

Dialogic Teaching

A Report on the work of a Research Learning Community on the application of dialogic teaching strategies to improve learning across a group of schools in Lewisham, South London.

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Dialogic teaching strategies give children the opportunity to contribute to class dialogue while exploring the limits of their understanding and challenging other children to do the same. At the same time, they practice new ways of using language as a tool for constructing knowledge, reasoning and problem solving. At Cambridge University, Faculty of Education, they explain, 'through dialogue, teachers can elicit students' everyday 'common sense' perspectives, engage with their developing ideas and help them overcome misunderstandings.' (2019). In practice, the role of the teacher is to engage the children in dialogue and clarify ideas, while modelling different ways of using language to articulate learning.



The Role of Questioning in Dialogic Teaching

Previously, research has shown a 'teacher dominance' in classroom talk; where, as Myhill, Jones and Hopper noted, 'teachers are asking

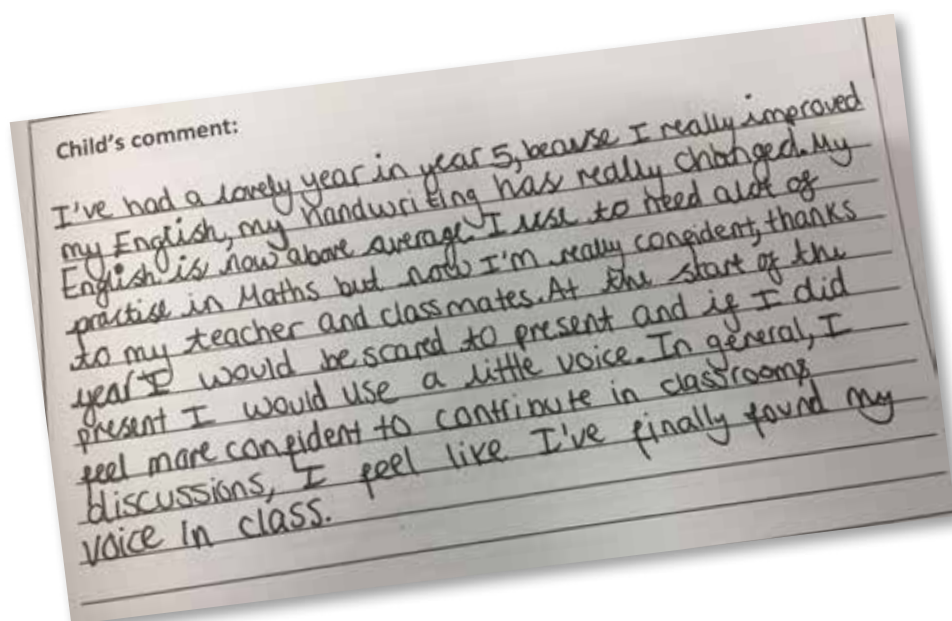
largely closed questions making little use of the children's prior knowledge' (2006:134). Therefore, teachers have been encouraged to reduce the 'teacher voice' and promote the child's. However, Mercer (2003)

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argues, that simply telling teachers to stop asking questions is too simplistic an approach and does not take into account that teachers rely on their professional judgements to ensure every child makes good progress; with 'questioning' inevitably providing the foundation of these assessments.

Having said this, most teacher questions form part of a questioning structure referred to as an 'initiation-response-feedback (IRF)' exchange (Mercer, 2003). These IRF exchanges are easily recognisable in classrooms and all follow a familiar form. The exchange between the teacher and child begins with the teacher posing a question with the expectation that the child will share their knowledge on the subject and in turn gain teacher feedback. This ping pong approach to questioning and feedback has been ferociously debated amongst educational researchers, such as William cited by Fawcett in 2020 (p. 101), who question its function and value to learning.

So how should 'talk' and 'questioning' be approached in a dialogic classroom? As Mercer (2003) successfully argues, questions can reside in the highest lofts of education, encouraging children's critical thinking skills, conversely they may be used to manage the mundane - 'do you have your equipment and word mats ready?' The frequency of teacher's questions are irrespective if they provoke extended and reflective talk among the children. A teacher's use of questions should encourage and



extend on children's understanding. When modelled correctly, children can use their own questions and statements to become reflective learners.

Scaffolding Dialogic Learning

During a dialogic session, it is good to begin with a recap of 'talk rules' which are a set of good listening skills explicitly taught before the session begins. A topic line can be given to the children who are then supported by 'dialogic phrases' and sentence stems. These sentence stems could be as simple as 'because I know' and 'thinking about my previous learning'. Key vocabulary is displayed in sight of every child and during the session the teacher models different approaches to asking questions, posing explanations and clarifying children's points. A basketball approach to a discussion, as described by William (2019) means every child can share their thoughts and/or respond to a previous point. Furthermore, research carried out by

Rojas-Drummond and Zapata's study on exploratory talk in a Mexican context (2010), found reasoned dialogue is needed to enable children to develop their use of language as a learning tool. In a dialogic classroom, teachers and children model 'talk' strategies which promote; reasoning, reflection, problem-solving and clarification.

Dialogic Teaching as a Vehicle for 'Effective Feedback'.

When children engage with feedback and are given the tools to reflect and build on previous learning, progress can be accelerated by as much as eight months (Dann, 2015). With this in mind, I was tasked to find more effective ways to feedback to our children. It had become obvious teacher's deep marking of ninety books a night was exhausting at best and futile at worst. Children would arrive ready for their exciting new learning, only to be confronted with yesterday's work and a comment, wish or question to respond to. The



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comments we received in return were often thanking us for our ideas, promising they would look at a sentence again or duly copying out spellings in neat rows. The children found it hard to drum up any enthusiasm for learning when they had already shelved it to 'yesterday's news'.

As such, over the course of my inquiry I found feedback is at its most effective when given immediately and with purpose. With this in mind, each child should receive a clear explanation as to their understanding of the subject at the time of learning. We found distance marking meant we were effectively marking in hindsight and trying to reignite their learning the following session (which in some cases could be in a week's time). It was the need to make feedback immediately accessible and engaging which led me to 'dialogic teaching'. And so in my search for a 'feedback alternative', I became involved with the London South Teaching School Alliance, who were working in partnership with The University of Cambridge Faculty of Education to research and develop 'Dialogic Teaching'. Many primary schools from across the London Boroughs worked together to form a 'research learning community' in which teachers from all key stages, completed an inquiry around 'class dialogue'.

The Early Years Model for Effective Feedback

Having worked closely with a team of teachers from across the different key stages, it became



apparent feeding back to children through immediate discussion is already embedded within Early Years practice. Plunket and Schafer (1993 cited in Barrett, 1999: 63) suggest from the age of 18 months, children's language acquisition has a metaphoric 'growth spurt' and it is during these formative years when education can take full advantage of their developing language and communication skills. With Early Years practitioners providing all feedback verbally, our young linguists are already primed to benefit from the dialogic approach to teaching. However, as children move through education, the findings suggest an emphasis on 'marking books and written feedback' diminishes the children's natural linguistic ability. Through either whole class or small group feedback discussions, children are able to reflect immediately on the learning taking place and agree with or challenge their peer's point of view. These feedback discussions can take place at any time during a session and are often used as mini-

plenaries. Alternatively, a teacher may spot a general misconception and bring the class together to discuss the concept or run an immediate intervention with a small group. Through a dialogic approach to feedback, the teacher can teach from the misconception and plan open questions accordingly.

The Results of the Inquiry

As a result of the inquiry, opportunities for children to develop high level speaking and listening skills through oral rehearsal and drama are planned for explicitly and teachers provide and model a consistent language framework. This framework is based upon the 2018/19 Teacher Scheme for Education Dialogue Analysis (T-SEDA) resources. Through the application of dialogic teaching and use of the T-SEDA resources, children are rapidly becoming autonomous masters of their own feedback where ideas are challenged, misconceptions verbally interrogated and debates are held at every opportunity.



To ascertain the qualitative impact dialogic teaching has had within the school, teachers and children were given the opportunity to comment on their experience.

One year five child wrote, “before, the teacher would give us feedback in our book and we would not do anything about it... I feel I have much more confidence in myself... I discuss with my friends, build on each other’s ideas, challenge, clarify answers and ask questions.” Teachers also saw an increase in collaborative learning, with one observing an exchange between two pupils who had both completed a math problem, “are you done? Shall we check our work together?”

Conclusion

From the first session, it has been apparent we can use high level discussions to feedback to the children and for them to feedback to us. Moreover, children have demonstrated increased confidence when feeding back to their peers with a significant rise in collaborative learning. We are therefore able to use these discussions to support immediate assessments, ‘in the moment’ planning and interventions. The classroom has become a hub of quality and productive dialogic interaction. For all the reasons above, the inquiry process has been a success and dialogic teaching has provided a viable alternative to replace distance marking. The results speak for themselves: ‘It’s good to talk!’

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Pen Portrait

Danielle Sullivan has worked in education for 15 years and is a middle leader in a diverse Inner-London primary school.

She has worked closely with The London South Teaching School Alliance and The University of Cambridge Faculty of Education to research and develop ‘Dialogic Teaching’.

Danielle was a guest speaker at the 2019 London Education Conference, where she spoke about the use of dialogic teaching for effective feedback.

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