



Collaboration and speaking and listening in the primary classroom

Colin Hill
Birkdale Primary School
Southport

Collaboration and speaking and listening in the primary classroom

Aims of the project

- To explore methods of enhancing collaboration skills with key stage 1 pupils.
- To improve speaking and listening skills with pupils.

Dimensions of the study

The setting for this study is Birkdale Primary School, a mixed sex primary school within the Sefton area of North Merseyside. I investigated the use of commercial resources in supporting Key Stage 1 pupils to improve their behaviour in collaborative group working lessons. The commercial resources used were a combination of *Let's Think* and Dawes and Sams' *Talk Box*. The initial target group comprised children aged 5-7 years old, of whom 3 were boys and 3 were girls.

Summary of main findings

The main findings included:

- the 'noisier' members of the group became calmer
- quieter pupils participated more in discussion
- pupils gained more confidence in working in groups
- pupils showed their group work skills in other lessons; and
- pupils of all abilities benefited from the intervention

Background and context

My experiences with Key Stage 1 children had led me to think about interactions between pupils and how they had a bearing on children's learning. For example, some pupils were unable to work positively together, being disruptive, dismissive, dominating or argumentative when working in groups.

The original aims of the project were prompted by the GTC's

Research of the Month (RoM) number 35: *Raising achievement through group work*. This RoM summary explored theories of exploratory talk, where pupils who engaged in such talk create shared knowledge and understanding. This type of talk builds on Vygotsky's educational theory that children learn to think individually by learning to reason with others through dialogue. Having attended a briefing from the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (CUREE) in York my thinking turned to how behaviour affected children's learning in my own classroom. As a Key Stage 1 teacher I observed that pupil talk is pivotal in developing children's learning. Helping pupils become more aware of their thinking was a key part of this process.

I found one of the activities linked to the GTC RoM to be particularly helpful in developing my thinking. This 'Taster' asked: *'How can you help pupils become more aware of their thinking?'* This was a relevant question as group work I had previously given to the pupils (who are aged 5-7 years old) often collapsed into farce. Some children took a strong lead, which caused conflict, with other pupils having no active participation in the activity, allowing the stronger members of the group to dominate.

Teaching processes and strategies

Introduction

Initially, I focused upon one class in which the group dynamics often led to argument, fall out and conflict. I planned a speaking and listening activity [resource reference; *Let's Think: a programme for developing thinking in five and six year olds*. nferNelson] designed as a cognitive intervention approach to develop skills in information processing, reasoning, enquiry and evaluation.

The main strategy

The class comprised of five groups, all set according to ability, although there were Year 1 and Year 2 pupils in the class. As the teacher, I led the sessions, but as the sessions went on, this became more a facilitating role. The sessions took place over a three-week period, with the timings changing according to the activity and the concentration of the pupils. Sessions were video-recorded, all six pupils being advised of this beforehand. After each session I shared observations with my teaching assistant as part of the planning for the next session.

The first session:

The first activity involved the children sorting out different sized sticks into some kind of order, with the intention that they justify their positioning, rather than just place their stick/s on the table. I discussed the purpose of the session, explaining that they needed to talk about why their stick should be placed where it was, and that they had to take turns, and listen to others' reasoning. During the task it was evident that two boys were taking a lead in proceedings, as I noted in my comments: 'the other pupils are taking a back seat whilst these two are dominating proceedings'. The session was over in four minutes!

The next sessions

I referred back to the GTC's RoM 35 which referenced materials from L. Dawes and C. Sams; *Talk Box: Speaking and Listening Activities for Learning at Key Stage 1*. The materials consisted of 14 lessons aimed at developing pupils' speaking and listening skills. However, I felt that some of the sessions were inappropriate for my pupils, so I devised my own series of sessions - (incorporating the Talk Box activities, as well as using some of the Let's Think materials).

Session 2

This session introduced some basic group rules such as turn talking and actively listening to others. We used a 'I'm a talking ball' activity, where only the person who was holding the ball was allowed to talk. Other members of the groups listened, without interruption, unless they had a question to ask – then they had to raise a hand and get permission to talk. The two dominant boys had difficulty in waiting for their turn or getting permission for talking. I kept the session deliberately short in order to maintain pace and engagement.

Session 3

In this session I continued to investigate the talking ball activity. Children's speaking and listening skills were becoming more effective and although there were interruptions, they were more relevant and probing rather than disruptive or ignorant.

Sessions 4 and 5

These sessions were based on a *Let's Think* activity in which the children had to discuss together and justify their decisions by adding 'because' to their answer. This was initially a challenge for them, but it was noticeable that the more dominant pupils were not interrupting as much, as they had to justify their vocal responses. Some children still needed support to remind them to use 'because' but other pupils in the group took the opportunity to shine and voice their opinions.

Session 6

This session was based on a 'Let's Think' activity that challenged the pupils' thinking. In this activity pupils order pictures of a cat and a snail to make a logical story. The problem is that one of the pictures will not fit into the story, which causes potential conflict. This proved more successful than earlier sessions, with the children sharing thoughts and ideas more constructively. The session proved equally beneficial for all participants, rather than just one or two of the more dominant, confident pupils.

Extending the activities

When it became evident that the sessions were having a positive impact on the group, I was interested in how this approach would affect other groups where there were issues of group dynamics. The other groups are of either a higher ability level, or a lower

ability level than the group I focused on.

The findings

The pivotal moment for me was the impact of the children's use of accepted rules during group work, such as using 'because' correctly in group discussions. This had the effect of calming the 'noisier' members of the group, which allowed the quieter pupils to come more to the fore. It was evident as the sessions progressed that the 'quieter' pupils were gaining more confidence in the group situation – a process that was also noted outside the recorded sessions.

Pupils of all abilities gained experience of group work and learned to follow rules that made their talk more effective. There was some evidence that pupils transferred their group work skills to other lessons.

I was amazed at the impact of such a simple pedagogical approach which encouraged deeper thinking by such young pupils – a lot of the strategies are promoted within Key Stage 2, but perhaps we under-estimate the abilities of younger minds? It was this 'light bulb' moment that widened the project to other groups within my classroom – to see if it was just the 'mid-range' group that could benefit, or others. The other groups followed the same course of sessions as the focus group, with similar results, the only notable difference being the speech ability levels of the lower attaining group.

Research methods

This research project was undertaken during six sessions over a two/three week period. A video was used to record classroom activities and to offer me the opportunity to analyse the effectiveness of the project, as I was aware that I might miss key incidents which were happening out of my focus. This was analysed with my class-room support assistant in order to capture the range of interactions taking place. After analysing all the evidence gained to see how the project had gone, I started to deliver the sessions to other groups in the class.

Conclusion and implications for future practice

My practice has now been affected more generally and I have extended my approach to include other similar activities. Assuming children will come into the class equipped with these skills is not appropriate, and I am aware of the need to build upon the skills acquired by the pupils within this project.

Lev Vygotsky's work led him to suggest that children learn to think individually through learning to reason with others using dialogue. This was not evident at the start of the sessions, but became more prominent in later sessions. Eventually, the pupils were showing signs of thinking aloud together to create shared knowledge and understanding. Throughout, the learning improved for all pupils as they gained confidence and comfort in talking aloud, with



collaborative thinking helping each other to complete tasks. This, in turn, supported and enhanced their learning experiences.

There is a need to take account of the language abilities of young children, but they are surprisingly well-equipped and can benefit from a teaching approach which offers them skills which give them the confidence to use their minds.

The results of the project showed that through careful coaching, children's behaviour for learning can improve if they are taught the skills required to successfully work together. The next steps are to share my findings with Key Stage 1 colleagues who may benefit from a similar course of sessions. Therefore, I have planned INSET with Key Stage 1 (and Foundation Stage) colleagues, with the possibility of our giving feedback Key Stage 2 colleagues later.

I feel that this project has given me a foundation to build upon in my teaching. At the same time it provides the means for children to gain more experience, knowledge and understanding of working collaboratively so they become more competent communicators.

Suggestions for further reading and references

Adey, P., Robertson, A. & Venville, G. (2001) *Let's Think: A Programme for Developing Thinking with Five and Six Year Olds*. London, nferNelson Publishing.

Dawes, L. & Sams, C. (2004) *Talk Box: Speaking and Listening for Learning at Key Stage 1*. London, David Fulton Publishers.

Research of the Month [RoM] *Raising Achievement Through Group Work* – part of the General Teaching Council's Research Schemes. RoM 35, Available at: [http://www.gtce.org.uk/?view=pdf&itemId=182038&fileName=025-Raising-achievement-through-group-work\(ROM-35\).pdf](http://www.gtce.org.uk/?view=pdf&itemId=182038&fileName=025-Raising-achievement-through-group-work(ROM-35).pdf)



Author's contact details

Colin Hill is currently a Year 3 & 4 teacher at Birkdale Primary School in Southport.
e-mail: hillcolin@hotmail.com

This summary was commissioned by the National Teacher Research Panel for the Teacher Research Conference 2008, which explored and celebrated teacher engagement in and with research.

All conference materials are available at www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/ntrp

This publication has been supported by the DCSF Gender Agenda.

To find out more please email: research.summaries@dcsf.gsi.gov.uk