Exploring Kids’ Talk about Books: An Author Study of Kevin Henkes

by Jennifer Griffith, Second Grade, Van Horne Elementary, Vignette 2 of 3

After several months of exploring literature discussion as a whole group in our classroom I decided to move to small group discussions to provide more opportunities for children to talk with each other. I wondered about the types of talk that I was hearing from my kids in literature circles and whether they were having a ‘true’ literature discussion. Noe and Johnson (1999) found that, “Literature circles provide a way for students to engage in critical thinking and reflection as they read, discuss, and respond to books” (p. ix). My concern was whether my students’ talk was really moving from conversation into dialogue in order to get at this critical thinking. I was worried that their thinking was staying too much on the surface of their thinking as they explored many connections instead of focusing in depth around an issue.

Our small groups were organized around an author study of Kevin Henkes in which each group would read and discuss one of his books. *Chrysanthemum* (1991) is about a little girl who has always loved her name, but discovers that kids can be mean when she starts school. She is often teased until her teacher chooses a name for her baby that is the most beautiful name she’s heard. *Wemberly Worried* (2000) is about a little girl who does nothing but worry about everything, especially when she has to go to school. She makes friends with Jewel, who is also a worrier. The third book in our set was *Lilly’s Purple Plastic Purse* (1996), in which Lilly brings her new purse that plays a ‘jaunty little tune’ to school. When it disrupts class, her teacher, whom she idealizes, confiscates it for the remainder of the day. Upset Lilly draws a mean picture and slips it into his book bag only to find out when she gets her purse back that he has written an apology letter to her. Playing catch, exploring nature and re-creating a Christmas spent apart are just a few of the ways a boy and his grandfather enjoy their summer together in *Grandpa and Bo* (2002). Our last book was *Julius, Baby of the World* (1990), which explores the familiar theme of the arrival of a new baby and sibling rivalry.

I introduced each of these stories through a brief book walk and explained the voting process. Each book was given a number and each student recorded his/her top three choices on a post-it note. I then went through their ballots and created the groups. The next day I announced the literature groups and handed out their chosen book in a plastic bag with a letter to their families, inviting them to read the book with their kids and talk about their favorite parts, marking them with a small post-it. They had two days to read their book and return it to class for discussion day.

On discussion day the kids came to the carpet with their books marked with two places they wanted to talk about. I explained that they would be sitting with a small group and the time was to be spent talking about their book; making connections, sharing why they chose a certain part of the story, asking questions
or exploring wonderings. A colleague, Mrs. Nichols, was in our room to help manage the other groups while I participated in one group. Over time, I rotated to different groups each week. I dismissed each group to a certain area of the classroom and asked them to start discussing. This week I chose to sit with the *Julius, Baby of the World* group in the library area of our classroom. It was important to me that I devote this time to one group and try not to focus on what was taking place in the rest of the room, which is why I asked Mrs. Nichols to be part of this experience.

The group I chose was comprised of five students – Matthew, Evan, James, Sammy, and Reid. I expected Reid, Matthew and Evan E. to guide the discussion since they were my natural talkers in class. All of these kids except James and Sammy have siblings who live at home, which I felt might play a part in their participation since the book focused on sibling rivalry. As we sat there, no one jumped in to get started and so I asked, “So what did you think about this book?” My goal was to sit and listen but interject if they needed to get back on task or needed a prompting question.

Reid began the conversation with an observation. “I thought it was nice when the cousin came over to their house.” Instead of responding to Reid, Evan shared a connection, saying, “I liked the part when Lilly didn’t want to share a room because I had to share a room with my brother and I didn’t want to either. And I made a connection to the part when she was in time-out, I’ve been in time-out.” I eagerly awaited someone else to respond to Evan’s comment with their own connection or a connection to the book but to no avail. Sammy came back with her own reaction, “I liked when Lilly was singing the ABC’s wrong.” Reid replied back, “I liked that part too.” At that moment I wondered whether they were on the right track. I wasn’t sure if I should try and get them to think differently to encourage more deep conversation about the book. Then I remembered that they were second graders and talking about this part in the story seemed to be important to them so I did not interrupt as they continued the conversation about the ABC’s and jumped into responding to each other.

Matthew: I liked the part about singing the ABC’s.
Evan: Yeah I liked that part too, it was funny.
Reid: Yeah she was trying to get him off track.
Sammy: I liked when she said 3, 8, 6, c, f, e, because it was kind of cute.

The conversation then went back to unconnected comments. In the middle of this, Evan stated, “I know why the author wrote it – to be nice to your baby brother or someone else in your family.” I was excited about this comment and waited for a response – but again nothing. Matthew came back with, “I kiss my baby brother on the nose” and that moved the discussion into a lot of “I liked...” statements. I decided to redirect the conversation by saying, “Let’s go back to what Evan said about why the author wrote it. Do you agree or not?”
Matthew: I agree. People should be nice
Evan: I bet the author had a baby brother.
Teacher: Any comments?
Everyone: No.

Then all of a sudden I was in the middle of what I believe to be a true dialogue around a focused idea as the kids talked about what happens to Lilly because of her baby brother.

Evan: I feel bad when baby gets all the attention – that happened to me. I wouldn’t do anything to get their attention though, like Lilly did.
Matthew: My brother feels that way when I give attention to the baby.
Reid: Well Lilly would be my older brother and I guess I would be Julius.
Evan: The baby is getting all the attention.
Matthew: When Ethan was in my mom’s tummy I was afraid that was going to happen and it did, he gets all the attention.
James: When I play with my friends that happens sometimes, they get all the attention.

I found James’s comment profound, since he was a child who did not have siblings at home. He wanted to be a part of this conversation so searched for a way to connect himself to his classmates. I wondered if the students were aware that they had just had a successful exchange about the book.

As a new teacher using literature circles, I was hazy about what these discussions should look like in a primary classroom but, after this encounter, I felt that these kids were on the right track. Not once during the 30-minute discussion did they stray far from the book and at some point they all participated. Their comments, for the most part, did not build off each other, but there were times when they moved from conversation about their many connections to the book into a short dialogue around one topic. I also know that young children struggle with trying to remember their thoughts and need to say what is on their mind before it slips away. With more experience in literature circles and studies of different authors, I knew that there would be a huge change in the depth of their talk as they learned to build from each other and dialogue about focused issues.

The small groups came together as a whole class to chart the books. We included the title, main characters, setting, plot, and solutions and recorded the similarities and differences in Henkes’ books. This chart was then available to students as they continued reading and discussing his other books in our weekly literature circles. My hope was that they would bring connections between his books naturally into their conversations.

Each literature circle is a learning experience and I noticed that while one group of students may be successful at moving into dialogue, another group might struggle with a conversation. I believe that demonstrating talk as a whole class
with a read aloud is the best way to promote and encourage thoughtful talk about literature.

After reflecting on the process, I found that this group of children moved from conversation about a wide range of topics, which included what seemed like many random isolated thoughts, to dialogue about a focused issue, how Lilly felt about the arrival of her baby brother. As a teacher who believes that kids should be having focused talk from the beginning, I realized that they have to begin somewhere and they need to have conversations to share their many connections in order to find a focused issue that they can then dialogue around. Even when it seems that a discussion has gone off track, it doesn’t mean that it has failed (Noe & Johnson, 1999). Kids always seem to bring a discussion back around when you least expect it and that’s what I experienced with this group. How eye-opening for me to understand that the kids were engaged in the same process as adults who have conversations that eventually lead to a dialogue. Literature circles naturally begin with conversations where readers, no matter what their age, share their many connections to a book and, out of that sharing, find an issue that is significant to them and that they then explore through dialogue with each other.

References: