex and more difficult thinking and problem-solving tasks" while those in the lower tracks are exposed to "less demanding topics and skills" (Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992, p. 583). Those in higher tracks also engage in more discussion and show greater growth (Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Gamoran & Berends, 1987; Gamoran, Nystrand, Berends, & Lepore, 1995; Nystrand, 1997). Although tracking may or may not be the cause, students in the lowest tracks have "the most negative views of themselves . . . academically and generally and the lowest expectations for their educational futures" (Oakes, 1985, p. 143). Further, students of color and students from homes with low socioeconomic status populate the lower tracks in disproportionate numbers (e.g., Brown, Carter, & Harris, 1978; England, Meier, & Fraga, 1988; Hilliard, 1988; Lucas, 1999; Natriello, 1994; Oakes, 1985; 1995; Oakes, et al., 1992).

Oakes (1985) raises the pressing question: "If tracking is as bad as the evidence seems to indicate, why *do* we continue it?" (p. 15). She argues that tracking, which began in the late 1880s so that the schools could provide vocational training as well as preparation for college entry, has been the ordinary way to do business in U.S. schools for so long that it is difficult for educators and members of the public to imagine other possibilities. Many school-reform efforts have attempted to untrack or to create programs that would lead to untracking (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Comer, 1988; Levin, 1987; Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, &

Lintz, 1996; Sizer, 1984; 1992; Slavin, Kaweit, & Madden, 1989; Weinstein, 2002; Weinstein, Soule, Collins, Cone, Melhorn, & Simontachi, 1991). The untracking related to these efforts, however, has not been accepted on a large scale. Oakes and Guiton (1995) found that advocates of tracking hold firm to beliefs that students' abilities, motivation, and aspirations are fixed attributes and that teachers can best meet students' needs when those with similar attributes are grouped together so that curriculum can be designed to accommodate, not alter, their attributes. It may also be the case that teachers argue for tracking because they do not have adequate strategies for teaching students in heterogeneous classrooms.

Cohen (1997) and Lucas (1999) warn that as long as teachers favor tracking, even if classes are detracked, they will find ways to retrack the students inside the classroom. Cohen explains, "Social systems in heterogeneous classrooms have the potential to recreate a new status order that reflects, at least in part, the old status order of tracking and ability grouping" (p. 7). Lucas concurs: "If de-tracking advocates are successful, what will stop teachers from re-tracking inside their classrooms once students are no longer divided by course assignments?" (p. 146). He concludes that re-tracking is "likely if teachers are not convinced that de-tracking is both logistically manageable and pedagogically sound" (p. 146).

A great deal more is known about what's wrong with tracking than about how to implement alternatives. Thus, for the past several years we have been studying what is involved in teaching very diverse groups of students effectively. In this paper, we report on data from a year-long ethnography in an eighth-grade, untracked English class in a highly diverse urban community; Verda Delp was the teacher of the class. We established the fact

that diverse students achieve in her class at equivalently high levels and have examined the theories and practices that guide her teaching (Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005). Here we review and further probe some of the theories and practices that guide Delp's teaching and her students' learning.

To conduct this project, we offer a collaboration between Sarah Warshauer Freedman, a Professor in Language, Literacy, and Culture in the School of Education at the University of California Berkeley, and Verda Delp, a 30-year veteran teacher and a teacher researcher. We bring together our different experiences and areas of expertise in considering links between theory, research, and practice.

#### Research on How to Teach Untracked Classes

The literature on teaching untracked classes is sparse and provides little guidance for teachers, especially for secondary English teachers. For the most part, the research is general and crosses curricular areas. Still it forms a necessary foundation for particular curricular areas. Weinstein et al. (1991; Weinstein, 2002) show what is involved in getting teachers to raise their expectations for the achievement of traditionally low-achieving students. In Weinstein's project, teachers met with university researchers weekly to discuss the literature on expectancy theory. They then developed techniques to help them raise their expectations. As part of this process, Weinstein and her colleagues suggest that once teachers change their views of their students, they begin to offer more substantive educational opportunities, in particular providing students previously labeled "low track" with an academically demanding curriculum. They found that students in "high expectations" classrooms developed more positive attitudes toward school and achieved more than students in classrooms taught by teachers with low expectations. The main

curricular strategy for the English teachers in Weinstein's project involved using the same materials and activities for the honors track in the new detracked classes and devising ways to support all students to benefit from those materials.

Cohen (1994) and Cohen and Lotan (1997) conducted extensive research on the sociology of the heterogeneous classroom and argue for what they call "complex instruction." Cohen (1997) suggests that curricular strategies of using high-level materials for all students are insufficient. As part of complex instruction, she calls for a "multiple-ability curricula" (p. 11), which she describes as including "curriculum materials that reflect a wider range of human intellectual activity" and which "make it possible for different students to be seen as competent in different classroom activities" (p. 10). Besides changes in curricular materials, Cohen calls for changes in "task structure and evaluation practices." She documented achievement gains by implementing cooperative learning groups where mixed-ability groups work together on tasks and receive group rather than individual grades (see also Cohen, Scarloss, & Arellano, 1999; Slavin, 1983, 1990). Cohen (1994) concludes, "Creating equity in the heterogeneous classroom requires a change in curriculum materials, a change in instructional strategies, and a direct attempt to change differential expectations for competence that lead to status differences" (p. 12). Weinstein also argues for all of these changes.

Subtle contrasts in Weinstein's and Cohen's approaches uncover one of the many tensions teachers face in enacting high expectations for all students: how to offer high-level materials and at the same time engage all students in productive learning activities. Further, while Cohen and Lotan offer sample tasks across different disciplines and age groups that

illustrate what they mean by "complex instruction," neither Weinstein nor Cohen and Lotan had a goal of providing specific guidance for developing an English curriculum.

Rubin (2003) complicates Cohen and Lotan's findings for English and social studies teachers. In her study of students in detracked English and social studies classes that use Cohen's cooperative groups and complex instruction, Rubin found that higher achieving students often undermined cooperative learning groups that were set up to accommodate students at a range of achievement levels. The higher achievers asserted their superiority and systematically silence the others. She concludes that the success of detracking "depends on diverse students' harmonious social interactions. . . and thus may call for a more conscious form of adult intervention in students' social worlds" (p. 568). She further argues for "targeted attention to the needs of individual students . . . explicitly training teachers in detracked classrooms to meet these and other challenges and creating new structures to support students in reaching raised expectation[s]" (p. 568).

The literature on teaching English in untracked classrooms either presents unresolved challenges (Cohen & Lotan, 1997; Rubin, 2003), is not research-based (e.g., King-Shaver & Hunter, 2003; White, 1976), reports on small-scale studies by teachers who provide information about their practice (e.g., Cone, 1993, 1994), is focused on non-U.S. settings (e.g., Freedman, 1994; White, 1976), comes as a relatively minor part of a piece looking at the larger social context, including public policy issues (e.g., Mehan, Villanueva, Hubbard, & Lintz, 1996; Oakes, Wells, & University of California Los Angeles, 1996), or is discussed in a methods text as something for English teachers to consider (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2002). This literature usually does not explicitly examine student learning or provide a great deal of information about how to teach in untracked classrooms.

This project takes up where Rubin's 2003 study left off. Rubin identified problems with even the most progressive methods; she studied what was wrong rather than what worked. Thus, she could only speculate about how to right the wrongs she observed. She now is studying what's involved in teaching successfully in untracked social studies classrooms and this AERA panel looks across curricular areas. We attempt to fill some gaps with respect to teaching English in untracked classes.

### Theoretical Frame

For our studies of teaching English, we rely on theories associated with CHAT (Cultural-historical activity theory) as we consider teaching and learning for diverse groups of students (see Vygotsky, 1978, 1986, and neo-Vygotskian writings on this topic such as those by Cole, Engström, Moll, Wertsch). Many studies of teaching and learning that rely on a Vygotskian or neo-Vygotskian theoretical frame focus on dyadic or small group interactions (see Cazden, 1988, for a review of studies of this sort). Few consider the special issues raised by interactions within the whole-class space when a range of student needs must be met at once. One exception is Moll and Whitmore's (1993) study of a third-grade classroom. They examine how classroom teachers, who have to consider the needs of multiple students at once, manage to teach within Vygotsky's "zone of proximal development," (ZOPED) that space where students cannot complete a task alone but can complete it with the assistance of an expert other. Moll and Whitmore propose "a 'collective' zone of proximal development" which emphasizes the "interdependence of adults and children and how they use social and cultural resources" (p. 20). They characterize the teacher as providing "mediated assistance, indirect help" and the students as giving "directions and control" (p. 40). Cazden (2001) discusses various forms of

“scaffolding” within students’ ZOPEDs, including an example from Hillocks (1995) of curricular scaffolding for the whole class. Given the different dynamics in Delp’s class, with a focus on socio-culturally, historically, and intellectually diverse students at the middle school level, we wanted to probe further the issues her setting was raising for us about Vygotskian theory in general and how the ZOPED in particular functions in a this kind of whole class setting.

We also attempt to integrate the theories of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) with those of Vygotsky. Several Bakhtinian concepts influenced the ways Delp thought about teaching and learning in her classroom. She was particularly taken by the idea that many voices enter into teaching-learning interactions and that those voices help to create each student’s historical, cultural, and academic self. She saw that individuals internalized the voices of others in varied ways and at varied points in time. These concepts guided her thinking about how best to assist students to work within their ZOPEDs.

### The Study

What we report here is part of a larger study looking at both teaching and learning in untracked English classes and at teaching beginning teachers to teach in these settings (Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005). For the larger study two research assistants observed, took field notes, and videotaped Delp’s second-period, eighth-grade class during the first three weeks of school and during three of six literature studies: *The Light in the Forest* across eight weeks in the fall, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* across eleven weeks in the winter, and *A Lesson before Dying* across seven and a half weeks in the spring. In addition, Freedman observed and took field notes once or twice a week during the data collection periods. In all, we collected 111 videotapes representing

26 weeks of class time. We also collected all teaching materials related to the tapes, including books and short stories the students read and handouts Delp distributed.

The research team, including Delp, Freedman, and the two research assistants, met weekly to review the videotaped data and add information about Delp's intentions and her sense of her students' progress to the field notes. Besides the videotapes, audiotapes, and associated materials and notes, Delp wrote daily field notes about her teaching during the research year and audiotaped several one-on-one conferences that occurred outside of class.

To examine further the students' views about their learning, we selected six focal students who showed the range and diversity in the class and interviewed them twice during the research year and once a year later (Shefler, 2002). We collected all writing, art, vocabulary tests, and any other work completed by the focal students during the taping periods and between the main data collection periods whenever possible. We also collected data from a seventh focal student, selected late because he was having difficulty in the class. For this student we did not collect the first interview or the interview a year later. In all, we collected 564 pieces of focal student work. Finally, we collected a beginning and end of year on-demand writing sample from each student as well as standardized test data.

### Data Analysis

The methodological perspective for the study of Delp's teaching and her students' learning is consistent with what Erickson (1986) calls "interpretive research." This perspective assumes that (a) "the nature of classrooms as socially and culturally organized environments for learning, (b) the nature of teaching as one, but only one, aspect of the

reflexive environment, and (c) the nature (and content) of the meaning-perspectives of teacher and learner as intrinsic to the educational process” (p. 120).

Delp participated fully in all analyses of the classroom data. It is important to note that her ability to communicate her intent in an ongoing way and her ability to retrieve from memory relevant events that occurred outside the times we were formally collecting data allowed for a more in-depth analysis than is normally possible. Because, in addition, there were generally at least two observers in the classroom, and because the research team included Freedman and six research assistants over the course of the project, multiple perspectives informed our interpretations of events. Just as team members pushed Delp to consider alternative interpretations, she did the same for them. In the end, although one never can be objective in interpretive research, our conclusions represent a synthesis of a number of research voices. Even though we all brought our biases, we considered many alternatives and looked for disconfirming findings as we analyzed the qualitative data.

To begin our analysis of the classroom data, we indexed the 111 classroom tapes. As part of this process, we inserted counter numbers to indicate segments showing Delp’s decision points and key strategies for teaching untracked classes and those showing evidence of students’ struggles to learn. These portions of the data set were most related to the research questions we posed about what we stood to learn about teaching and learning English in the heterogeneous classroom. We then made decisions about which tapes to transcribe in full. We selected the entire first week when Delp established her expectations for the class, a sequence of approximately one week from each of the three data collection periods, and a selection of individual classes and segments of classes when Delp made key decisions for teaching a heterogeneous group or when important struggles involving focal

students were evident. We also transcribed segments that included in-class, teacher-student conferences with the focal students. In all, during the 26 weeks of observation, 34 of the 111 observed class periods were transcribed in full and 25 were transcribed in part.

We next coded the talk. Based on both the theories that guided our work and the patterns we saw in the transcribed tapes and tape segments, we developed three sets of codes. The coding categories were often overlapping; much of the talk was coded with more than one code. First, some of the coding was nested, in that we coded major activity systems and then the substantive work or meaning-building that took place within them. Similarly, alongside coding the meaning-building, we also coded the ways meaning-building was functioning in the classroom. It is also the case that within the nested systems, more than one category was often visible simultaneously. Although it was possible to code what was happening at each moment in time, it was not possible to develop meaningful codes that were non-overlapping.

Following Cultural Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), we took "action" as our primary unit of analysis. The first set of codes, therefore, was designed to characterize the activity system that organized teaching and learning in Delp's classroom. The activity system consisted of a set of participant structures and a set of activities or actions. The second set of codes was designed to focus on the mental functioning by looking at the meaning-building system. These codes included a set of concepts that we could trace across the year. The third set of codes identified the modes and functions of communication, both within the activity system captured by the first set of codes and within the meaning-building system captured by the second set. Finally as an overlay to all three sets of codes, we noted each time a focal student participated and each time Delp interacted individually with a focal student or with

other individuals. This coding allowed us both to see the teaching from Delp's point of view and to examine teaching-learning interactions with a variety of students.

## Findings

### The Activity System

We coded the following repeated activities in Delp's class: log writing, signing, and sharing; book, map, and log (BML) discussions; map making, signing, and sharing; spelling and vocabulary discussions and tests; discussion and creation of pictorial representations; and essay writing, discussion, and conferences. These activities fell into a predictable rhythm across time and are fully explicated in Freedman, Delp, & Crawford, 2005.

Most of the activities took place within individualized and whole-group participant structures, with teacher interactions with individuals most often embedded in whole group teaching. Teacher interactions with individuals were also unevenly distributed across students, carefully calibrated according to need. Only 5% of the individual talk occurred in the form of formal 1:1 conferences. Delp explained her stance:

I just keep going with who has done the work. And then I do a lot of individual talk with kids. I mean I think that is probably my greatest strength as a teacher is that I can keep everybody going and I can go over and talk to people individually. And this is for the most part how we observed Delp keep as many students as she could "going" during the whole-group activities.

Delp did not use cooperative groups and rarely organized group work although she provided many activity structures in which students were encouraged to choose to

initiate work with others of their choosing and were supported by Delp in their work together.

This activity system promoted equity in several ways. First, the activities were particular to Delp's class which meant that all of her students had to learn to participate in them, regardless of their past academic experiences and their achievement level. For example, all students had to learn what pictorials were and how to keep logs and how to embellish them, and how to create resource maps. These activities were highly structured and routinized. Second, the same structures were repeated for every literature study. Along with a new literature study came another set of logs, another map, another set of vocabulary and spelling words, another pictorial, and another essay. The repetition made it possible for the students across time to focus on content rather than the directions for the activity. Also, those who were having difficulty had an opportunity with each new literature study to begin anew and in a way that would be familiar. As Delp told the class in April when they began their last novel, *A Lesson before Dying*, "We're starting fresh and clean now. This is all good. So everybody's on the beginning log now. Let's get this done so we're all at the same place." As the structures grew familiar, Delp was able to spend less and less time giving directions. Finally, the varied nature of the activity system left space for students to show their many different talents and also offered them challenges, with different students finding different activities more or less useful and more or less challenging. The regular rhythm of whole-class and individual work supported Delp's students as each one learned to participate in her classroom.

### Integrating Community and Curriculum

The activity system provided a foundation on which Delp and her students

built an academic community. The community functioned according to a set of moral values and a community ethos in which diverse views and approaches to learning were both valuable and valued. To teach diverse groups of students so that they have opportunities to choose to work within their ZOPED, the community must feel supportive and safe; working in the ZOPED implies a willingness on the part of individual students to take risks and to struggle to learn. Delp understood that she had to build a community where students could receive and give help to each other in an equitable way (all were sometimes givers and sometimes receivers) and where they could receive help from their teacher. Delp integrated building community and curriculum, in this way creating not just community but academic community.

Across time, the community's moral values and the classroom ethos were addressed during each literature study and helped students understand and make personal connections with the literary themes and characters they studied. Community and curriculum mutually reinforced each another.

The community further was held together with a set of common stories and shared ideas. All students and the teacher were responsible for contributing ideas and taking on the ideas of others. Contributing ideas was something all students could do and something others could value. Further, Delp structured activities so that the ideas of others became useful and were worth collecting.

#### Community Values: Inculcating an Explicit Moral Foundation

Delp began the year by getting her students to agree to live according to a common moral and ethical code. She, too, agreed to abide by the code. Over time, members of the class grappled with how to “respect” and “trust” one another, act

with “integrity,” “dignity,” and “compassion,” examine and “reflect” on the “perspectives” of others, “contemplate” across time, and take “responsibility” for their actions. They also considered what it meant to be “mindful” of others and themselves, show their “vulnerability,” and be willing to engage in the inevitable “struggle” associated with learning and growth. Delp spent time helping her students understand the values connoted by these words and why such values were important to building an equitable intellectual community.

On the first day of class, Delp asked the students to think about how they saw three moral values—dignity, respect, and integrity—functioning in the community they would build. She began by explaining the meaning of these concepts to the whole class. Then she gave a log-writing assignment to get the students to define the concepts for themselves. After asking students to write dictionary definitions for the words, she asked them to connect the concepts to their vision for their classroom community:

I want you to think about what you think makes a good classroom community and how dignity, respect, and integrity can perhaps play into a fine classroom community. And then underneath this write about your ideas about a classroom community with dignity, respect, and integrity . . .So you’re going to think to yourself, “Hmm respect. What does that mean?” You’re going to look at that definition. “Do we need to have respect in our classroom?” Then you’re going to think “dignity: honoring oneself, honoring other people. Do we need to have that in the classroom?” And you’ll write about that.

To reach her range of students, Delp circumscribed the writing task without closing it off. She gave explicit and detailed directions for how to perform the task, and she modeled a thinking process.

Delp also used the moral code to teach about her behavioral expectations. As she explained to her students on the first day of school, “[I] expect everybody to be wonderful and kind to each other and respectful.” Her expectation and assumption was that all students were committed to respectful behavior. At the same time, Delp realized that she played a critical role in reminding students to act respectfully. Indeed in most middle-school classes, and Delp’s was no exception, student behavior must be carefully managed, and Delp told her students that she understood that there would be times when a student might forget to behave respectfully.

Finally, across the year the moral code permeated the literature Delp taught and the vocabulary study associated with the literature. Students explored these moral values through the actions of the characters in the stories they read and through ongoing discussions of these same concepts in relation to characters’ lives and their own lives. For example, when introducing *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* relatively late in the year, Delp explained the importance of “integrity” in the lives of the characters:

He [Gaines] shows you characters who can stand up and keep talking about good ideas, no matter how other people treat them. And I really admire that. That is so hard to do. Where you stand tall, with your integrity. You know, your uprightness? You stand tall, no matter how someone else is treating you. No matter how bad and ugly and rude and hateful that is, you stand tall and proud cause you believe in yourself. That's hard. So Miss Jane Pittman is a character

like that. And there are many characters who are like that in the books that he's written.

### Moral and Literary Stories

Throughout the year Delp told many very brief stories to her students, which they usually referred to across time. These stories often contained a moral lesson or emphasized a concept in the literature. They also became part of the community lore, giving this heterogeneous group of students another common set of experiences, community touchstones with shared ways of talking and thinking about their ideas.

The following example comes from the second day of class when Delp first told the students the story of the tree and the star.

Delp: Okay see the tree and the star up there? Okay now listen to this. Did you know that every time a tree is cut down in the forest, a star falls from heaven? Did you know that?

Student: No.

Delp: You didn't know that? Let me say that to you again. Every time a tree is cut down in the forest, a star falls from heaven. Do you believe that?

Student: No

Delp: No? Hmm. Does anybody in here believe that? You'd be afraid to say it wouldn't you? [laughs] Yeah I know. I know.

Student: I do.

Delp: You do? Thank you so much.

Delp meant for this story to help her students suspend their disbelief and ignite their imagination. She also designed it to help her students begin to think contemplatively and

interpretively about how symbols may be interpreted in literary texts.

Later in the year, to help her students understand the meaning of “mindfulness,” Delp gave an everyday example of the importance of paying attention to the effects of one’s actions on others. She explained that one was mindful if one was aware of others when walking with a backpack. She then retold the story of the tree and the star: “Every time a tree is cut down in the forest, a star falls from heaven.” At this point she meant for the story to become a symbol of mindfulness, of the consequences of one action on another.

Just as such shared stories became a touchstone for the community, Delp also had pictures of trees and stars drawn by students in past years on the walls in the classroom, and she had drawn a picture of a tree and star on the board. The artifacts in the classroom as well as the study of the story connected this class to Delp’s past classes in a continual line, connecting these students to a history of ideas.

#### Valuing Each Students’ Ideas

As she worked to bind her class into an academic community of learners, Delp focused on equalizing academic respect and opportunity for her students. She did this primarily by promoting a culture that at its center valued sharing ideas (Bakhtin, 1981). She believed that all students had good ideas to share and that students could benefit by giving and taking ideas from her and from their classmates. Even if their skills differed, all were on level ground with respect to their ideas. Indeed, a diverse group was valuable because the ideas they came with were diverse as well. Delp told her students the first day she met them:

So we're going to be building a community of, well I call it a classroom

community of learners. That, we're going to be a group of people where we've shared our ideas together. This class will be very different than my first period class and very different than my third period class because of the ideas that we have in here. You will have a distinctive community in here, because of your ideas.

A few weeks later she elaborated on her philosophy of idea sharing and idea generating:

You're taking the ideas that you already have, and you're listening to other ideas, and then you're negotiating your thinking. So you may take on some new thinking. Or you might even feel more strongly about what you already think.

That's good. But it's hard work. And I know that.

In her diverse classroom, Delp expected that all students would have interesting ideas to share and that everyone's ideas would be enriched by an ongoing struggle to incorporate the perspectives of others. To enact her theoretical stance, Delp shaped the activities in ways that required students to share their ideas and to use the ideas of others. We found that the main idea sharing and using occurred during the almost daily sharing and embellishment of logs and the BML discussions when students recorded the ideas of others, including Delp's, on their resource maps and in their logs.

Toward the end of the year, when Delp's students were used to sharing and using one another's ideas, she reminded them of what they gained from sharing and encouraged them to choose to share broadly with their classmates as they read each others' logs:

We have shared a lot of our ideas together. And you are used to writing about your ideas. And . . . I know . . . how good you have become, and better you have become, at sharing your ideas and your writing, showing your ideas, showing

your thinking . . . I want you to read as many people's logs as you can. And I am going to read as many people's logs as I can. And what we are going to do is honor each other's thinking . . . And I would like you to underline and star [the symbols Delp and the students used to indicate their positive responses to what they read] very specific things on the logs as I will be doing.

She connected positive response to gathering ideas from others as she explained that "We're looking for good ideas, good thinking, excellent words. Okay, so you're going to try to find something really good to notice." This emphasis on positive response seemed particularly important in a heterogeneous classroom, where it is all too easy for those with stronger skills to critique surface aspects of their peers' work, and miss what they could learn from others.

When students embellished their logs after reading each other's, Delp encouraged students to consider the ideas of others and perhaps incorporate them in their writing. Besides the embellishing that occurred during the log-sharing activity, Delp explained to her students that she expected them to embellish their logs if they got ideas during BML discussions:

I always figure and expect that kids are looking at their logs all the time. So today in class, for example, if we're talking about an idea that you didn't fully explain in your log, then go back and add it. That's your job. So that these logs end up with all of your thinking, go back and embellish your logs whenever you want to. I'm not worried about crossing out. And I love it when kids draw little arrows and write more in the margin, or draw a little arrow and write embellishment here. This is good. This means you're going back to look at it and you're adding more

thinking.

Members of Delp's class had their own moral code, they had common ways of sharing and appreciating the ideas of others, and they shared a common set of literary and artistic practices. They shared stories such as the one about the tree and the star, they drew stars and underlined phrases of one another's work to indicate their appreciation of another's ideas. In the midst of all this commonality, Delp encouraged the students to be themselves, to take their own routes to learning, to develop their own stories and their own pictures and their own symbols, to appreciate diversity. Besides reading, Delp's class used and valued art and dance and music. The students learned how to participate in the community.

#### Activities Cycle Across Time: A Year-Long Curriculum Allows Students to "Latch On"

Central to creating a safe and caring community where all students can and usually do contribute to its intellectual life was Delp's notion of time. In the previous section we alluded to the fact that Delp encouraged students to contemplate the same ideas across the year. As she explained to her students:

And I wrote up here on the board, one of the many words that we're going to be using over and over and over again in this class is this word contemplation or contemplate. Do you know what that means? It means to think about. So just put it in your mind and just wonder about it, ponder it over and over and over again. Not something that's really quick. Like yes or no kind of answer. But to think deeply about things. We're going to do that in this class over and over and over again.

To support contemplation over time, Delp planned her curriculum as what she

called “a year-long journey” rather than a set of discrete units.

Named long ago, when I first considered the notion of teaching thematically across the year—rather than episodically by units—. . . I think of my teaching and my students’ learning as a year-long journey—a year-long study of literature and writing (Delp, 2005)

Delp’s emphasis on contemplation emerged from her belief that the acquisition of meaning is gradual and that the teacher must trust that all students will challenge themselves and engage seriously with the material. Delp was patient, and through past experience knew that she could expect that students would learn over time. In a talk for the National Council of Teachers of English (2003), Kristin Land, a beginning teacher who had taken a summer course from Delp, spoke eloquently about the importance of this concept for her and her students. She reported that it allowed her to have more faith in her students’ abilities and gave her permission to be patient with the pace of their learning.

A study of the focal students shows that as they participated in the same curriculum, the students “latched on” to it in different ways and at different times. As they did “latch on” Delp challenged them to engage in the struggle involved in moving from where they began to a higher level.

To illustrate how students “latched on” and how Delp supported this process, we compare Jamal and John during the fourth week of school when they were studying *The Light in the Forest*. The activity was “embellishing” logs that they were supposed to have written for homework. In preparation for this activity, Delp had engaged the students in a whole class BML discussion. During the discussion she had directed the students to take

their logs out and add ideas to them. She introduced the discussion by saying, “This is high-level thinking. I’m asking you to think deeply about these ideas. If you didn’t get it right away . . . keep trying. Struggling is good.” Immediately after the BML discussion, she asked the students to use the new ideas they had gathered to embellish their logs. While the students were embellishing, Delp held mini-conferences with a number of them.

We turn to Delp’s conferences with Jamal and John who represent something of the continuum in Delp’s class. Jamal was one of the lowest achieving students; in fact he ultimately did not pass, but he scored in the mid range on standardized tests. He seemed to have trouble settling in to work and was the student who demanded the most attention from Delp. Across the time we taped, we coded 188 discipline-related comments directed at an individual; 51 of these or 27% were directed at Jamal. He also often asked for help. John, was one of the high achievers. He often had his hand up during BML discussions but Delp worried that too often he tried to slide by without engaging in the kind of thinking and study that he was capable of.

We begin with Jamal, as Delp kneels beside his desk, checking on him during this log-embellishing activity:

Delp: So, Jamal, do you have the log from last night?

Jamal: I don't know what it was. It was supposed to be about a sapling.

Delp: Uh huh. Did you do that last night?

Jamal: I wasn't supposed to (uc)

Delp: I can't hear you.

Jamal: No.

Delp: Okay. Well, let's start it right now, OK? Were you listening just now when we talked about the sapling?

Jamal: No, I was writing that down.

Delp: You were writing that down? Do you understand about um the sapling being torn from the ground?

Jamal: Yeah, I think.

Delp: Explain it to me.

Jamal: Um, it's like tearing away (uc) his white heritage in a way.

Delp: So at age 4, explain the picture up there.

Jamal: The roots, he's been a Indian longer than a white person, so he doesn't like white people (uc)

Delp: How long was he with the Indians?

Jamal: Eleven years.

Delp: OK, so you were listening or you've got this from the book from reading it?

Where do you get it?

Jamal: I was listening some.

Delp: Oh, you were listening. Oh, you tricked me there. First you said no, now you say yes.

Jamal: I was listening some.

Delp: Some. That's good. Torn from his home like a sapling from the ground. So that's exactly what this log's about, OK?

Delp: So what you want to do, is you want to explain True Son at age 4, and at age 15, and again right now at the beginning of the story, when he's sent to live

with the whites. OK?

Jamal: He doesn't like it. He hates white people

Delp: That's right. So you're gonna explain all three stages here now, OK?

Concentrate. I know you can do it.

Jamal had not written his homework log even though he had been writing logs for three weeks. This was the first log for this novel, and Delp saw that he needed a push. She did not get upset with him for not doing his homework; rather she immediately began working with him by helping him structure the work he needed to do. She helped him learn to make use of the class discussion and got him to acknowledge that he had been listening. She kept the tone light and did not back him into any corners. Her work with him was constructive, not punitive. During their conference, she wrote notes about the structure they had discussed on a blank sheet of paper, hoping the notes would further help him get started and as well help him remember their discussion.

Jamal took advantage of the conference and wrote his log. He filled the blank paper, using the notes Delp had written (in blue) as a guide (Figure 1).

Figure 1

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Chapter 1

“Torn from his home like sapling from ground.

Age 4 Trueson had white beliefs and was used to living in a big house with a bed and covers with doors and like having his own room not sleep with 10-15 people laying next to him.

Age 15 Now at age fifteen trueson has crused all the white memories and had Indian beliefs. Now catching his food with his rear hands not wearing whole outfits and socks but head bands and little things that look like skirts.

Sent

to white And now trueson has to go back to his white family which he doesn't want to because he hates white Americans and they call them alien

whites because they are invading on their land and they want them to go back where they came from.

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Jamal ultimately was able to “latch on” to this activity, but only after getting additional support from Delp. She recognized that he needed support to “latch on” and then once he began to “latch on” during the conference, she pushed him forward, getting him to challenge himself.

By contrast, John had completed his homework log and was busy embellishing it. When Delp walked past his desk and looked at his work, she gave him a gentle push as well, “Come on, think like crazy on the paper.” For John, the one-liner was sufficient to encourage him to stretch his thinking. In an interview the following year John reviewed the work he had done in Delp’s class. He felt that he improved across the year. The interviewer asked him to be specific about “what got better,” and John replied, “I started actually writing down all of my thoughts . . . instead of just writing down like the bare minimum and keeping the rest in my head.” At this point, as the interviewer asked him “What happened to you that made you change?” John replied,

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Well, basically, it was just Ms. Delp. You know, I’d write something, and she’d say “Embellish it.” . . . She’d come over, and she’d say, “Well, where’s your (uc)?” And I’d say my idea, and she’d say, “Now just put that in writing.” And I’d just write it down. But in the next log I’d do the same thing, and she’d just keep doing that until I actually started writing out all my ideas.

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## Conclusions

This study points to how Vygotsky’s theory of the zone of proximal development (ZOPED) applies to whole-class settings. In many applications of this aspect of

Vygotsky's theory, it is assumed that the teacher must find the students' ZOPED (e.g., Applebee & Langer, 1983; Palincsar & Brown, 1984). Under this assumption, managing instruction within each student's ZOPED becomes complex, if not impossible, in heterogeneous classrooms. We found that Delp operated under a different set of assumptions.

She assumed that the student, not the teacher, initiates work within his or her own "zone of proximal development," which according to Vygotsky is the place where the student can complete an activity only with the assistance of a more expert other. At the very same time, she assumed that the teacher must recognize when the student enters this zone and she must then provide the needed support and guidance for that particular student to take on new challenges. We found that students challenged themselves when: (a) they felt supported and safe within the classroom community, and (b) they had the opportunity to engage in activities that allowed a range of ways for them to "latch on." Such activities generally were multimodal, consisted of multiple activities and ongoing dialogues (Bakhtin), and were repeated in whole or in part across time.

From her point of view, Delp understood that her role was to create activity systems that helped students assume the responsibility of finding their own ZOPEDs. Within the activity system, she could provide needed tools, offering a range of appropriate opportunities to the group. At the same time, she could work with individual students to help them "latch on" within their ZOPED and support them as they challenged themselves and worked through the struggles they encountered.

Moll and Whitmore (1993) describe the classroom they observed as functioning as a "collective" zone of proximal development, and Cazden (2001) describes the

curricular activities. But in Delp's classroom, what was more salient than either the collective zone or the particular curriculum was the dynamic created by a collective socio-cultural and historical space where students' multiple zones were operating at once. As was the case in the classroom that Moll and Whitmore describe, the activities in Delp's class were within the students' control. But Delp's roles were somewhat different from the roles Moll and Whitmore's teacher played. Whereas their teacher was guide and supporter, participant in the learning, and evaluator and facilitator, Delp took on added responsibility. She also actively planned activities in which students at multiple levels could participate at the same time. Since our theory suggests that students decide on their learning zone, the multiple structures and tools Delp offered become essential.

Delp further capitalized on the multiple and diverse voices of the classroom (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986), including those of other students, those of the literary characters in the books they read, and her own voice, to add to the voice each student brought. These voices supported students and helped them challenge themselves and engage in the struggles associated with learning. Her whole-class focus on ideas rather than skills helped make the multiple voices productive and valued. It must be noted that although Delp emphasized thinking and honoring students' ideas, she did not ignore the teaching of skills. Work on skills--including writing in academic genres, thinking interpretively and analytically about literature, grammar, spelling, vocabulary--was thoroughly embedded in the year-long study of literature and writing. This work was a topic of whole class discussions as well as a focus of much of the individual work with students.

We have concluded that if we want an educational system in which increased numbers of students succeed, we will have to stop assuming that we are teaching

homogeneous groups of students in our classrooms. Rather, we will need to assume that our classes are composed of heterogeneous groups of students, regardless of whether the classes are tracked. If we were to work from an assumption of heterogeneity, we would never believe tracking would make teachers' jobs easier. Instead, we would think of the individual student as well as the group so that all students, like Damien, would have the opportunity to gain "a larger perspective of ideas."

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