Having just assigned the day’s reading, I anxiously watched as the students in my eighth-grade language arts class at Pioneer Middle School (all names of places and people are pseudonyms) settled in and started their work.

The previous week, we had started reading *Bronx Masquerade* by Nikki Grimes (2002) in conjunction with our new critical inquiry unit, “How does school (dis)empower students?” *Bronx Masquerade* is the story of a high school English teacher in the Bronx who introduces “Open Mike Fridays” as a way for his students to express themselves through original poetry. As we began the unit, I reminded my class that grouping would be student-constructed, and they could group themselves as they wished provided they could demonstrate learning. I circulated around the room and saw students pairing up, Henry reading alone, groups of three or four all getting into formation. Then I paused and saw what appeared to be a group of three and a group of four coming together to make a group of seven.

Interested, I approached them, remembering the guidelines for grouping students that I was taught as a preservice teacher: do not group students in rigidly tracked ability groups (Oakes, 1985); group students heterogeneously prior to the class activity (Lyman, Foyle, & Azwell, 1993); keep student groups to a maximum of four members (Weinstein & Mignano, 1997). In addition, I was reminded of how our recently restructured school had made an aggressive push to implement Kagan Cooperative Learning strategies (Kagan & Kagan, 1994) that called for students to be placed in groups of four, with each group comprised of a “high” student, a “medium high” student, a “medium low,” student, and a “low” student. Despite the fact that these seven students were exhibiting much of what I had been told was not “best practice,” I was curious to see what had motivated the formation of this large group of seven and how they were making sense of their work.

What I came to learn and will argue in the article is that even though this group of seven did not reflect how I had been taught to group students or represent the ways in which my school leadership was expecting me to group them, this group intellectually and socially engaged in learning while on their way to creating their own “community of practice” (Wenger, 1998). The purpose of this article, then, is to challenge and rethink notions of “best practice” grouping in a middle school language arts classroom. The students’ voices and my own, as their classroom teacher, are set against the backdrop of an urban Title I middle school that was recently restructured after failing to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) for five consecutive years, in accordance with No Child Left Behind (NCLB) policy. While much professional conversation around grouping students would suggest that my group of seven was 

**While much professional conversation around grouping students would suggest that my group of seven was too big to succeed, my contention is that they were too big to fail.**

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big to succeed, my contention is that they were *too big to fail*.

**Group of Seven**¹

Flexible, student-constructed grouping was the norm in our class. Students were free to work in various ways with their classmates. For example, some students took turns reading and/or collectively worked through projects, while others worked independently of each other and consulted their peers when needed. Students often worked with the classmates already sitting in their immediate vicinity. However, some students eventually began to read alone or to move around and form different groups as they worked to meet their individual needs.

The largest group formed in the class started as a group of four that eventually added two students from an adjacent group whose third member was often absent, and another student who drifted away from his original group under amicable circumstances. Together, this group of seven students became a regular site for the development of a community of practice. An illustrative example of this occurred during two class periods early in the reading of *Bronx Masquerade*.

**Day 1**

I circle around the room, stopping by each group to listen to their reading, watch their collective work, and help if needed. Seeing that the groups are working constructively and that there are no more immediate student needs to be addressed, I come back around to the group of seven for a longer observation. Students are discussing the literary devices in the section. Jordan reads a section from a character’s poem and suggests that the line is an example of alliteration and assonance.

*Jordan (after a pause): I mean repetition, I’m sorry.*

*Vasha: It’s not assonance?*

I review how repetition, assonance, and alliteration are different from each other. Then I read a line from the poem and ask, “How about ‘even cereal boxes boasting champions’? What’s he mean by that?”

*Vasha: What’s that even mean?  
Jordan: Isn’t that personification?  
Discussion continues regarding literary devices and how the student in the book later used the word “flake,” and its many meanings. Jordan, Hannah, Vasha, and Renée vocally participate in the discussion, while Luke and Brandon listen to the conversation, follow along in their books, and take notes.*

*Vasha: So what’s disempowering? I know what’s empowering.  
Jordan: Bullying!*

Jordan goes on to explain his thinking, and group members add to their notes while Hannah and Vasha contribute their interpretations of the topic of bullying within the context of the book.

*Hannah: You can’t judge a book by its cover.  
Jordan: Thank you.  
Hannah: Well, sometimes you can.  
Renée: I don’t read books with dumb covers.*

Jordan asks Renée about this, and while the two of them start their own side conversation, Hannah continues to tell the group about how she would likely be judged if she were a new student.

While Luke and Brandon add to their notes, Jordan and Vasha begin to quietly discuss bullying at school while Hannah talks to Renée about her coming off as shy in certain situations. Eventually the two conversations come together and focus on where they went to elementary school. After about a minute listening to this side conversation and seeing that the students not engaged in the conversation are done writing, I interject, asking, “So he was disempowered by the bullying? How’s he being empowered?”

*Vasha, Renée, Hannah, and Jordan all speak up at once to collectively explain that the character “Devon” likes “Tanisha.” Vasha opens the book, attempting to reference something specific Devon said to support their claim. She notes that Devon didn’t want to express his feelings toward*
Tanisha because he didn’t want to be like all the other guys, to which Renée replies, “I hate guys like that.”

I push the group to look at the end of Devon’s narrative in order to identify what Devon did and how it relates to empowerment. Vasha, frustrated, says, “Y’all gotta help me.” Members of the group find the part in the book, and Hannah and Jordan take on the persona of Devon in order to explain how he was empowered.

Jordan, alluding to Devon's reading a book on the team bus despite being bullied for it, proudly says, “I’m reading!” Jordan then tells the group, “I hate reading,” to which Renée responds, “I’ll read if there’s nothing else I have to do.”

Hannah, responding as Devon would, says, “I’m going to make sure everybody sees it!”

I ask the group why Devon wants to flaunt his reading of the book, and both Vasha and Jordan say they don’t know. I go on to ask what the character “Mike” wants Devon to feel. Hannah answers, “Like a nerd!” I continue by asking the group what Devon wants to do by showing off that he’s reading this book. After a pause, Renée responds, “He doesn’t care what people say.” At this point, I worry that my presence, while apparently helpful in spurring conversation, might stifle critical thought and communication between the group members. I leave the group where they are and begin to make my rounds checking in on the progress of other groups.

Day 2

The next day in class, I make it a point to stop by and closely observe the group of seven again. I notice that the group is physically positioned the same as the day before. Jordan repeats a line from a poem in the book: “many moons ago.” Confused, Jordan looks up at me. I ask what the line means and Vasha answers, “A long time ago.” Jordan continues reading aloud and his fellow group members continue to read along silently.

When Jordan is done reading his section, Vasha asks me, “Isn’t ‘I dipped my brush in the sky’ metaphor?” I tell her it is, and we go on to

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**CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITE THINK**

**Group Poetry Work**

The following resources from ReadWriteThink.org provide additional resources for group poetry work:

- **Sonic Patterns: Exploring Poetic Techniques through Close Reading**
  Students develop close reading skills connecting sound with sense in the poem “Those Winter Sundays,” then write an original text that reflects their new learning.
  

- **Speaking Poetry: Exploring Sonic Patterns through Performance**
  Using their voices as interpretive instruments, students gain a deeper appreciation of the art of poetry as they prepare a recitation of the frequently anthologized poem “Those Winter Sundays.”
  

- **Poetry Reading and Interpretation through Extensive Modeling**
  Students will research, read, clarify, analyze, and interpret John Berryman’s poetry and create a sustained evaluation of a given poem in a three- to four-page essay.
  

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Lisa Fink
www.readwritethink.org
identify that “the stench and sting of chlorine” is an example of imagery. Jordan reads another excerpt from the poem and discusses it with Hannah, Vasha, and Renée.

Luke and Brandon listen to the conversation, read along silently, and add to their notes without vocally participating. Jordan, Hannah, Vasha, and Renée, the more vocal members of the group, continue to go back and forth between reading, discussing the text, relating the text to their own lives, adding to their notes, and having side conversations seemingly unrelated to the task at hand. Compared to days prior, there is less reliance on me as a resource and more reliance on each other. At one point during the discussion, Vasha interrupts by asking Renée, “You like this color, don’t you?” Jordan, Renée, and Hannah respond, and after a 20-second conversation, a student mentions empowerment, and both Vasha and Jordan quickly state that the character in the story is empowered by Raul. Vasha supports this point by reading directly from the text, and both Jordan and Hannah add comments in agreement. Jordan adds that what took place in the story is similar to what he has seen in “old time movies.” He elaborates on his point, focusing the attention of the entire group and eliciting laughter from Hannah.

Discussion continues to center on the book as a student asks if the character is disempowered by anything. Renée remembers from earlier in the book something about the main character’s father playing a role in the character’s empowerment, but she is not totally sure about this recollection. There is a pause, and I encourage them to look back in their notes to see for sure what we learned about this character earlier. Members of the group flip back through their notes, and Renée confirms that she was right about this character’s father. Vasha, Jordan, and Hannah talk about this character’s empowerment as they and the others write in their notes, stopping periodically to return to the text to specifically read aloud parts that guided their work.

Later, as more and more conversation became off-topic, Luke spoke up to say, “We only have, like, five minutes.” And Vasha added, “You guys, shut up.” After this interjection, the talking members of the group did return their attention to the task at hand and all members finished reading, discussing, and writing before the end of the work period.

The Group of Seven as a Community of Practice

Etienne Wenger (2006) describes three crucial elements in distinguishing a community of practice from other groups and communities:

The domain. A community of practice stems from something beyond a group of friends or a social network of people. This group of seven did not come together because I had assigned group membership to them, nor had the students decided to work with their best friends. In fact, in most cases, students in the group of seven did not work with their best friends in class. Instead, their shared domain of interest was deep engagement with the text and commitment to their learning, both individual and collective; the group dynamic served their best interests and functioned as the vehicle by which learning would occur.

The community. Reciprocal communication that involves and extends beyond the task at hand is key to a community of practice. Group of seven members oscillated between work that explicitly involved Bronx Masquerade and communication that was more personal. This helped to bond the group members, as well as to connect their learning, both individual and collective; the group dynamic served their best interests and functioned as the vehicle by which learning would occur.

The practice. Over time, members of a community of practice develop routines and rituals that are utilized to get their work done. Their work becomes efficient and comfortable because it has become personal and collective. This group
of seven had developed the practice of occasionally diverting discussion from the academic topic at hand. They had established their group to meet their needs, worked together in a community, and developed their own rituals of behavior, to which everyone at least tacitly agreed and felt accountable.

Reflection

It wasn’t enough to simply let my students work together in hopes that they would form communities of practice; the students had to do work important to them that in most cases could be done better with the help of others. It wasn’t enough to tell students that in the name of critical literacy they would be in charge; I needed to intervene and provide the right amount of support at the right time. It wasn’t enough for me to blindly follow administration-prescribed strategies to group students; I needed to critically examine school policy vis-à-vis the needs of my students.

However, it was enough for me to trust my students and myself to act in our own best interests. In essence, it was the thoughtful and reflexive blending of what the students and I identified as empowering components that aided the students in developing a community of practice. Also, this meant challenging the common notion that a group of seven students working together to co-construct knowledge would be too big to succeed. In point of fact, allowing students the space to explore grouping resulted in the formation of an “oversized” group that was simply too big to fail.

References


Brian Horn is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at Illinois State University. He can be reached at bhorn@ilstu.edu.

Call for 2013 Hoey Award Nominations

The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award for Outstanding Middle Level Educator in the English Language Arts recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers in grades 5–8 who instill their own love of learning in their students. Sponsored by Scholastic Classroom Magazines, which has recently partnered with Weekly Reader, this award honors Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of Read during his nearly 40-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine.

Nomination information can be found on the NCTE website at www.ncte.org/awards/hoey and must be submitted by February 1, 2013. Results will be announced in Spring 2013, and the award will be presented at the 2013 Annual Convention in Boston, MA, at the Middle Level Luncheon.

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