The wording of the CCSS is often taken to mean that texts have single text-inherent meanings, and that the goal of instruction in close reading is to bring children to a convergent understanding of that meaning. Consider this College and Career Readiness Anchor Standard for Reading: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10). The writers and promoters of the Common Core have elaborated on this idea by claiming that “rigorous text-dependent questions require students to demonstrate that they not only can follow the details of what is explicitly stated but also are able to make valid claims that square with all the evidence in the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 6). This example, taken from a document designed to help publishers align their materials with the CCSS, suggests reading is a passive process where children “follow” text, that texts “explicitly state” something absent a reader who actively and agentively constructs meaning, and where only student claims that the teacher sees as valid are ultimately of value.

“Creating Questions for Close Analytic Reading Exemplars: A Brief Guide,” a widely disseminated document by Student Achievement Partners (2013) suggests that educators develop questions this way: “Determine the key ideas of the text. Create a series of questions structured to bring the reader to an understanding of these.” According to these instructions, the child reader is positioned passively, as someone who needs to be brought to the teacher’s vision of what key textual ideas are. Indeed, a model videotaped lesson on the same website appears designed to do just that. The
Our findings suggest, first, that students did engage in close reading in the context of the public discussion—if close reading is conceived (as we see it) as the examination of textual evidence and ambiguity coupled with the making of textual claims and inferences. Indeed, they diverged in their textual opinions precisely because differing close readings emphasized different aspects of the text. We also found that students’ private positions did not always align with their public ones, making us wonder whether a communal close reading is possible, let alone desirable.

The End of Dialogue: A Communal Close Reading?

While not all text discussions result in a communal close reading, of course, an emphasis on achieving such a shared understanding appears regularly as a desirable end goal in scholarship about classroom discussion. Reznitskaya and Gregory (2013), for example, argue that an important function of dialogic discussion—a form of discussion that explicitly builds on the interplay of multiple student understandings during classroom dialogue (cf. Nystrand, 1997)—includes guiding students toward particular agreed-upon understandings as well as shared ways of thinking:

The emphases in dialogic classrooms on open-ended versus known-information questions and on processes versus products of thinking do not necessarily imply a dichotomy between teaching students how to think versus what to think (Harpaz, 2007). Through engaging in inquiry dialogue, students eventually formulate conclusions that are “most reasonable by account of all available arguments and evidence” (Gregory, 2006, p. 166 as cited in Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013, p. 117). These conclusions represent the products of dialogic teaching. During inquiry dialogue, student misconceptions, gaps in knowledge, and flaws in reasoning become visible to the group and are “put to the test of public accountability” (Reznitskaya & Gregory, 2013, p. 117)

Of course, disagreement is often seen as a useful ingredient for productive discussion, provided it is used as a means to move toward a shared understanding at the end (e.g., Wood, 1999). For example, Michaels, O’Connor, and Resnick (2008) provide...
In changing his expressed opinion, Ramón allowed the class to go forward with a planned activity—measuring and comparing children’s heights—for which Ms. Martínez felt a shared agreement was required. Michaels and colleagues (2008) describe this as accountability to standards of reasoning, in which students support their arguments with evidence, along with accountability to community, in which “participants listen to others and build their contributions in response to those of others” (p. 286). Yet we believe an additional question should be asked of this exchange: Did Ramón really change his mind about accurate measurement, did he primarily change what he said he thought, or did his thinking fall somewhere in between? To explore Ramón’s participation further, we turn to a Russian philosopher of language, Mikhail Bakhtin, to set the stage.

What Is Internally Persuasive Discourse?

Bakhtin (1981/2001) suggests that language is never neutral. Certain voices speak with more power and authority, and the meanings conveyed by those voices are often accepted and even repeated by others (ventriloquated). But, because authority is fused to those meanings, the voices represent what Bakhtin calls authoritative discourse—a kind of talk that typically propels others to adopt and ventriloquiate the meanings, whether or not it is convincing. For example, teacher talk is often authoritative.
discourse: if a teacher validates a student answer as correct, students will often accept that as the correct answer, and may even provide that answer the next time around; however, they may not have a deeply thought-out reason for doing so. In the above example, if Alexandra and the other peers in Ramón’s classroom were seen as smarter or more likely to be privy to the teacher’s preferred answer, Ramón might have adopted their position because they were seen as authoritative meaning makers, not because their arguments made sense to him.

By contrast, what Bakhtin (1981/2001) calls internally persuasive discourse is dialogue, with others and/or with ourselves, in which we explore what we believe to be true. If Ramón mentally wrestled with the words of Alexandra and his other peers in ways that changed what he truly believed, he could have arrived at new intentions and beliefs about measurement and the significance of the height of the sole of a shoe; in such a situation, the discourse would have been internally persuasive to him because he actively engaged in testing and evaluating his perception of the truth of that idea (cf. Matusov & von Duyke, 2009). Ramón did not have an opportunity during the dialogue to really explain how and why he was thinking about the matter differently, and he was not subsequently interviewed about his position. Thus, it is not possible to identify whether the dialogue was internally persuasive or not.

It matters whether Ramón was ventriloquiating authoritative discourse or engaged in internally persuasive discourse because only in the latter condition, we believe, was he likely to be mastering new mathematical concepts and ways of thinking. We also believe that if an important goal of literacy instruction is close reading, as advocated by the CCSS, then it is equally critical that students have opportunities to engage in internally persuasive discourse during text discussion. Reading closely, we argue, should mean pondering what a text offers in order to determine what the reader believes to be its meaning, always in light of one’s own experiences and reasons for reading. It should involve becoming internally persuaded of one textual meaning rather than another, not simply replicating authoritative discourse about the text’s meaning. If so, then we wonder if it is even possible for close reading to assume the form of the oft-idealized communal understanding, which would require every child in the same class to be internally persuaded of exactly the same thing.

Classroom text discussions are public spaces where, ideally, students can explore, develop, and reconsider ideas about textual meaning as they develop their own close readings of a text. And yet, when students discuss ideas publicly, we may see only fragmentary glimpses of what each child finds internally persuasive. In our study, we compare children’s public and private speech about a text’s meaning in order to better understand how children do—and do not—adopt as internally persuasive the ideas voiced by their peers.

Analyzing the Classroom Discussion Context

The data discussed here come from a larger year-long naturalistic study examining reading comprehension discussions in a bilingual second-grade classroom in a high-poverty urban school district. One of the authors visited the classroom at least once per week for the entire school year; we audio- and video-recorded literacy instruction and took field notes. The 20 students in the class were all of Latino descent (mostly with Mexican or Mexican American backgrounds). The teacher, Max, was of Puerto Rican descent with 27 years of teaching experience. (Max asked us to use his real first name. All other names are pseudonyms.)

Max used text selections (in Spanish) from the district-mandated Foro Abierto [Open Court] curriculum (Abarca & Domínguez, 2003), but he did not necessarily adhere to the curriculum as written. At least once per week, and often more than once, Max and his students engaged in large- and small-group discussions around a text. These discussions, which took place in Spanish, focused primarily on students’ questions and ideas about this
In this discussion, students addressed four topics, each of which involved disagreement among the students.

Text and manifested typical discourse patterns for dialogically organized discussion. For example, the teacher seldom evaluated student responses as correct or incorrect, and he frequently asked students to elaborate on their thinking (Nystrand, 1997). Disagreements were common, and the teacher almost never pressed for a communal close reading.

The current study examined a 25-minute discussion that occurred late in the school year and centered on the text, *Un Libro Ilustrado Sobre Martin Luther King, Hijo* (A translated version of *A Picture Book of Martin Luther King, Jr.*; Adler, 1992). During an initial discussion of this same text that had taken place a few days before, several students had disagreed on whether James Earl Ray, King’s assassin, was White or Black; Max asked the students to revisit this topic during the discussion analyzed here. (Due to space limitations, transcript and text excerpts have been translated into English.) The text mentioned Ray, but did not address Ray’s race directly; rather, the text simply described his actions:

On the 4th of April, in Memphis, Dr. King was outside his hotel room. A man named James Earl Ray was hidden near there. He pointed a rifle at Dr. King and fired it. One hour later, Dr. King was dead. (p. 193)

No further information mentioning James Earl Ray was stated in the text.

Data Sources and Analysis

In addition to video-/audio-recording the discussion itself, we asked students to draw and write about Martin Luther King (MLK) and James Earl Ray in response to several questions. These written responses, produced a few days after the discussion, were also used as a starting point for individual interviews: We asked students to tell us about their response sheets and about the classroom discussion. The interviews were conducted in Spanish by one of us (both European American women proficient in Spanish).

We began by identifying each topic addressed by the students during the discussion of the Martin Luther King, Jr., text. In this discussion, students addressed four topics, each of which involved disagreement among the students. Here, we explore one of these topics: the disagreement that unfolded about whether MLK’s assassin, James Earl Ray, was White or Black. Because we had explicitly asked students to write about this question in their written responses, we were able to compare what was said in discussion (the student’s public position) to what was written (the student’s private position). We then coded for four kinds of textual moves that we believe play important roles during close reading:

- **Offering textual claims.** Any student assertion about the text’s meaning, including those that disputed a peer interpretation.
- **Noting textual ambiguity.** A student assertion that the text could be interpreted in several ways.
- **Citing textual evidence.** An explicit reference to the words or the pictures in the text. These could be specific (e.g., quoting from the text) or general (e.g., claiming that the text says something).
- **Making inferences.** Speculation about what is happening in the “gaps” in the text, i.e., where information can be deduced but is not explicitly stated (cf. Sipe & Brightman, 2009).

For each of the 14 students who consented and who were present for the conversation, we then noted students’ public positions on the topic—those they voiced during class discussions—in relation to their written (private) positions. In the interview transcripts, we examined the ways each student described the discussion itself as well as how they described their views of the topic to the interviewer. Students’ responses were coded first by their stated position on the central question discussed (i.e., Ray was White; Ray was Black; or We can’t be sure), and, second, according to which if any of the above moves were being undertaken. The six students who exhibited differences between public and private positions were selected for in-depth discussion here.
Public Positions

The question of James Earl Ray’s race did not come up until the final three-and-a-half minutes of the discussion, when the teacher alluded to several positions taken by students during a discussion earlier that week: “On Wednesday, some were saying that . . . James Earl Ray was Black, and others were saying that he was White.” This statement referenced a disagreement about the text in which several students, including Valentín, had argued that Ray was Black, while a group of their peers took the counter position. When the teacher reminded students of that disagreement, he unleashed a flurry of student responses based on the students’ readings of the text. (Parentheses indicate overlapping talk. Equal signs indicate continuous talk without a break between speakers.)

Dalia: He was White. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Others chorus: (White.) [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Javier: (White.) He was White. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Marisol: No, because= [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Dalia: Hey, Valentín, you’re saying a Black person killed Martin Luther King.
Javier: Uh-(huh: I know). [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Valentin: (Now, I) agree with this [gesturing toward the group]. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Mr. Max: And why? Tell me. Why did you change?
Diego: Maybe.
Mr. Max: Why did you change?
Rafael: We don’t know because (it doesn’t say.) [TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY]
Javier: (Uh-huh. We don’t) know because it doesn’t say in the story. We don’t know . . . [TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY]
(Nonparticipating student utterance.)
Emilia: We don’t know if he is White or (Black.) [TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY]

Javier: (Yes, but we) don’t know if he is a White or he is a Black because it doesn’t say there. [TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY]
(The class erupted into overlapping, inaudible talk.)

In this excerpt, three positions on James Earl Ray’s possible race were put forward. Dalia was the first to offer the textual claim that James Earl Ray was White. She was backed up in this position by many classmates, including initially Javier and, notably, Valentín, for whom this position represented a shift from his position stated two days earlier. Valentín did not provide a reason for his shift in perspective, despite the teacher’s request for him to do so. Mari-sol put forward the counterclaim that James Earl Ray was not White. No other students publicly aligned themselves with her. The third position was put forward by Rafael, who claimed that the text itself was ambiguous on this point. This may have been what Diego was starting to say when he said, “Maybe,” as it is a theme that Diego picked up again as the conversation continued (see below). Rafael was verbally joined by Emilia and by Javier, who appeared to publicly moderate his initial belief that James Earl Ray had to be White, saying, “We don’t know.”

At this point, the teacher broke in to give Felipe the floor. Felipe’s response suggested that he was also reading closely, but by inferencing rather than by concentrating on what the text did or did not explicitly say. He argued that James Earl Ray could not have been Black:

Felipe: No, because, because how can a Black person kill uh, uh . . . [INFERENCE]
Javier: Martin Luther King.
Felipe: Martin Luther King because the Blacks liked this (rule, and the Whites didn’t because [inaudible] . . . [INFERENCE]
Marisol: (I know, but not all the Whites didn’t.) [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Javier: (For some . . .) [Max puts his hand out signaling Javier to stop talking.]
Felipe: Uh-huh.
Marisol: Not all the Whites didn’t . . . [inaudible] [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
reported that they thought he was Black. As Table 1 indicates, there were a number of differences between the publicly stated positions and the private ones.

When we asked students to elaborate on their drawings during interviews, we learned more about these positions. Here, we describe the positions of the six students who had a publicly stated position that changed in a substantial way when they stated their position privately, beginning with two students whose positions reversed.

**Private Positions**

The following week, we asked each student in the class to privately fill out a form on which they drew a picture of James Earl Ray and stated whether they thought he was Black or White. Each of the fourteen students who had been present for the discussion answered the question. Eleven students reported that they thought that Ray was White, and three students reported that they thought he was Black. As Table 1 indicates, there were a number of differences between the publicly stated positions and the private ones.

When we asked students to elaborate on their drawings during interviews, we learned more about these positions. Here, we describe the positions of the six students who had a publicly stated position that changed in a substantial way when they stated their position privately, beginning with two students whose positions reversed.

**Marisol**

Marisol was the only student who had publicly, and vehemently, maintained that James Earl Ray was Black. When asked to describe what she had written under her picture, however, she reported a different version of the discussion:

**Interviewer:** And here below you wrote that James Earl Ray was . . .

**Marisol:** White. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]
Diego had taken the public position that the text did not say whether Ray was Black or White (“So we don’t know if he was a Black or a White person”), yet his private position was that Ray was White. He described fluctuating in that position:

Diego: I thought that he was a White man because the Whites were following him, but then I changed my idea to a Black, and then I changed my idea again. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]

Interviewer: You changed your idea?

Diego: Yes.

Interviewer: So at the beginning when you read it the first time, what did you think? That he was White?

Diego: White. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]

Interviewer: And after?

Diego: And after Black, and then White again. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]

Interviewer: And why did you change your idea? What made you change your idea?

Diego: Because in one part, the book it said that some Whites also followed Dr. King, but many Blacks followed him. [TEXTUAL EVIDENCE]

Diego talked about changing his position several times during the discussion, and cited as a reason for his final position an idea that had been explicitly discussed in class and that, for Diego, was linked to direct textual evidence—that while some Whites were followers of King, many Blacks were. At the same time, and even while saying that his position evolved “because I read the whole story,” Diego maintained that the text did not state the race of Ray:

Interviewer: And does the text say that or doesn’t it say that?

Diego: No, it doesn’t say. [TEXTUAL AMBIGUITY]

Thus, the shift from Diego’s publicly stated position to his private position was more subtle than it might have initially appeared. Diego believed...
that he was right in thinking Ray was White, and that this information was based on what he read in the story, but he still believed that the text did not explicitly say. In other words, he appeared cognizant of the fact that he was making an inference.

**Emilia**

Emilia gave a different response on her response sheet than she had in the public discussion, where, like Diego, she maintained, “We don’t know if he is White or Black.” In her subsequent interview, she stated that he was White. When asked if her peers agreed with her, she conceded that some students did not:

**Emilia**: Some don’t.

**Interviewer**: Some don’t? And do you have an idea . . . who doesn’t? Who didn’t agree with that?

**Emilia**: Uh, some . . . this . . . Diego, because he says we don’t know.

Perhaps surprisingly, she described the position of Diego—a position that she herself had verbalized during the discussion—as a position in disagreement with her own.

**Javier**

Javier’s position fluctuated over time. He first agreed that Ray was White (“White. He was White.”). A few lines later, however, he agreed with Rafael, Emilia, and Diego that Ray’s race was unclear in the text (“Uh-huh, we don’t know because it doesn’t say in the story.”). Finally, in private, he appeared convinced that Ray was White:

**Interviewer**: You wrote that he was a White man. Yes? Why do you think he was a White man?

**Javier**: Because the Blacks liked that law.

**Interviewer**: The Blacks liked what law?

**Javier**: The law that Martin Luther King made. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]

**Interviewer**: Ah! And the Whites?

**Javier**: No. [TEXTUAL CLAIM]

Javier did not describe any ambivalence in his own position. When asked about the possible reasons that students might have had a different opinion, he said that they were not relying on textual evidence:

**Interviewer**: Did they have a reason why, why they believed that? (Javier shakes head.) No?

**Javier**: They were just guessing.

Thus, in the discussion, Javier was willing to publicly state that the text was unclear, yet this lack of evidence in the text did not change his own sense of certainty that James Earl Ray had to be White. He saw his peers who were unsure as simply guessing.

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**NOW ACT!**

How can teachers honor the full range of students’ textual positions in their classrooms?

- When a student makes a textual claim, be aware that it may not fully reflect what the student is thinking, and remember that sometimes students’ ideas will still change after the discussion is over.
- Reconsider using thumbs up/thumbs down or questions such as “Do we all agree?” to gauge students’ textual thinking, and do not assume that choral responses signal that everyone shares the same idea. A “turn and talk” or a “think/pair/share” may be a richer alternative for widening student participation in the dialogue.
- Pose uptake questions that allow students to flesh out their thinking: “Tell me more about that.”
- Rather than asking students if they agree with a peer’s position, invite them to reflect on it: “Laura just told us she thinks that the boy’s sisters were being unfair. Maria, how do you feel about what the sisters did?”
- Have multiple students reflect on evidence presented by a peer. “Would you all reread that passage Brianna just mentioned to yourselves? When you read that, how does it make you think about our larger question?”

*Language Arts*, Volume 93, Number 4, March 2016
Rafael

Rafael had also taken the public position that the text did not say whether Ray was Black or White. However, when asked privately, Rafael made the claim that Ray was “a White.” Pressed about his reasons, he gave this intriguing reply:

Interviewer: How do you know that, that he was White?

Rafael: I don’t know. But everyone says that he was White.

Despite the fact that there was no one singular close reading in the class discussion, Rafael remembered the class position as a unified one and aligned himself with it privately even though he had not done so publicly. Yet, he did not feel able to articulate reasons for that stance, making it unclear whether he was internally persuaded or just inclined to accept what he perceived as the majority view—what he perhaps identified as authoritative discourse.

Discussion

As seen in the excerpts above, these students were deeply engaged in multiple forms of close reading within the context of dialogic text discussion; students were examining textual evidence, making textual claims, and drawing inferences based on the text and their peers’ responses. Their close reading did not depend on the teacher pushing for a communal close reading. In fact, it was arguably the differences between students’ close readings—their relative emphasis on different aspects of close reading, particularly inferencing versus noting textual ambiguity—that drove the conversation and accounted for some of its richness. The issues the students examined (i.e., “What race is James Earl Ray? Does the text tell us?”) were up for discussion in a way that might not have seemed open to multiple interpretations had they been posed by a teacher as text-dependent questions with sought-for right answers. Yet, in a context where the disagreement did not need to be settled for or by the children, the issues raised—which came from the students themselves—afforded the opportunity for the students to think carefully about the text (cf. Aukerman, 2012).

But while our study indicated that the students were hearing and engaging in close reading, driven by the divergence of their interpretations, our study also indicated that the interpretations children reached were not necessarily straightforward in some cases. The diversity of children’s interpretations calls into question whether communal close readings are possible and, if so, desirable. Of the

It was arguably the differences between students’ close readings . . . that drove the conversation and accounted for some of the richness.

Some students may not wish to publicly acknowledge changing their minds: Avoid putting students on the spot to do so.

When possible, leave students with multiple positions to continue considering at the end of a discussion. Strive to recap student positions in ways that illuminate subtle differences between positions that may appear similar. “Marco thinks a meteor might have wiped out the dinosaurs on account of the dust. Jessica thinks that meteor might have wiped them out because it destroyed their habitat.”

In situations where you are uncomfortable with students having multiple interpretations (e.g., of a factual matter you believe is critical), consider telling the students what you want them to know rather than pushing for textual consensus: “Actually, the Civil War did not happen at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement.” Limiting how often you make such moves can allow students more opportunities to wrestle with the text themselves.

Language Arts, Volume 93, Number 4, March 2016
14 students, 6 of them presented a different version of their position than the last publicly stated position they had put forward. There is no way to analytically determine whether students’ articulated positions represented their interpretations as they truly saw them during the discussion itself. It may be that some students evolved their positions during the course of the discussion as they listened to things their peers said and engaged with the text, but they may not have had the opportunity or desire to share their new position with the group after changing their minds. Alternatively, students whose positions were different in the private sphere may have been fully presenting what they were thinking at the time of the discussion, but then they continued to think about these ideas, ultimately developing a different point of view after the discussion ended. Finally, it is possible that the public positions they articulated may not actually have represented how they were thinking about the matter even at the time. For example, the desire to affiliate with other students, to be on the side that appeared to have more support, or to publicly save face after initially putting forward a position may have played a role in the decision to present a position publicly that was different from what the student was actually thinking.

While we cannot be fully certain that opinions shared with us privately were their ultimate readings of the text, our findings do suggest that the complexities and evolving nature of students’ textual beliefs do not always fully emerge during classroom dialogue. Teachers, then, should respect the possibility of private positions, of shifting positions, and of ambivalence. Honoring these kinds of perspectives is necessarily incompatible with pushing for communal close readings, raising the aforementioned question of whether communal close reading is possible and, if so, desirable during text discussion. We discuss each of these in turn.

**Is a Communal Close Reading Possible?**

If the classroom goal is for all students to verbally articulate the same position, it is certainly possible to accomplish this. Many classrooms ask students to indicate with thumbs up/thumbs down whether they agree with an idea, and it is doubtless possible to reach the point in a discussion where all thumbs are pointing the same way. But our study indicates that some students who hold a minority view will not necessarily speak up to own that position (Alfredo and Rosita both took the private position that James Earl Ray was Black, even though they did not support that position publicly.) Moreover, even in cases where students stated the “same” position, this stated position did not mean the same thing to each of them. Valentín made a public gesture of being convinced that Ray was White, but did not provide any evidence explaining that shift (despite two requests from the teacher). His private position indicated that he had either remained with or returned to the conviction that James Earl Ray was Black. Meanwhile, Rafael told us he believed that Ray was White, but he appeared to accept that position because everyone else was saying so rather than because the evidence had swayed him to that perspective. For both Valentín (publicly) and Rafael (privately), saying that Ray was White did not appear to mean that the text had convinced them. And even for students who appeared to be internally persuaded that Ray was White, this textual claim was not necessarily grounded in exactly the same ways. Thus, even on a matter as seemingly straightforward as the race of James Earl Ray, what appears to be agreement can mask considerable nuance of opinion.

Certainly it is possible to argue that the available text in this case did not offer sufficient clarity on the point of discussion to lend itself to a communal close reading. Perhaps if the text had explicitly stated that James Earl Ray was White, students would have reached a cleaner consensus on the matter. While we acknowledge this possibility, texts do not always offer that kind of neatness, nor should they. Classrooms that focus on discussion, reasoning, and inference with challenging texts—precisely
the kinds of texts called for by the CCSS—are likely to encounter ample situations where textual evidence is less than straightforward to all readers in the class, and where readers will need to make inferences. Indeed, we suspect that the range and variation of the inferences generated around textual ideas may be even more pronounced when discussing inherently complex, multifaceted matters such as the reasons for a character’s decision or the process of photosynthesis.

Our data suggest that, rather than the “unforced force of the better argument” (Habermas, 1996, p. 350) moving the group to a communal close reading, genuine unanimity after a textual disagreement may prove elusive, at least when the text does not provide explicitly stated information supporting one position or another. We worry that teachers who emphasize agreement may be less likely to recognize and explore the nuanced differences among student positions that may exist under the surface of an apparently communal close reading. We wonder too if, in situations in which the teacher wishes for a single, predetermined perspective to prevail, it may be more intellectually honest for this perspective to be presented by the teacher; in the case of this text, the teacher might simply state, “While the text doesn’t explicitly say, James Earl Ray was actually White.” This may be preferable to insisting that students identify with a communal close reading that may not represent the close reading of each student. Of course, simply having the teacher present such information is also no guarantee that students will accept the conclusion for themselves.

Is Communal Close Reading a Desirable Goal during Text Discussion?

There are doubtless times during instruction where it is important to present particular information as settled and agreed-upon, whether or not the surrounding discourse has been internally persuasive to all students. We are less sure, given our findings here, that text discussion should be geared toward reaching communal close reading (cf. Sherry, 2014). We believe that, when teachers strive for a communal close reading, both students and teacher may be less likely to treat reading as a process where internal persuasion really matters, and therefore less likely to attend to the ways in which even similar perspectives might challenge, extend, and enrich one another. We also wonder whether teachers and students might have something to learn from

FOR INQUISITIVE MINDS

Aukerman, M. (2008). In praise of wiggle room: Locating comprehension in unlikely places. Language Arts, 86(1), 52–60. This article provides a framework for thinking about reading comprehension that de-emphasizes “right” answers and single interpretations.


Fecho, B., & Botzakis, S. (2007). Feasts of becoming: Imagining a literacy classroom based on dialogic beliefs. Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy, 50(7), 548–558. doi: 10.1598/jaal.50.7.4 This article provides suggestions for how to set up a classroom based on Bakhtinian dialogic principles.


Lewis, C. (1997). The social drama of literature discussions in a fifth/sixth-grade classroom. Research in the Teaching of English, 31(2), 163–204. This article unpacks the complex social dynamics of classroom text discussion.
acknowledging and publicly examining potential social purposes that might shape the positions publicly and privately held by discussion participants—purposes that are likely to extend well beyond what is “in” the text.

We believe that our study provides further evidence that, as Grossman and colleagues argue, “by its very nature, community presses for consensus and suppresses dissent,” (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2001, p. 992). Even in this classroom, where a communal close reading was not prized by the teacher and where students often disagreed with each other right up to the end of a discussion, students took on positions publicly that did not necessarily match their privately stated beliefs, or they opted for the majority view without being internally persuaded of it. Mandating communal close readings could short-circuit opportunities for students to engage in discourse that is internally persuasive: that would be a loss not only for students themselves, but also for their peers who could benefit from engaging with multiple interpretations of complex text. For this reason, we argue that the emphasis on close reading in the Common Core needs to be fundamentally reconceptualized in ways that make a multiplicity of interpretations central to the work children are asked to do—during text discussion specifically and reading more generally. We believe that, if educators truly wish to work toward the goal of close reading—conceptualized as internal persuasion of textual meaning—during text discussion, then they should seek to honor the multiple close readings that students offer without pushing for ultimate agreement.

But is such a conceptualization of close reading in alignment with the CCSS? We return, finally, to the Standard we mentioned in the opening of this article: “Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it” (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10). When we read this Standard with a close reading lens that we acknowledge is also a critical and somewhat mischievous lens, we read its imperative to students in this way: “Have a dialogue with the text. Read closely to determine what the text says to you, and talk back. Make inferences from it that are logical to you, and consider them in light of what others believe.” Is this reading what the writers of the Common Core intended? Perhaps not. But, as close readings go, we argue it is both a possible and a promising one.

References


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