**The Existence of Classroom Discussions**

I sat at my desk with a Reading Street manual in front of me, and my elbows holding up my hands that were rubbing my temples in a circular motion. I lifted my weary eyes and scanned an empty classroom where an hour ago 23 fourth graders had been. I felt pushed to my limits and stressed beyond words as I tried to decipher the code to “making Reading Street better”. What was it that my students really needed and how would I be able to help them get it? Those were the only two questions that were set on repeat in my mind. I needed a starting place but couldn’t seem to figure out where that place was. Then a quote came to me. “You will never know who you are until you know who you aren’t.” This quote was like an answered prayer because it occurred to me that I could apply this idea to my questions. I needed to start by looking at what did not work in the lessons and figure out what would work in order to find the best possible solution to making my lessons meaningful and still follow the curriculum.

After a lot of reflection I found that the students never really got a chance to discuss the materials they were being introduced to. I found that this discussion idea was a crucial factor with the low comprehension skills the students had. I quickly narrowed my thinking to discussions and how to introduce and execute a good classroom discussion. The first thing I had to figure out is what I wanted the classroom discussions to look like. I reminded myself that it is one thing to say something is good but it is another thing to actually do it. Closing my eyes I began to ask myself what a good classroom discussion would look like. As I thought about the question, I pictured my students and how I would have a discussion with them. I hit a quick roadblock because I knew that my students struggled with staying on task and staying focused for a long period of time. I knew that they would also need some sort of procedure that would need to be explained to them when it came to discussions. As I began thinking about a procedure for classroom discussions I realized that it would also be important to explain good listening skills. I knew that listening skills were important so that the discussion could flow and more students could participate in a meaningful discussion.

I started taking notes as I pictured a good classroom discussion. I wrote down the procedures and then began to think about the discussion aspect itself. I saw myself asking a question to students and then having many different voices answer that question in a way that flowed from one student to the next and made connections to each person’s idea. I pictured a lot of relevant talk about a topic and no other stories brought in to the discussion. I pictured a range of voices. I pictured voices from ELL students as well as voices from the high level learners and the low level learners. As I took notes I realized that this was the strongest thing I could incorporate into the reading lessons to really benefit the students in a positive way. Then came the easier task; or so I thought. I needed to apply my idea of classroom discussion into my literacy lessons for reading.

On the first day of my literacy unit I asked the students to join me on the carpet. I figured that the best way to have a discussion would be in a group setting and having the students at their seats took away from the “group” aspect. I also took into account the fact that when the students are being taught at their seats they have a lot more distractions available to them. I also found that when they are at their seats, these distractions cause them to wiggle a lot more in their seats and they stop listening after a few minutes. My hope for fixing this problem was to have the students join me in a group on the floor so that they were close and the distractions at their seats and in their desks would be eliminated. The kids slowly came to carpet and as I watched their responses to “join me on the carpet” I realized that already we were having a problem with following directions. This class struggled with transitions but my goal was to help them get better at it. I coaxed the students to come quickly so we could get started. I then began the lesson asking the students about working as a team and ways they have worked as a team in their lives. I did my best to remember wait time but before I could finish my question I already had hands shooting into the air and blurting from students that were thinking at a high pace. I knew that this was not going to work very well if I wanted this to develop into a classroom discussion so I quickly responded with an expectation. I told the students that I wanted them to close their eyes tight. When I could not see any eyeballs staring at me I asked them to picture a time they worked as a team or what they thought of when they heard team. I told them that when they had an idea from their mental image I wanted them to raise their hand without making a sound. I did this for a few reasons. I felt that by having students close their eyes they were having to listen to the question and think of an answer and it also kept them to focus only on their own thoughts and not what they saw from their classmates or what they heard from the blurting of ideas. I waited until I saw all of the hands in the air before I called on one student to begin sharing their idea.

As the student began to explain their ideas of a team and what it means to work as a team the hands began to frantically wave in the air while they waited for their turn to talk. I began to see that the students were not listening as to the idea but rather focusing on raising their hand and trying to get me to call on them. I then stopped and told the students that I wanted them to put their hands down when another student is talking so that they are listening to what the student is saying. When that student is done talking, I told them they could raise their hand again and wait to be called on. I tried to follow this consistently through the discussion so that I could have other students add to someone else’s idea to get the discussion to flow. By the end of the lesson I found that the students were frustrated when they were not able to be called on and I found that my high level learners were losing focus and getting bored from talking about the same thing for so long and the other students were getting antsy from sitting on the carpet for so long. I had the students stand up and do some stretches to get the juices flowing in their bodies again and then released them to go to their reading seats and begin reading.

After the day was over I went back through the lesson in my head and with my MT. My MT asked me why I had chosen to have the students sit at the carpet and why I had got down on the floor with them. I explained to him that by sitting with the students I was eye level with them so I could look right at them when we were talking. I also mentioned that by sitting on the carpet with them I could model what I wanted the students to do when they were sitting at carpet with me. My MT then asked me what I thought did not go so well in the lesson. I mentioned to him that I felt the discussion did not go very well because too many kids were moving around and it did not seem like they were listening to each other but worried more about getting to speak. He explained that sometimes in lessons that we spend a lot of time on we see it going one way and forget that things can change in a classroom. Sometimes the students are excited and sometimes it is the Monday Molasses where students struggle all day trying to get things together.

As I planned for my next lesson I felt that I needed to evaluate what I could change in the lesson in order to try the classroom discussions again, but this time in a way that drew on what I had pictured the discussions to look like. I felt that the students were not familiar enough with a classroom discussion in order to fully be successful at doing this task. I knew that the idea of a procedure was important but I did not think about explaining the idea explicitly. I decided then that the best thing to do would be to explicitly talk to the students about listening and being a good listener as well as having good discussions. I thought it would also be important to explain the purpose of classroom discussions so that the students could see the meaning behind the madness. I also thought it would be beneficial to have the students whisper their thinking to a partner before we begin the classroom discussion so that each child can talk about what they want to say or share so they can then focus on listening and connecting it to their own thinking rather then worry about when they will get called on to share.

By the end of the unit the students were able to transition quickly and quietly to the carpet in order to have a discussion about the lesson for that day. Students learned to listen politely and in a way that helped them use someone else’s idea to help guide their own idea. What I noticed at the end of the unit is that students were able to really think about what the topic was we were talking about and then explain their thinking using examples and reasoning from their background knowledge or even from a spark that came when someone else mentioned something they could relate to.

In the end I found that I gained a lot of important knowledge from this experience. I learned that classroom discussions help students listen and contribute to ideas that focus around an idea or topic. I found that students first need a new procedure explained to them explicitly and if possible, modeled, before they can be expected to execute a new procedure. I learned that once students are able to know the procedure of classroom discussions they are then able to have a meaningful classroom discussion about a topic and build background knowledge and draw conclusions about that topic. These discussions also helped the ELL students and the lower level learners because they were able to hear many ideas and see that not everyone had the same idea and that sometimes there is not one answer but many answers that can help you learn. I also found that Reading Street is a good guide for what to teach but does a poor job explaining how to teach and by learning about your students and understanding how they learn you can change lessons to fit your students learning. This benefits the students greatly and shows them that they can learn their own way and still be able to have an answer that makes sense.