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Teacher and child talk in active learning and whole-class contexts: some implications for children from economically less advantaged home backgrounds

ABSTRACT

This paper reports the experiences of 150 children and six primary teachers when active learning pedagogies were introduced into the first year of primary schools. Although active learning increased the amount of talk between children, those from socio-economically advantaged homes talked more than those from less advantaged homes. Also, individual children experienced very little time engaged in high-quality talk with the teacher, despite the teachers spending over one-third of their time responding to children's needs and interests. Contextual differences, such as the different staffing ratios in schools and pre-schools, may affect how well the benefits of active learning transfer from pre-school contexts into primary schools. Policy-makers and teachers should pay particular attention to the implications of this for the education of children from economically less advantaged home backgrounds.

Introduction

We know that learning environments are important to language and literacy acquisition and that the learning environment of the classroom affects both what children do and how they do it. This paper examines the experiences of children and teachers in six classrooms in Scotland when teachers introduced active learning into the children's curriculum for their first year at school. It particularly focuses on the extent to which the active learning

provisions provided opportunities for oral language development in the form of talk between children and also talk between adults and children. It is important to understand how pedagogical approaches impact in different learning environments and on different cohorts of children because many countries are seeking to change the type of pedagogies children experience in the early primary stage. For example, the Rose Review of the Curriculum in England also seeks to allow "more opportunities for extending and building upon active, play-based learning across the transition to primary education, particularly for 'summer-born' children and those still working towards the early learning goals" (Rose, 2009, p. 12).

Much research has shown that children from socio-economically disadvantaged home backgrounds typically begin school with poorer spoken language facility than those from more advantaged backgrounds (Zill and Resnick, 2006). While the language environment provided by the school is clearly important for all children, it is particularly important for those from socio-economically disadvantaged homes, who do not have a huge fund of resources outside school and may also be educationally vulnerable in a number of other ways (Snow et al., 1998).

Schools need to ensure that the Early Years curriculum supports and develops young children's oral language skills because they underpin much of the development in literacy. For example, facility in oral language contributes to the development of children's skills in narrative (Dickinson and McCabe, 1991), reading comprehension (Cain, 2003), vocabulary (Biemiller, 2006) and writing (Wells-Rowe, 2003). A strong grasp of oral language also empowers learning more generally; through talk children can organise their understanding of the world (Bruner, 1985; Vygotsky, 1978), reshape their understanding (Barnes, 2008) and develop their reasoning skills (Mercer et al., 1999). Talk also fosters social development (Turnbull and Carpendale, 2001) and emotional well-being (Brown et al., 1996; Miller et al., 1990). Together, the literacy and more general benefits of talk serve to widen children's opportunities for learning (Dunst and Hamby, 1999) and their learning capacity (Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998; Dickinson and Tabors, 2002).

Gordon Wells has shown that the nature of adult-child interaction has an impact on how quickly children acquire language. Children surrounded by adults who welcome opportunities to talk and who have a collaborative style of interaction in which the 'talk agenda' is jointly negotiated between the adult and the child, develop their language skills more quickly than those surrounded by adults who do not encourage interactions or have a non-collaborative style of interaction. In schools, Wells found examples of both adult-child and adult-class interactions in which the adult set the 'talk agenda' and then followed it in an unhelpful manner. He contrasted these with more meaning-focused and negotiated agendas (Wells, 1986).

A negotiated conversational agenda is important not only because it fosters talk that is collaborative and encourages children to build shared meanings, but because it also tends to increase the quantity of talk the child produces. Talk is no different from a great many other areas of learning in that many repeated experiences are needed to develop mastery of conversational and talk skills (Girolametto, 1988; MacDonald, 1989).

It is not only talk between adults and children that matters. Opportunities for child-to-child interaction within the classroom are also important and there has long been recognition of the role of talk between children and its impact on their learning, as well as discussion of how the Early Years curriculum and resources can promote talk, and of how this talk can be made more effective (Larson and Peterson, 2003; Webb et al., 1995; Wegerif et al., 1999).

In many parts of the United Kingdom, there have been concerns that the shift towards a more formal, content-driven, school curriculum makes less space for talk and narrative development. Specific concerns are that more formal, whole-class, settings allow fewer opportunities for children to drive the conversational agenda and also reduce the potential for children to have conversations with other children, to play and engage in other sense-making activities. A more formal curriculum may also restrict teachers' abilities to engage in informal, responsive teaching, and to adapt the pace and sequence of their teaching for individual children (Pugh, 2001). The Cambridge Review has recently called for Early Years classrooms in schools to make space for talk and to enhance the role and status of play (Alexander, 2009). Recent curriculum initiatives in Northern Ireland (Walsh et al., 2006), Wales (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills, 2008) and Scotland (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2007) have promoted the concept of an enriched, play-based curriculum for 4–5-year-old children in the first few years of school, proposing to increase formal schooling patterns only gradually during the infant years.

The changing context in Scotland

In Scotland, the new Curriculum for Excellence (Scottish Executive, 2004, 2007) has attempted to blend the traditional pre-school nursery curriculum with that of the first year of school by introducing one 'Early' level, which covers children aged 3–6 years and spans the two contexts. The approach attempts to take the best elements of the old pre-school 3–5 Curriculum (LTS, 2006) and develop it as a stronger element of the teaching and learning approach in the first year at school.

Accordingly, there has been a push from policy-makers to change practice in schools, to make it more child-centred, more play-focused and more child-initiated as opposed to the traditional teacher-focused and content-driven approaches favoured by earlier policies. One key element of this has been 'active learning', which is commonly described as an approach which focuses on experiential learning with opportunities for play and both child-led and adult-led pedagogical interactions.

Curriculum for Excellence (2007) states that:

"Active learning is learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations. It takes full advantage of the opportunities presented by spontaneous and planned, purposeful play; investigating and exploring; events and life experiences; focused learning and teaching"

(Scottish Executive, 2007, p. 5).

The policy acknowledges the need for sensitive adult intervention to extend learning and encourages schools to give a higher profile to a play-based curriculum. Pre-school research has long shown play to be a particularly important element of a high-quality provision for young children (Siraj-Blatchford and Sylva, 2004). Fabian and Dunlop (2002) suggest that play in the classroom should support learning and development, with the teacher focusing attention on specific elements of the play and providing oral feedback encouraging children's enquiry. Research shows that it can develop children's content knowledge across the curriculum and can play a role in enhancing the development of language, social skills and competencies and in prompting positive dispositions towards learning (Fabian and Dunlop, 2002; Wood and Attfield, 2005). Children's language skills develop through play and Bruner (1980) suggests that the most sustained and productive conversations come from children working together. This encourages discussion and the development of ideas, which is not 'dependent' on adult intervention (Browne, 2007). Play, in particular pretend play, enhances children's language interactions and is often perceived by teachers as an 'underrated context' in language development and competence (Moyle, 1989). However, the research on play has been carried out almost exclusively in pre-school settings. There is less research that looks at whether play is equally likely to enhance language and communication in the school setting. Research into classroom interactions (Mercer, 2000; Skidmore et al., 2003) indicates that small group working provides the best context for an interactive approach with children involved in their own learning. Dombey (2003), however, suggests that active participation from children in whole-class situations is possible; the role of the teacher is of crucial importance and should demonstrate an open-ended approach to language and literacy development. If this participation is planned and prepared by the teacher the pupils will benefit from more interactive sessions and have a greater degree of partnership and autonomy.

There are important differences in the focus, staffing and planning frameworks that operate in pre-school and school settings. Teachers operating a play-based curriculum in school are operating in a context that offers quite different constraints and opportunities from their colleagues working in pre-school contexts. One obvious difference, for example, is that Scottish schools have to implement the new curriculum within their existing resource allocation. Staffing levels have not been changed to facilitate the operation of the new style of teaching and learning and, while the pre-school adult-to-child staffing allocation is one adult to 10 children, the school staffing allocation is one teacher to 25 children, plus whatever classroom assistant time the school chooses to allocate. This places schools and teachers in a difficult position. The child-centred, active learning approach in pre-school implies that teachers in the first year of school are expected to operate a 'responsive curriculum'— in which, having selected resources, they work within an open set of learning outcomes to respond to what young pupils are doing and saying. However, they are staffed for the 'recruitment curriculum' that commonly operates in schools, where the adults determine the learning agenda, pre-selecting resources and learning objectives and 'recruiting' children to the activities.

The study

This paper is based on data collected for a broader study about the impact of active learning on children's engagement in the first year of school (Stephen et al., 2009). The study examines the experiences of 150 children and six primary teachers in Scotland who wanted to introduce active learning in the Early Years at school. All the teachers had opted to be part of the study, were very positive about the policy development for their children, were keen to change their practice and were proactive in trying out new ideas. In each classroom the ethos was to be child centred and play focused. All children were in their first year of school. Their ages ranged from 4 years 6 months to 5 years 6 months. Almost all the children had received pre-school education.

The classes and teachers were drawn from two local authorities. Two classes were in denominational schools and four were in non-denominational schools. Table 1 indicates that the classes involved formed two groups, drawn from schools and local authorities with distinctly different social profiles as measured by the percentage of free school meals (FSM). FSM is widely used as a proxy for socio-economic status in UK educational research and pupils who are entitled to FSM tend, on average, to have lower levels of educational attainment than pupils not entitled to FSM (Hobbs and Vignoles, 2007). They may also begin school with different typical language experiences, and be less advantaged within the school system in terms of their oral language, narrative and vocabulary skills, their phonological awareness and alphabetic knowledge, their experience of (and access to) books and digital technologies, their understandings about the purposes and uses of literacy, as well as their knowledge of the world and levels of home support (Zill and Resnick, 2006).

***Table 1: Percentage of pupils registered for free meals
in 2007/2008 in Scotland (primary)***

Class	Percentage of FSM for school (%)	Local authority average FSM (%)	Scottish average FSM 2007–2008 (%)
A	1.5	8.2	16.9
B	1.5	8.2	16.9
C	4.2	8.2	16.9
D	34.9	23.3	16.9
E	53.6	23.3	16.9
F	31.2	23.3	16.9

Source: LTS: Scottish Schools.

<http://www.ltscotland.org.uk/scottishschoolsonline/index.asp>

FSM, free school meals.

Each class teacher, in consultation with the head teacher, decided how to plan and implement the new active learning curriculum. One class teacher chose a 'soft start' where the children self-registered and then selected their own activities from the selection of choices on offer for the week. All activities had to be covered over the course of a week, but the children could choose when they would do each activity. The learning approach in this classroom could be described as having similarities to a High/Scope approach.

"Active learning is the foundation of the High/Scope approach: learning is initiated by the child. The curriculum is planned around children's needs, interests and ongoing cognitive concerns and can be adapted to different age groups and settings"

(Wood and Attfield, 2005, p. 130).

The other five class teachers chose to have a more traditional 'primary school' start to the day with a general registration followed by formal, teacher-led literacy and numeracy sessions. After these, children rotated around structured and play-based activities covering content ideas from mathematics, literacy, environmental studies and other curricular areas. In these classrooms, one activity was always directly teacher supported, and the others involved children working collaboratively or independently in their groups. After a set period of time, all groups rotated so that all children experienced all activities.

Methodology

Each classroom was observed on four separate occasions. The total observation time spent in the six classrooms amounted to 98 hours. The observations followed a strict schedule: each classroom was scanned every 10 minutes for 2 minutes. The observers noted where the teacher was and categorised what she was doing against a list of observable behaviours and then categorised the children's actions against a list of observable behaviours. Six children were also observed in 10-minute blocks each hour, and the observer categorised their actions and recorded their level of engagement. To ensure reliability, half a day was spent in joint observation and rating of behaviours using the engagement scales and categories. This showed that observer reliability was above 95%.

Semi-structured interviews with class teachers asked each teacher to describe the active learning practice in their classroom and the implications for the children's learning experiences. Teachers were also asked to provide examples of any evidence of impact on the children's development and learning from the active learning approach, if they claimed this as their impression. Each teacher was also invited to share any data they had gathered – for example their own records of classroom observations, daily plans and

experiences, extracts from children's profiles and photographs or notes recording particular classroom events.

Approximately 30% of the parents from five of the six classes were selected at random and interviewed by telephone. The parents were asked whether their child talked to them about what goes on in the classroom and if so what kind of thing their child talked about.

Results and discussion: children's and teachers' behaviours during active learning

In this paper we are particularly addressing the question of how active learning approaches affected the type and quantity of oral language opportunities afforded to children in the classroom. The analysis, therefore, is presented in terms of the teachers' and children's communicative behaviours observed when the classes were working in whole-class teaching and learning situations (Tables 2 and 3) and when the classes were working in active learning groups (Tables 4 and 5).

Table 2: Percentage of teachers' time spent on talk and non-talk activities in the six schools combined and in low and high FSM schools, when engaged in whole-class teaching activities

General communicative engagement category	Average across all classes (%)	Average for low FSM classes (%)	Average for high FSM classes (%)
<i>Teacher behaviours—whole class</i>			
Managing behaviour, transitions and resources	36	43	29
Teacher-led discussion of content-focused agendas	43.4	37.5	49.4
Teacher responding to children's needs and interests	20.6	19.5	21.6

FSM, free school meals.

Table 3: Behaviours of children when engaged in whole-class activities across all six schools combined and for low and high FSM schools, expressed as a percentage of total observed time

General category heading	Average across all classes	Average for low FSM classes (%)	Average for high FSM classes (%)
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(%)

Child behaviours—whole class

Behaving, waiting, transitions	25.25	35.58	14.92
Children responding to teacher's instructions and questions	41.16	32.46	49.86
Talk with teacher, in context of child's actions and activities	15.1	13.7	16.49
Child-to-child talk	3.86	4.46	3.26
Children off task – disengaged, fidgeting, playing with shoes	14.51	13.66	15.3

FSM, free school meals.

Table 4: Percentage of teachers' time spent on talk and non-talk activities in the six schools combined and in the less advantaged, high FSM, classes and the advantaged, low FSM schools, when the pupils were engaged in active learning group activities

Behaviour category	Average across all classes (%)	Average for low FSM classes (%)	Average for high FSM classes (%)
<i>Teacher behaviours—active learning groups</i>			
Managing behaviour, transition and resources	28.24	32.6	25.2
Teacher-led content-focused agendas	32.03	24.05	40.3
Teacher responding to children's needs and interests	39.73	42.35	34.36

FSM, free school meals.

Table 5: Behaviours of children when engaged in active learning activities across all six schools, and for low and high FSM schools, expressed as a percentage of total observed time

General category heading	Average across all schools (%)	Average for low FSM schools (%)	Average for high FSM schools (%)
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Child behaviours – active learning group activities

Behaving, waiting, transitions	9.86	1.8	17.3
Children responding to teacher instructions and questions	32.18	34.44	29.86
Talk with teacher, in context of child's actions and activities	5	2.36	7.66
Child-to-child talk	47.17	55.96	39.39
Children off task – disengaged, fidgeting, playing with shoes	5.75	4.8	6.7

FSM, free school meals.

To arrive at this analysis, we re-categorised the specific types of behaviours observed in the original study into broad categories, which capture different types of communicative engagement. For the teachers, these were: teacher-initiated/led discussion of a content-focused agenda; teachers responding to child-initiated agendas, or to the children's needs and interests; and teachers managing behaviour, transitions and resources. For the children, the observations were re-categorised to reflect the following types of communicative engagement: children talking with the teacher in the context of the child's actions and activities; children talking to other children about the activities in which they were engaged; children responding to the teacher instructions and questions; children 'behaving' (waiting passively, perhaps for the teacher to issue instructions or waiting their turn) and in transition between activities; and children off task and showing disengaged behaviour such as fidgeting or playing with their shoes.

Tables 2 and 3 show the behaviours of the teachers (Table 2) and the children (Table 3) when the class was engaged in whole-class activities, represented as a percentage of the total time observed across all six schools. They also give a breakdown showing the percentage of time these behaviours were observed in the socio-economically advantaged, low FSM classes and the socio-economically disadvantaged high FSM classes.

In the whole-class teaching situations, teachers spent a large percentage of their time managing behaviour, particularly in the more advantaged cohorts and this resulted in the pupils spending time waiting. As would be expected, there was a high percentage of teacher-led talk and of children responding. Within this, the most teacher-led talk was in the high FSM classes. Children spent little time talking to each other and less time was spent responding to the children's needs and interests than in managing behaviour. There was also a considerable amount of time spent on off-task behaviour.

In the active learning situations, teachers spent more time responding to children's needs and interests. They still spend almost a third of their time managing behaviour, particularly in the economically advantaged cohorts. This perhaps reflects a greater concern among school management and parents in these schools for teachers to be seen to

be controlling children's behaviour in the classrooms. There was a great deal of child-to-child talk in the active learning classrooms, particularly in the classrooms with children from economically advantaged backgrounds, and there was much less time spent in off-task behaviours. A lower percentage of child-to-child talk was observed in the classrooms serving economically disadvantaged children, and more time was spent waiting and in transition between activities. In both settings, there was actually very little teacher talk in the context of the children's actions and activities. The observations of teacher behaviours indicate that the teachers were spending quite some time – more than a third of the total time – talking to the children and responding to what they were saying and doing but, because this was happening in small groups, only a few children benefited. The low amount of talk with the teacher in the context of the children's actions and activities in Table 5 shows that, at any one time, very few children were getting the "sensitive adult intervention to extend learning" that was envisaged in the Curriculum for Excellence policy documentation.

It is not surprising that there is more child-to-child talk in active learning, or that there is more teacher-led talk in whole-class situations. It is pleasing that the children were showing fewer off-task behaviours during active learning activities, and perhaps this indicates greater engagement with the active learning tasks.

However, if there is more child-to-child talk in the active learning contexts, and very little interaction with the teacher, the design of the tasks is of central importance. The task needs to be structured in ways that scaffold the learning and that encourage children to interact so that they scaffold for each other. If active learning and play-based experiences in the early years of school are not to be given the same staffing resource as those in the pre-school sector, the teachers' expertise in designing tasks that promote interaction and encourage children to focus their talk on the learning content is crucial. This difference between the pre-school and the school context needs to be recognised in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development courses.

It is slightly worrying that there is less child-to-child talk in the economically disadvantaged classrooms, with children spending much more time waiting and in transition between activities. We know that children from economically advantaged homes are more likely to start school with more advanced language, vocabulary and conversational skills, higher verbal reasoning skills and a better grasp of narrative. The oral language skills they have developed help them to make sense of their experiences and to learn from each other by allowing them to recall, compare and elaborate each other's explanations to make sense of their learning. Conversely, children from less advantaged backgrounds have less linguistic resource to draw upon. If the impact of socio-economic status on achievement is to be addressed, professionals need to recognise that schools serving populations of linguistically vulnerable children may need a greater adult resource to provide the specific modelling and scaffolding for language and learning. To treat both classroom settings as though they were the same is to sanction and enshrine the language differences of advantaged and less advantaged children in ways that are likely to exacerbate them, widening rather than addressing the attainment gaps that currently exist.

Results and discussion: teacher and parent interviews about active learning

The teachers were interviewed about active learning in their classrooms. All were of the opinion that this active learning approach was a better way to teach compared with the more traditional way they had used before. Teacher E stated: "AL (active learning) gives you freedom and the opportunity to know where the children are. For example, if they are not speaking, are not relaxed how can you know in traditional methods where they are?" All were aware of the role of talk and of its importance in an active learning environment. Teacher C stated: "We have a discussion afterwards with the children and a plenary session on what happened ... they can talk about it ... and if it's done successfully go on to the next step in their learning". They felt that the quality of the children's talk was richer and was more related to their learning: "Children [are more] engaged in an activity where they are talking, listening to each other" (Teacher A). The teachers also felt that this approach allowed them to develop a better relationship with the children and, as a result, were more responsive to them: "[I] know the class so well already because of the way of managing it – I can spend time talking to them, identifying next steps. I'm able to give lots of oral feedback – give quality feedback to children" (Teacher A).

We analysed the teacher interviews and counted the number of times teachers made reference to talk and the role of talk in learning. This analysis shows that there may be some differences in the extent to which different teachers were aware of the role and nature of talk in the classroom. Some referred to it very much more frequently, and in a wider range of discussion contexts, than others. Table 6 shows that one teacher referred to talk very much more often than the others. Although the numbers are small, it seems that the teachers working with children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may appear to be more aware of the talk occurring in their classrooms than those working with children from more advantaged backgrounds. This is important because teacher expectations and values affect what happens in classrooms (Hargreaves, 1994).

Table 6: Number of references teachers made to talk, discussion and conversation

Teacher	ABC	D	EF	Average (%)	Low FSM (%)	High FSM (%)
<i>Number of teacher references to talk during interview</i>						
Number of references	5	4	6	13	7	7
				5		9

FSM, free school meals.

Teachers also felt that the active learning sessions were having a persistent influence on children's social interaction in more traditional school-based learning situations such as reading groups. Teacher C said: "Reading has changed; children read to one another, they ask one another questions so they have to listen to one another". They reported that they were more aware of the contexts in which children talked. Teacher F noted that "Quieter children such as Sarah wouldn't volunteer anything in the whole group but will talk in the

reading group".

The teachers also noted that there was more discussion with parents and a better understanding of the need for dialogue.

"[We have] ... just had parents' night when they are saying things like their child love the house corner or science lab, love coming to school. Parents are very positive and report a huge difference in way children engage. More sharing of info going on e.g. what the actions are for sounds, where to get things. Two way flow"

(Teacher E).

Interviews with parents indicate that they too were positive about this new approach. They were asked about how their children were getting on and about the kinds of things that their children had been learning. In response to this, they talked about their children's reading, writing, phonics, counting and number and said that their children had been telling them about these aspects. Most parents reported that their children enjoyed all aspects of school and felt they were making better than expected progress. Some parents had older children who had experienced a more traditional start to formal education and these parents were asked about whether they noticed any differences. They reported that their children who were experiencing active and play-based learning were happy to talk about what they were doing at school and they felt they were asking more questions, were more independent and more confident about school. One parent said that their child spoke about what he did in school: "Mostly he talks about maths and counting".

It is encouraging that, by changing what they do in schools, teachers can promote learning conversations at home. We know that children are likely to ask different types of questions of their parents and that it is important that children take their school learning and recall, apply and consolidate it in contexts outside school. Explaining what they have been doing at school supports children in remembering, reflecting and identifying what is, and what has been, important about the learning activities.

Conclusion

Curriculum change is always challenging, and will always be dependent on how curriculum innovations are interpreted as they are moved through the different levels of policy and practice. Andrew Hargreaves has famously written that "Teachers don't merely deliver the curriculum. It is what teachers think, what teachers believe and what teachers do that ultimately shapes the kinds of learning that young people get" (1994, p. 9). However, effective education is not only about teachers', or even policy makers', beliefs and values. It is also about their understandings of what matters in curriculum activities and of evidence about how curriculum activities may need to be reinterpreted and re-framed if they are to produce the same benefits when implemented in a new context.

This paper has been based on a small study involving six teachers and 150 children. It

reports that the children enjoyed active learning and were discussing their school day at home, an important opportunity for developing narrative talk. However, during active learning in class, individual children experienced very little time engaged in talk with the teacher and did not get the sensitive adult interactions that would scaffold learning and develop oral language abilities envisioned by policy-makers. Active learning did, however, increase the amount of talk between children, although those from socio-economically advantaged homes got more talk experiences, and are better positioned to make use of them, than children from less advantaged homes.

Educationalists should pay particular attention to these different effects when planning, resourcing and implementing future developments. It is important for everyone – teachers, policy-makers and researchers – to get a better understanding of how active learning may impact on, and interact with, the language that children bring to school. Only then will we have the clarity that is needed to guide the future development of policy, teacher education and pedagogy so that we provide appropriate support to those children who need it most.

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