

Chinn, C., & Anderson, R. (1998). The structure of discussions that promote reasoning. *Teachers College Record*, 100, 315-368.

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Summary:

Researchers analyzed two fourth-grade classrooms where children discussed stories that they read in class. During these discussions, students took positions on important issues based on evidence from the stories and invited others to change their minds and/or argue their opposing positions (referred to as interactive argumentation). The discussions were more classroom conversations than formal debates. The objective of this research was to examine the discussions in order to help educators plan discussions more carefully and help promote students' reasoning abilities.

Assumptions:

- Most of the work on argumentation has centered on the structure and content of a single person's statements.
- Argumentation is often viewed as a means to improve or foster student learning.
- When done respectfully, argumentation can heighten or create greater student motivation in regards to literacy instruction and reading.
- Argumentation may help students learn how to reason and organize thoughts about text reading; however, relatively little research has been done to support this idea.

Findings:

- Many arguments were causal (Character A felt sorry for Character B so s/he let him/her win...); most of the causes given were inferences about characters drawn from facts.
- Teachers tended to prompt students to give reasons, evidence, and challenges; students responding by using similar terms and ideas.
- Classroom discussions lacked the organization that written texts have.
- Many arguments were only maintained at surface levels, and few positions were challenged without teacher prompting.

Conclusions:

- By examining the structure of classroom discussions and interactive argumentation, teachers and researchers were able to see where classroom discussions were simply surface level discussions. By conducting similar classroom discussions with teacher prompting, students were able to further analyze and discuss texts by challenging one another's assertions.

Suggestions for Teachers:

- Argumentation or debate may be an effective structure for prompting response to reading.
- Students may need teacher support to learn how to challenge one another's assertions.

Suggestions for Literacy Leaders:

- Explore the role of argumentation or debate in promoting response to reading.
- Help teachers define their roles in these conversations, so that they scaffold students' responses without appropriating them.