

Making Connections during Transactional Discussions:

Adolescents' Empathic Responses to *Thirteen Reasons Why*

“The student’s personal response to literary works will be primarily colored by his [sic] attitude toward the characters and situations they present. To attempt to ignore these student reactions would destroy the very basis on which any greater literary sensitivity could be built.”

—Louise Rosenblatt, *Literature as Exploration*, 1938/1995, p. 225

Although the publishers of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS; National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010) call for an approach to reading that “focuses on what lies within the four corners of the text” (Coleman & Pimentel, 2012, p. 4), the CCSS for speaking and listening also invite high school students to engage in sophisticated discussions about complex texts; they are asked to “propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas” (CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.9–10.1c) *beyond* the “four corners of the text” and to “respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives” (CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.9–10.1d) that emerge from students’ lived experiences.

From the perspective of the CCSS, then, students seem to be asked to inhibit their intertextual, experiential, emotional, social, and multimodal responses to text in order to focus their meaning making solely on what is available within the text; however, as speakers and listeners, students are asked to make just such connections. This apparent contradiction does not seem to recognize the roles of speaking and listening in mediating reading comprehension. From a socio-

cultural and transactional perspective, readers learn to interrogate texts by speaking and listening in social interactions with peers. That is, discussions do not merely serve the function of exposing publicly previously comprehended insights from the four corners of a text; rather, discussions facilitate meaning making about texts and the world.

However, not all discussions are characterized by critical connections between the text and the world and/or thoughtful responses to diverse perspectives. To encourage the internalization of these discourse practices among young people, literature circles (Daniels, 2002) have been used in classrooms for quite some time and across grade levels to promote students’ engagement with and comprehension, interpretation, and evaluation of texts. Typically, during literature circle discussions, students take on individual reading roles (e.g., “summarizer,” “illustrator,” “connector”) from which they draw to help facilitate their talk during small-group discussions.

The literature circle role of “connector” provides an especially illustrative example of how personal experience can promote students’ literary analysis. In this article, we demonstrate how the connectors in three different literature circle discussion groups drew

on their experiences to link events from their personal lives and interactions in ways that facilitated their meaning making about Jay Asher's (2007) young adult novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. In linking events from their lives with the situations described by Hannah and Clay, protagonists in Asher's novel, students empathized with characters and classmates by "relating to and collaborating with others" (p. 52)—one of the critical literacy practices that Beach, Thein, and Webb (2012) identify as paramount in promoting engaged learning in the age of the CCSS.

Furthermore, the enactment of literature circles grounded in transactional theory celebrates the social nature of learning about literature by emphasizing the role of language in facilitating thinking about text. From this perspective on learning, meanings are negotiated, situated, and co-constructed in the particular communities in which the literacy practice of discussion takes place. In fact, Rosenblatt (1938/1995) argued that

[t]he literary experience may provide the emotional tension and conflicting attitudes out of which spring the kind of thinking that can later be assimilated into actual behavior. The emotional character of the student's response to literature offers an opportunity to develop the ability to think rationally within an emotionally colored context. (p. 217)

Engaging students' experiences and emotional or "expressive" responses to text (Soter, Wilkinson, Connors, Murphy, & Shen, 2010) is not only a prerequisite to the development of higher cognitive functions; such emotional investment *mediates* rigorous intellectual work.

Empathy: A 21st-Century Literacy Practice

Scholars have identified empathy as a necessary capacity for life in the 21st century: "Learning how to *relate to others* requires the ability to empathize with others' perspectives, share one's own feelings and perspectives, and negotiate differences of opinion" (Beach et al., 2012, p. 52, emphasis in original). Thus, taking on another's perspective and empathizing with others can be conceptualized as 21st-century skills that can be developed through the literacy practice of literary discussion. Adolescent readers, in displaying empathy, take on an individual's or a character's perspective as her or his own and respond to that

perspective in an affective and cognitive way, which Keen (2006) described as feeling what one believes to be the emotions of others. Beach et al. (2012) synthesized recent work by Davidson (2010) and Johnson and Johnson (2009) on the importance of taking on another's perspective as one's own during interpersonal interactions, noting that

the success of a group does not depend on individual members' intelligence or skills; it depends on "collective intelligence"—group members' ability to empathize with each other's emotions, to honor individual differences in the members' diverse abilities, and to have other members acquire these abilities, as well as leaders who listen to and enact others' ideas. (p. 53)

Indeed, responding empathically to others or to characters in texts might have the additional effect of promoting critical listening—a literacy practice that is necessary for fostering independent thought and action.

Furthermore, transactional discussions about literary texts can "transform imaginative occasions into productive insights" (Sumara, 2002, p. 5) as readers engage both affectively and cognitively with others, texts, and contexts. In addition to representing an authentic disciplinary practice, literary discussions characterize the literacy practices of lifelong readers and learners as they engage in dialogue with others in order to realize their thinking about a text. In what follows, we illustrate the ways in which adolescent readers engaged empathically during literature circle discussions about *Thirteen Reasons Why* (Asher, 2007) over the course of one academic trimester. We draw upon excerpts from literature circle transcripts to demonstrate the ways in which students leveraged their empathic responses during discussions to promote literary analysis of Asher's novel, which led to students critically connecting issues from the text to their own lives—the "actual behavior" (p. 217) that Rosenblatt (1938/1995) identified as central to literary transactions.

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Methods

Instructional Context

Selected excerpts were drawn from literature circle discussion transcripts in one 10th-grade English classroom in a rural high school in Appalachia. At the classroom level, students were accustomed to engaging in literature circles as an integral feature of a thematic unit on bullying in their curriculum. The

classroom teacher purposefully established five heterogeneous literature circle groups to promote multiple perspectives on the text (e.g., the teacher-created groups comprised both young women and young men who had diverse out-of-school interests). These groups met approximately once per week on seven occasions over the course of an academic trimester. Prior to each literature circle discussion, students completed literature circle role sheets (Burke, 2002), which provided them with a) directions on how to

enact the role, b) space to jot down important points or questions about the text, and c) specific guidelines to prompt thinking and prepare for discussion. At the district and state levels, the high school was identified as a “persistently low-achieving” institution, meaning that its students’ scores on standardized measures of achievement ranked in the lowest-performing 5% of all high schools in the state. Most of the students in the high school identified as white, and nearly two-thirds of the student population qualified for free or reduced-price lunches.

Twenty student participants read Jay Asher’s (2007) young adult novel, *Thirteen Reasons Why*. This novel describes the cumulative effect of multiple and distinct instances with peers that lead the protagonist, Hannah Baker, to commit suicide. The story is told primarily through a series of audiotapes on which Hannah’s voice can be heard as she addresses persons who played a role in the snowball effect that led to

her death. Throughout these tapes, Hannah describes the emotional trauma she experienced as a result of various critical instances that led to her perceived objectification in the eyes of her peers. In this double-narrative text, readers also experience the story from the perspective of Clay Jensen, one of Hannah’s close friends, as he listens to the audiotapes that reveal the 13 reasons why Hannah took her own life.

Data Analysis

We used techniques from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006) and classroom discourse analysis (Rex & Schiller, 2009) to examine 35 literature circle discussion transcripts. After transcribing all 35 literature circle discussions, we read through all transcripts individually for each literature circle and engaged in initial, line-by-line coding. Next, we discussed our impressions of the transcripts for each literature circle before rereading all of the groups’ transcripts collaboratively and engaging in focused coding by comparing our individual codes for each line. We noted, for example, the ways in which some students appropriated what we called a “teacher/didactic voice” as they attempted to (re)focus the group’s talk on the literature circle task. Then, we generated a preliminary coding rubric based on the themes we identified in our data set (see Table 1).

We returned to our collaborative coding process with the newly constructed coding scheme and segmented the transcripts into interpretive episodes (a collection of thematically related turns by multiple members) based on the themes in the coding scheme. Reducing the data set to episodes instead of turns-at-talk allowed us to identify the ways in which students’ empathic and analytic responses interacted across multiple student turns-at-talk.

Findings

Students’ empathic responses (i.e., responses that reflected their appreciation of and willingness to inhabit another’s experience) corresponded with their interpretive responses in which they analyzed text, projected themselves imaginatively into the text, and considered hypothetical plot structures that might have altered the events that took place in the text. These responses were almost without exception instances in which students “responded thoughtfully

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Table 1. Literature Circle Codes, Definitions, and Examples

Code Label	Definition	Transcript Example
Clarification of Comprehension (CC)	Student talk that promotes understanding of a meaning in the text.	Taylor: Ok, well, in the first part, the first thing I think that she's in love with Justin. But did somebody start a rumor because Clay thought that they did more than just kiss, so did somebody start rumors? David: I'm pretty sure Justin started it. I mean, it's bragging. Taylor: Ok. So Justin started telling people they did more than just kiss in the rocket ship slide thing? David: Pretty sure that's what it was. That's what I was thinking.
Clarification of Literature Circle Process (CLC)	Student talk related to understanding the roles of the group members or the evaluation system.	Ms. Johnston: Who's the summarizer? So you guys can either always have the summarizer give the grades, or you can work to negotiate that. Felicia: So I got a question. Since I was the connector and Robert was the connector, shouldn't me and Robert get to pick what we want so we don't have to be a connector again, [be]cause there was 2 of us. Ms. Johnston: That's fine with me. You and Bobby don't always have to have the same job. Sure, I think they'll let you pick first. Felicia: She's the connector this time. Or, are you the illustrator? Nick: She's the illustrator. I dibs the summarizer. Carrie: I think everybody was really good today. Danielle: I'll do the problem poser. Nick: You could do the problem poser. Felicia: I don't really know how to do that. Nick: Or you could do the applauder; you could applaud the author.
Curiosity/Engagement (C/E)	Student talk that demonstrates interest in reading and responding to meanings in the literature.	Gayle: You guys are about to get into a really good part. Kayla: I've already finished the book. Gayle: Oh, it's good, isn't it? I cried on that one part at the party. Maggie: Wow. Gayle: I did. Maggie: Really? Gayle: Yeah, like it's really that sad. Maggie: So there's a party. Kayla: There's like 2 more. Kevin: So you all done finished the book? Kayla: Yeah. Kevin: What the hell? Kayla: I just sat down and started reading.
Hypothetical Plotting (HP)	Student talk that forecasts events that may or may not occur in various representations of the text and the hypothetical consequences that might follow such an event.	Haley: . . . what would have happened if somebody like the diner worker did something nice for Hannah like he did Clay? Cassidy: She probably wouldn't have killed herself. Haley: She probably wouldn't have felt alone. Melissa: Probably would have felt like she had at least one person there with her. Cassidy: Yeah. Haley: Then she probably would have drifted off anyway.
Literary Analysis (LA)	Student talk that examines a literary device employed by the author.	Felicia: Alright, I was the author applauder and I get nothing but Clay [be]cause I didn't read that [be]cause I wasn't here. But I did get something for Justin. I like how Jay Asher just put "Just relax" to tell us that whoever this was the person who grabbed Hannah's butt at the store in the beginning of the story. And that's all I have.

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Table 1. Continued

Literature Circle Role Completion (RC)	Student talk that responds solely to the literature circle role sheet prompt.	<p>David: Ok. My part was the illustrator, and for the first one, I drew a picture of a Butterfinger.</p> <p>Taylor: You drew a what?</p> <p>David: It's really good. A Butterfinger bar.</p> <p>Tom: Too bad it ain't real. I'd eat it.</p> <p>David: What?</p> <p>Tom: I said too bad it ain't real. I would have one right now.</p> <p>David: What are you gonna do?</p> <p>Taylor: Butterfinger</p> <p>David: He was at the blue liquor spot and he was down tying his shoes and he set the Butterfinger on his knee and in the story, she told Clay to go there and so that's why he was there.</p>
Literature Circle Role Fulfillment (RF)	Student talk that extends beyond the literature circle role sheet prompt.	<p>Haley: Well, I'll start off with my summary. You guys want me to read it to you? On cassette side B we learned what helped build up Hannah's snowball effect. There was a list of what, of who's hot and who's not. Hannah was mentioned on the Who's Hot for having the best ass of the freshman class. This set Hannah on fire knowing that this would only give everyone an excuse to look and touch. We learned her favorite store was the Blue Liquor Store where she bought candy and visited often. This is where the first incident happened. She was right about the list about giving people excuses to look and touch. A boy had forcefully grabbed her behind and intruded her. I thought I did pretty good.</p> <p>Melissa: Ok. And here's the connections I made. Text to movie: The movie <i>Cyber Bully</i>.</p> <p>Haley: Yeah.</p>
Personal Projection (PP)	Student talk that proposes how the situation of a character informs the student's response to a comparable life situation.	<p>Kayla: So if I were Clay, I'd probably feel probably pretty panicky in a way because I don't know what's coming next in the tapes, whether I get blamed for . . .</p> <p>Maggie: . . . If I were him, I'd kind of want to hear the tapes first before everybody else—even before Justin.</p>
Text-to-Life Responses (TtL)	Student talk that draws on ideas from the text to relate to the world.	<p>Samantha: I didn't make one of those in high school.</p> <p>Taylor: It was elementary school.</p> <p>Samantha: Yeah, 'cause I'm pretty sure I did.</p> <p>Taylor: And middle school.</p> <p>David: Yeah, and middle school.</p> <p>Taylor: I didn't exactly do that. I just circled parts in the yearbooks.</p> <p>Samantha: Yeah, the cute ones and stuff.</p> <p>Taylor: Or I'd put a star beside like the ones I kissed, too.</p> <p>Samantha: A kissed and not kissed list, I don't know.</p> <p>Taylor: Or put an "x" by the ones I hated.</p> <p>Samantha: Yeah, me too. Sorry, go on.</p> <p>David: In this story, the boys do the list. Boys don't usually make lists. Am I right? Boys don't usually make lists like this.</p>
Non-literary Talk (NLT)	Student talk that is non-literary in nature.	<p>Dusty: Deer! Who catches deer?</p> <p>Josh: I do. Jacob Smith.</p> <p>Dusty: Who's Jacob Smith? Is that like Katie Smith's brother?</p> <p>Shane: I do, but by hand and foot.</p> <p>Dusty: No you don't. Don't lie. Like a big buck? Like a 12-point buck?</p> <p>Josh: The woods are really thick, so it's harder to run through for deers.</p>
Literary Critic Responses (LC)	Student talk that interrogates authorial intention.	<p>Kayla: They make references to like when she's deciding how to commit suicide. She doesn't want to do that to her parents. Then it mentions in the story the whatever, Clay kept walking by the store.</p> <p>Gayle: Well, I think Jay Asher should have put Hannah's parents in the beginning saying, you know, she didn't quit being sad and all . . . they need to talk to her. They didn't do it. They don't care about her.</p>

Note: Transcript excerpts come from selected coded episodes of talk ($N = 303$) during 35 literature circle discussions.

to diverse perspectives” (CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.9–10.1d). That is, as students spoke empathically, they made rhetorical moves that promoted inquiry and literary analysis. As students provided both supportive and critical reflections on various literary characters’ circumstances, they “propelled conversations by posing and responding to questions that related the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas” (CCSS.ELA—Literacy.SL.9–10.1c).

Moreover, students’ empathic responses toward the characters in the text promoted their critical consideration of their own social worlds in which problematic peer interactions were interrogated in light of the snowball effect that so swiftly gained such destructive momentum in the novel. The three interpretive episodes below illustrate the compelling ways in which connectors in three different literature circle groups responded empathically by drawing on their personal experiences to leverage their understanding of the literary text and their own lives.

Promoting Literary Analysis through Empathic Responses

In this first interpretive episode, students considered one of the 13 reasons that led to Hannah Baker’s suicide in the novel. At one point in the text, Hannah composes a poem, “Soul Alone,” which represents a letter to herself. On the surface of the poem, Hannah’s mother is portrayed as unaccepting; as Hannah reflects, however, she comes to the realization that it is, in fact, *she* who has failed to accept and appreciate herself.

In this literature circle, David, Taylor, and Tom (pseudonyms, as are all names of students and places) discussed a critical moment in the text in which one of Hannah’s classmates steals her poem and claims sole authorship. When word gets out that Hannah wrote the poem, people begin to mock her and the ideas embedded in her writing.

1. Taylor: All right. Why do people make fun of Hannah’s poem?
2. David: You know, I have no idea why they make fun of it. I thought it was pretty good.
3. Tom: I don’t know. It didn’t seem like it was . . .
4. Taylor: There was nothing wrong with it. I mean, it’s sad. Why would you make

a parody? Why would you laugh at it? What’s so funny about somebody feeling alone?

5. Tom: I don’t know.
6. David: Then again . . .
7. Taylor: Maybe it was because why she wrote that. But she did say people were teasing her for telling why she wrote it or what it was about.

At the outset of this episode, Taylor and David questioned why Hannah’s classmates would criticize and turn into a parody such a personal and vulnerable expression (lines 1 & 2). As students continued their response to this student-generated question, they sided with Hannah and empathized with her predicament (lines 2, 4, 5, & 7). Taylor’s move in line 7 seemed especially important as she built on the empathic response of the group to explore text-based reasons why this event might have happened to the protagonist.

Taylor then posed a related question about Clay and his role throughout this chapter of the novel:

8. Taylor: Okay. One more question. Why didn’t Clay stand up for Hannah?
9. David: Because of her reputation. He was scared. He was nervous.
10. Tom: Because he liked Hannah.
11. Taylor: But what was so bad about her reputation? I mean, he didn’t believe it, did he?
12. David: No, he said he didn’t.
13. Tom: But he didn’t want to get teased by the other kids by hanging out with her.
14. Taylor: High school peer pressure. Stupidity. If he had known all this before, I’m pretty sure he would have gone out with her because he didn’t know she was feeling this way.
15. David: What I’m saying is that he had strong feelings toward her, and he was too nervous to actually get up and go over there and help her. Just like if you wanted like the girl and you were too nervous to actually do anything about that, and somebody was over there talking to her, would you actually want to get up and go over there?
16. Tom: I don’t understand it. Why do guys and girls got to be nervous about things like that?

17. Taylor: Are you up front, Tom?
18. Tom: I'm up front.
19. David: Clay is like a nerd. He has a perfect reputation; he's got good grades. In my picture, he's a nerd.
20. Taylor: He's afraid Hannah's reputation might drag all that down.
21. David: He thinks Hannah's reputation is just a bad girl, so he thinks, well no bad girl would want me. So that's what's going through his head, so he's nervous about that. And for us, come on, we're not nerds.

Taylor's question, "Why didn't Clay stand up for Hannah?" promoted an extended conversation in which Tom and David empathized with Clay's perspective (lines 9, 10, 12, 13, 19, & 21). Taylor, in line 11, took issue with this perspective, noting that Clay couldn't

have believed the things he was hearing about Hannah. This led to students' deeper explication of their reasoning for why Clay might hesitate to support his friend, Hannah, during a time of need. These reasons centered around avoiding the social ramifications of associating with Hannah.

In considering Clay's perspective, students also critiqued Hannah's reputation in the novel as a "bad girl" (lines 11,

20, & 21). Empathizing with Clay and problematizing Hannah's unwarranted negative reputation catalyzed instances in which students reimagined hypothetical plot elements in the novel (line 14) and projected themselves into the text (line 15). As students tried on the protagonists' perspectives, they imagined themselves vicariously taking on Clay's role and how they would have reacted differently in the same circumstances, which led them ultimately to identify alternative possibilities within the plot. By following their own line of reasoning and the ways in which students would act in comparable situations in their own lives, David, Taylor, and Tom delved more deeply into their

meaning making by understanding the consequences of their own behavior.

Transactional Responses That Promote Empathy and Analysis

In this second interpretive episode, students' empathic responses served to facilitate dialogue, comprehension, and their authentic use of literacy learning strategies. As members of this literature circle considered the theft of Hannah's poem, "Soul Alone," they recognized the power of characters' compassionate and cruel actions in the novel:

1. Haley: Well, for my question, I wrote, "What would have happened if somebody like the diner worker did something nice for Hannah like he did Clay?"
2. Cassidy: She probably wouldn't have killed herself.
3. Melissa: She probably wouldn't have felt alone.
4. Cassidy: Probably would have felt like she had at least one person there with her.
5. Melissa: Yeah.
6. Haley: Then she probably would have drifted off anyway. Then, I can't really . . . I'm going to [go] back and look at my annotations. Why would Ron steal her poem?

Haley proposed an authentic and empathic question about a hypothetical plot element—the notion that, if a stranger had committed a random act of kindness for Hannah, as the diner worker had for Clay, that such an event might have altered the self-destructive path on which Hannah was traveling. Cassidy and Melissa both provided ways in which the plot would have been transformed if someone had intervened on Hannah's behalf (lines 2 & 3). Despite clear responses to Haley's original question in line 1, Haley talked back to this line of reasoning and provided an alternative response to her original question, suggesting that Hannah would have "drifted off anyway" (line 6). As Haley attempted to marshal evidence in support of this claim, she revisited the annotations she made while reading before she posed another authentic question about a character's behavior in the novel, "Why would Ron steal her poem?" Below, Cassidy took up this question before Haley provided a critical analysis that leveraged the literacy strategies the class

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had been using in their reading of this text.

7. Cassidy: Oh, um . . . I really don't know why he stole it. I just think he put it in a magazine.
8. Haley: But he knew Hannah would know.
9. Melissa: Yeah.
10. Haley: Ok, and . . . And then I, on page 178, I mark where "and then I say my final words. Well, probably not my final words. But the last of these tapes . . . it's going to be one tight, well-connected, emotional ball of words." I was wondering why she wanted to write a poem and what the poem was going to say.
11. Cassidy: You could have also done where Clay didn't stick up for her when they were like making fun of her poem and stuff like that.
12. Haley: I tried to think of reasons for that.
13. Melissa: I know he was scared, but like it was just kind of mean.

In line 7, Cassidy provided a reason for why Ron might have stolen Hannah's poem in response to Haley's authentic question that focused on why anyone would do something like that to another human being. Cassidy's response, however, was not grounded in the text: "I really don't know why he stole it. I just think he put it in a magazine" (line 7).

To this response, Haley pushed Cassidy for elaboration on her reasoning as she took on Hannah's perspectives. Melissa chimed in during line 9 to agree with Haley's counterclaim. Haley then continued describing the questions that emerged from her annotation of the text to consider why Hannah would choose the genre of poetry to express what she had to say. Cassidy contributed another question that Haley could have included on her literature circle role sheet by reminding the group of Clay's lack of action when others made fun of Hannah's poem. Haley responded that she "tried to think of reasons" for why Clay didn't stand up for Hannah. Melissa, in line 13, empathized with Clay, recognizing that it would take a lot to risk one's own reputation for the sake of another, but wondered how Clay didn't realize just how "mean" others were being toward Hannah.

In the first two interpretive episodes reproduced

above, students' empathic and personal responses to the characters' situations in *Thirteen Reasons Why* led to literary transactions that facilitated students' comprehension of the text.

Furthermore, student reading, speaking, and listening extended well beyond the language contained within the text, which had the added effect of drawing out students' authentic uses of reading strategies (e.g., annotating text) and evidence to support their claims about literature.

Finally, the novel provided for students compelling and divergent examples in which adolescents acted and failed to act in ways that had direct and powerful consequences for others.

Empathic Responses from Text to Life

As students empathized with characters in this young adult text, they often developed insights into their own lives, a move that we identified as a text-to-life connection. At the beginning of this third interpretive episode, another group of students discussed the impact one's own words and actions can have on others and the way that the text has helped them to develop that insight.

1. Felicia: Like this story [is] sayin'—like you'll sit here and you'll say something to somebody and you might be joking, but they might think you're not joking, so this book opens up people's eyes. It opened up my eyes.
2. Nick: It opens up your . . .
3. Felicia: Like certain things that you say to people might hurt them more than it hurts someone else.
4. Danielle: Even though you don't know it.
5. Nick: Things that you do, too.

During this part of the episode, students connected with the idea that words may affect people in different ways; individuals are unique, and so are their reactions. The students displayed empathy generally (lines 1 & 3) as they put themselves in another's shoes to realize that what one says to someone might affect

As students empathized with characters in this young adult text, they often developed insights into their own lives.

that person more than expected based on one's own or another's reactions. As the episode continued, students bridged the impact of other characters' actions on Hannah's suicide with the way students with special needs were treated at their own school and other schools in their region.

6. Carrie: Especially the way special ed kids get treated here.
7. Danielle: Yeah, that's sad.
8. Felicia: In my opinion, I think they get treated better than most schools because if you go over to Jewel County, all the kids stare at 'em. Like their eyes go from talking to their friends to right at them. Like my cousin, she's from Jewel County—they don't go anywhere, they don't do nothing for the special ed kids. And like when she walks in the hallways where she has like burns and stuff [*Authors' note: Felicia's cousin's condition made her difference visible to everyone in the school population.*]. Like people stare at her and she'll come home and tell 'em about it. Like people pick on her on the bus and everything.
9. Carrie: Aww.
10. Felicia: And it's sad. But like here it's better. Yeah, it's *way* better than most schools.
11. Nick: I'll beat 'em up for ya.
12. Felicia: Like some people even said they moved here, like one of my friends, her brother has autism and her mom moved back here 'cause they're better here with her son than they are where they used to live.
12. Carrie: Here they don't really say anything to them.
13. Felicia: People here treat 'em like people, like us. Like they don't try to treat 'em different.
14. Nick: We treat 'em like . . .
15. Danielle: Yeah, they get treated like people.
16. Carrie: Some people still make fun of 'em though.
17. Felicia: Yeah, like disrespectful people that don't . . .

18. Nick: Rude people.

As the students displayed empathic responses toward classmates with special needs (lines 6–9), they mediated their understandings of how their peers were treated and how it might have affected those students emotionally (lines 12, 13, & 15). Carrie initially connected the text to life by bringing up the similarities between the ways Hannah is treated in the novel with the ways students in special education were treated in her county. She indicated that, in both cases, people were potentially unaware of the ways in which their behavior had an impact on others. The other students jumped on board with this topic and continued to discuss ways in which the students in special education were treated “different” (line 13) in a neighboring county, not like “people” (lines 13 & 15). Carrie noted, however, that students with special needs were still persecuted because “rude” (line 18) people in their school treated these peers without respect.

Felicia's initial recognition of the gradual ways in which Hannah Baker was dehumanized in the novel led to a candid and critical extension of this insight into students' own communities, with a particular focus on an especially vulnerable population in their school. Hannah's experience with cruelty in the novel caused students to extend their emotional response in order to recognize, then criticize, the actions of young people in their own community. Through their discussion, Carrie, Danielle, Felicia, and Nick provided a voice for students with special needs in a way that paralleled the kind of support that Hannah could have used from her peers in the novel.

Implications for Practice and Policy

Students' affective and cognitive responses to *Thirteen Reasons Why*, as illustrated in these literature circle discussions, demonstrated how students' empathic responses mediated the analytical thinking, speaking, and listening that occurred (e.g., the talk of David, Taylor, and Tom), as well as the ways students grappled with the text and its possible meanings during transactional discussions as they built on others' ideas and incorporated their personal experiences (as with Cassidy, Haley, and Melissa). Crucially, students' analysis of the text led some groups (e.g., Carrie, Danielle, Felicia, and Nick) to critically read their own social worlds by problematizing their peers' dehu-

manizing behaviors—precisely the kind of conflict that arises out of literary experiences “that can later be assimilated into actual behavior” (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 217). Across these excerpts from the discussion transcripts, empathic responses co-occurred with students’ engagement in transactional discussion practices. In other words, when empathy was present, so was dialogue-mediated literacy learning.

Student-led transactional discussions of young adult literature can create “interpretive sites” (Sumara, 2002, p. 8) that afford students opportunities for empathic *and* analytical responses toward texts. Practicing teachers might turn to Ingram (2003), who has adapted a theory for fostering empathy by combining personal response to texts with critical thinking and comprehension strategies. This model asks students to consider as readers a) their own feelings moments after reading the text, b) what the character (or narrator) states explicitly about how a character is feeling, c) the nonverbal cues in the text that represent the character’s emotions, d) whether the student and character have shared similar lived experiences, e) how the reader engaged with the character positively, and f) how an empathy statement could demonstrate a character’s lived experience.

It matters, therefore, that students’ experiences be incorporated into their evidence-based discussions around texts in the literature classroom. Incorporating experience into literary discussions was not only natural and meaningful for students on a personal level, it also established the authentic context in which text-based evidence mattered in students’ lives as it worked in support of argumentative claims about literary meanings they cared about. Students’ lived experiences related to the text did not get in the way of rigorous intellectual work; instead, these empathic responses mediated analytical talk.

Speaking and Listening in the 21st Century

What is the value of students’ personal experience-as-evidence given the language of the CCSS? What place might empathy have in discussing literature when empathic responses can’t be cited? What is the cost of excluding empathic responses to literature when it appears that understanding another’s perspective in literature and in life has never before been more impor-

tant in a 21st-century, globalized society (Beach et al., 2012)? These important questions deserve continued attention in research and practice. The adolescents in this study demonstrated how Jay Asher’s novel roused their a) analytical and emotional connections to text, b) compassion for community members who have been disrespected, c) recognition of peers’ complicit involvement in alienating others, and d) acceptance of the responsibility to act in situations in which others are being objectified and dehumanized.

The CCSS call for increases in the level of sophistication with which adolescents discuss complex literary texts. Although contestable, the speaking and listening Standards seem to aim to improve the ways in which students produce and respond to texts of various sorts. Our concern rests not so much in the particular rationale for these Standards as it does in the ways in which the Standards are received, interpreted, and carried out. In particular, we wonder how perspectives on the concept of complexity (as encoded by the selection of exemplar texts in Appendix B of the CCSS) will lead to further marginalization of young adult literature—a literary genre that has a long tradition of engaging diverse readers (Groenke & Scherff, 2010; Miller, 2014).

Although we recognize and value the use of textual evidence to support claims about texts, we also wonder how a focus on this particular disciplinary practice might push out of the curriculum the recognition of, appreciation for, and interpretive value inherent in students’ real-world experiences. Waves of articles in literacy practitioner journals have uncovered the myriad and often conflicting messages that educators have received about the new “national curriculum” and how the CCSS will transform teaching and learning in literature classrooms (e.g., Botzakis, Burns, & Hall, 2014; Ohanian, 2013).

Nevertheless, students’ inquiry and analysis responded well to the communicative and rhetorical challenges embedded in the Common Core State Standards for speaking and listening in this high school English classroom. We identified interpretive episodes throughout our transcripts in order to understand how students engaged in the literacy practice of Relating to and Collaborating with Others (Beach et al., 2012) as they read the complex text of *Thirteen Reasons Why*. These illustrative episodes in which students projected themselves into the context of the world of

the text and imagined alternative plot structures that might have transformed the action in the text were fueled by students' empathic transactions and vicarious experiences that are hallmarks of literary engagements. It is important to note that these empathic conversations also facilitated the sophisticated types of student-led dialogue that are features of the CCSS for speaking and listening. In fact, students exceeded the expectations for speaking and listening in the CCSS by demonstrating how their talk leveraged their meaning making about the text, which, in turn, leveraged their meaning making about the world. Far from being mutually exclusive concepts in this classroom's discourse, empathy shaped the "emotionally colored context" (Rosenblatt, 1938/1995, p. 217) in which "greater literary sensitivity" (p. 225) was constructed.

James S. Chisholm is an assistant professor in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Louisville, where he teaches courses in the Literacy Education and English Education programs. He studies inquiry-based discussions of literature as well as adolescents' multimodal literacy practices in high school English classrooms. His research has appeared in outlets such as the *Journal of Literacy Research*, *Journal of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, and the 60th Yearbook of the Literacy Research Association.

Bethany L. Keller is a third-year counseling psychology doctoral student at the University of Louisville. Her research focuses on relationship aggression (e.g., controlling behaviors, intimate partner violence, stalking) and maintenance of romantic relationships. Additionally, she is an advocate for LGBTQ issues and works with adolescents who are struggling with suicidal ideation and self-harming behaviors.

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