How to Have a Good Conversation:
By Fifth Graders at Aspen Creek K-8
with Marjorie Larran and Their Teachers, Andrea Cipoletti and Debbie Deem, Colorado

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In spite of all the other pressures on teachers and students, we still find sparks of sympathy, kind-ness and generosity in the classrooms where teachers collaborate and think together and where they embed this thinking and collaboration into their instructional practice with students.

For several years the Boulder Valley School District has supported a variety of in-school and cross-district collaborative groups. Debbie Deem and Andrea Cipoletti, fifth grade teachers at Aspen Creek K-8, have taken part in nearly every one of these opportunities to work with other teachers to explore aspects of best practice instruction.

This fall they wanted to more intentionally use their learning from their collaborative experiences to help their students engage in similarly meaningful reflection and conversation. They wanted to guide their students to break through the routine of contrived book discussions to real talk that touched them deeply, changed their thinking, expanded their views, strengthened their relationships.

Drawing on a clear philosophical stance in regard to teaching for understanding, that learning is thinking, and that we learn through seeing models and through interaction with our resources and with each other, Debbie and Andrea spent part of each afternoon with their students engaged in ever-deepening conversations about nonfiction short texts and books, in pairs and small groups.

They began this effort by modeling a conversa-tion about an article from “Time for Kids” for their combined classes. Their main goal was to show their students an authentic conversation, with interactions between them that led to new knowledge, changed understanding, new ideas. After the first modeled conversation they asked the kids what they had noticed that made it a meaningful conversation. This provided the first guidance for the kids’ own conversa-tions. The students volunteered what they would now do differently in their own conversations:

• Ask more questions.
• Try and think more.
• Use notes as a starting point for conversation.
• Don’t just change ideas when someone shares—add on to theirs.
• Listen to what my partner says and respond.

From there the kids were off and running in conversations about a variety of nonfiction top-ics based on short articles and books, chosen to include topics the kids otherwise might not choose or know about, with an eye to expanding their interests in the world. At each step along the way Debbie and Andrea have asked students to reflect on whether and how their thinking and learn-ing was impacted by the conversation with their classmates. The kids have expanded their initial ideas, generating long ongoing lists of advice, cau-tions, suggestions and promises of encouraging outcomes. When we told them we were writing an article about their thinking and conversations, Matt exclaimed, “We’re teaching the teachers.”

Indeed, as we read through each day’s reflect-ions, they remind us of what is supported in adult CFC’s through norms and protocols. They remind us to carry these principles of good conversations with us throughout the day with all our colleagues. Following are the lessons and experiences from 60 kind and generous fifth graders.

Advice on how to ensure you have a good conversa-tion:
• Don’t get distracted.
• Respond to each other; don’t just list your ideas.
• Ask each other questions and see if you can answer someone’s question.
• Share background knowledge.
• Don’t interrupt each other.
• Don’t argue if you disagree on something.
• Listen to your partners when they are talking and help them when they are confused.
• Take turns reading your notes about your thinking and then talk about it.
• Look at each other.

Advice from what we did when we had a good conver-sation:
• We worked well because some of that stuff is very interesting.
• We had some back-ground knowledge about other topics so that helped.
• We explained why we thought something and we learned more.
• Sometimes we both had the same thing but we still had different thoughts. For example, the water buffalo weighed 2000 pounds. She did not think that was a lot for a bison and I did.
• We understood each other and agreed and disagreed.
• We had different emotions.
• We stayed on—stopped and thought about what each other said—one of us said a comment and then another said one that related to it—built on each other’s ideas and questions.
• We used our notes to remind us of what we had thought when we read.
• We helped each other with pronouncing names.
• We talked back and forth. We shared our thoughts. We talked about some of our experi-ences.
• We got to share each other’s thinking, questions, answer, reasons sometimes we would disagree.
• We added on to each other’s questions, explain-ing it better.
• We talked about things we knew and didn’t know.
• We sat close enough together so that we could have a good conversation.
• We left questions open.

Cautions—challenges that came up:
• My partner and I had a hard time knowing what to talk about.
• When we didn’t get something it was hard if no one did and so we didn’t get the answer to our questions.

It was sometimes a challenge to think of what words to say.
• We were talking most of the time but my partner and I aren’t the best of friends so it was pretty hard to talk to somebody I don’t really know all that much.
• Our biggest challenge was staying on topic.
• It was too long because the book was BORING.

Advice: how to improve your conver-sation on the spot:
• …at first we just went back and forth making our facts and then after a little while we started look-ing at the book and we talked a lot more than we had about the facts and wrote down.
• Listen to each other, give each other information.
• Take turns on your conversation.
• We asked each other questions and tried to help each other answer them—referring to text, background knowl-edge, inferring, asking more questions.
• I was trying hard to converse with my partner and I was seriously learning some new stuff from him and asking him questions about what he said.
• …we had a great chat then we started to talk about different things. But we snapped out of it.

What we got from our conversations:
• We talked about what we would do if we were in a drought. We also talked about what the people might have done in the dust bowl. We talked about what happened to us in the drought we had a couple years ago.
• We had a lot of stuff in common. We both thought the same things were funny because they were funny. We could connect to what each other was saying.
• We talked about different things that we both didn’t know and we shared questions and got an answer! Also found out things that one of us knew and the other didn’t.
• We shared background knowledge got to know each other a little better.
• We added ideas to each other’s ideas (continued on page 12)
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that weren’t in the article or in our notes, took it somewhere different.  
• If you didn’t get something, you get to see their perspective.  
• Knowledge greens—much bigger thinking.  
• Get the knowledge of things I didn’t understand.  
• We laughed a lot.  
• We probably could have talked about swamp life forever!  

What the teachers noticed the kids get from these conversations that are part of their educational goal:  
• Laughter and fun. They like to talk. They are interested in your partners’ ideas along with your ideas.  
• Meta-cognition: students were able to identify themselves along a continuum from a conversation that is stilted and parallel with listing of facts from text, to a conversation that could go on forever as they keep expanding on each other’s thoughts and generating new questions.  
• Facts about topics and clarifying misconceptions and confusion.  
• Talking with each other helps them to naturally use strategies of proficient readers—share background knowledge to support inferences about meaning of facts; highlight important text.  
• Fluency—oral and written: The kids’ reflections began with parroting of language and moved to a conversation that is stilted and parallel with listing of facts from text, to a conversation that could go on forever as they keep expanding on each other’s thoughts and generating new questions.  
• Facts about topics and clarifying misconceptions and confusion.  
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We keep returning to the initial key ideas students identified: simply listening and being interested in your partners’ ideas along with your own. Adding to and deepening, correcting, and clarifying—thinking more, thinking more, connecting with each other more. The classrooms are buzzing with the hum of many conversations, now spreading to every part of the day.  

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It Is Not Rocket Science...  
(continued from page 5)

meaningful contexts helps Black male students acquire language skills that empower them to use language in telling their stories while simultaneously mastering the skills and demonstrating academic excellence through reading and writing. What does all of this mean for the middle or high school teacher of English working in an urban classroom teaching Black male students? In my mind it means that we, whether we be black or white or yellow or red, need to know who we are in relation to the dominant culture, and how we operate in that dominant culture. We need to be clear about what we believe to be the purpose of education. We need to love Black male students enough to struggle to successfully teach them the literacy skills they need to be successful in the oppressive American society. I hear this from an African woman on WBAI that we need to look at other people as our “other” selves. If we look at Black males as future, current or potential criminals, we are not seeing them as human beings and we cannot teach them. If we cannot look at, and love, a Black male student who is looking hostile, wearing bagging, sagging jeans with his underwear showing and see him as a person connected to us, then we should not and could not be successfully engaging him.

Dr. Tatum’s book Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males approaches the challenge of teaching literacy from the inside. In his book he includes tests, essential questions, and lists of books as well as charts of how and when and in what context to use certain skill development and assessment. Dr. Tatum demonstrates strategies that make the theories, instruction and transfer of skills live in real time in authentic ways in the high school classroom. Aside from the acquisition of skills and the practice of theory, and instruction, Dr. Tatum challenges teachers to be activists. The question that remains is: Do we have the will and the courage to truly interrupt and transform public school cultures and our classroom practices in ways that will resonate with and engage Black males in learning, in a variety of challenging ways that will be meaningful in their eyes? This challenge is both a personal one and a group mandate. We must look inside ourselves and examine our personal beliefs and practice while connecting with others to bring out the genius that resides inside each Black male student.

For more information about essential readings and questions suggested for teaching African-American Males visit our website at www.myschoolconnections.com. Camilla Greene can be contacted at cagreene@worldnet.att.net

Willing to Be Disturbed... 
Flipping the Biased Script of Our Standardized Curriculum
Debbie Bambino, Pennsylvania

Many of us have been using Margaret Wheatley’s except. Willing to be Disturbed, to introduce conversations about norm setting and an understanding that we grow most when we are willing to challenge our often comfortably held assumptions and understandings. I’m wondering today how this process of challenging our individual assumptions gets translated into questions and challenges of the curriculum we are often mandated to teach. In particular, I’m thinking today of the way Rosa Parks gets treated in our classrooms and in the media. Mrs. Parks died yesterday and was described in the Philadelphia Inquirer as the “Montgomery, AL seamstress…whose simple, spontaneous act of defiance…. lent a spark to a movement….” Describing Mrs. Parks and her actions on that day in 1955 has long been a staple of classroom instruction, especially in February. However, the standard script about Mrs. Parks is often simplistic and comfortable, it is disempowering. Mrs. Parks’ actions were neither simply spontaneous nor the result of her exhaustion after a hard day’s work. Being willing to be disturbed in the case of how we teach about Rosa Parks for me means being willing to flip the script and write a letter to the editor. In classrooms, I hope it will mean an analysis of Mrs. Parks’ history as an organizer and activist for civil rights, who also happened to be a seamstress. A closer look at the facts will show that Mrs. Parks and a number of other women had been put off of buses for their refusal to move before Dec. 1, 1955. In fact, some of these African-American women were members of the Woman’s Political Council (WPC) and had resolved to fight segregation on the buses as far back as 1949! Mrs. Parks’ refusal to move and her subsequent arrest were selected as the case to launch the bus boycott because of Mrs. Parks’ proven leadership ability. This story of collective decision making, willed risk and coordinated action is more dramatic than the story of a tired or angry individual who sparked a demonstration (Kohl, 2001).

I hope our script will also introduce students to the Highlander School in Knoxville, TN, where Mrs. Parks, Dr. King and countless others attended trainings and developed strategies designed to lead the struggle against racism in this country. And finally, I hope we will begin to ask students why they think the “official story” promoted about Mrs. Parks is inaccurate. Perhaps a conversation with our middle and high school students will open up questions about other parts of “the story” that our textbooks are wrong about and will hopefully disturb and engage many of the kids who are now simply marking time in many of our class-rooms.

Flipping the script about Rosa Parks in many ways means flipping the script about the role of our schools. Will we begin to acknowledge the role of our schools as sites where inequality and the status quo are reinforced? Will we begin teaching students to become critically thinking citizens who are willing to be disturbed and disturb the system? Will we open the doors to our students’ questions about the curriculum and its inherent bias? If we do, it won’t be easy to return to page 92 and answer the questions at the end of the chapter. Once our kids experience the power of an authentic curriculum powered by their own questions, it’s likely they’ll demand more of us as their teachers and as citizens. Motivating our kids as co-designers of their own learning based on an accurate understanding of the power of collaboration seems like a fitting way to honor Mrs. Parks’ legacy and put our willingness to be disturbed to an authentic test.

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For more information: