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## What would you like to say? Exploring Shared Sustained Thinking in an Early Childhood Setting

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EYFS

“If the structure does not permit dialogue the structure must be changed”

— Paulo Freire (1968)

### Project rationale

I had noticed that talk in the afternoon in EYFS was less structured than the morning, with fewer instances of dialogue. When pupils were completing free flow afternoon activities, there was little or no dialogue and any talk would often fall into the disputational category. Disputational talk can be characterised as ‘disagreement and individualised decision-making. There are few attempts to pool resources or to offer constructive criticism of suggestions.’ (Mercer 1995: 104). I hoped to move the talk of the students in EYFS towards one that was more exploratory, where there is co-construction of understanding through critical but constructive engagement of learners in each other’s ideas and reasoning is apparent. Indicators of exploratory talk include;

- the views of all members of the group are sought, respected and considered
- ideas need to be made clear and explicit
- proposals are challenged and may even be counter-challenged, but reasons are given for challenges
- alternative ideas are valued
- the group seeks to reach agreement through negotiation and evaluation of different views before taking a decision or acting
- different viewpoints are discussed and reasoning is applied
- agreement is sought and joint decisions reached (Mercer et al., 2004).

To allow for more scenarios for exploratory talk, I looked to design tasks that promoted an increase in opportunities for dialogue using the principles of shared sustained thinking (SST).

SST has been defined as:

‘An episode in which two or more individuals ‘work together’ in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend the understanding.’ (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002a, 8).

My sample group was selected based on my previous observations of talk; Khalid and Billy tended to dominate talk within a group setting, often showing little or no regard for the thoughts or ideas of others. Anya was selected as she was very reluctant to speak during group discussion unless asked directly by an adult, even then answers would be very short often without justification. Layla was selected as she would be very affirming; encouraging her group mates but rarely showing her own thoughts or ideas. The hope with this selection is that there would be a more even distribution of talk within the group, with more examples of justification and critical dialogue.<sup>1</sup>

The research includes 4 observations of group talk, two initial baseline observations and two impact observations conducted after a 4 week intervention programme (one session per week) focusing on SST. The rationale here was that after the teacher facilitated intervention programme, the students’ group talk would be more exploratory when a teacher was not facilitating a discussion, therefore improving the quality of talk within the classroom when teacher wasn’t working with a group.

<sup>1</sup>All names have been have been changed for the purpose of anonymity

TABLE 1: Sequence and details of each task.

Task	Title	Details
1	Design a new superhero	Design a new superhero - costume, and super powers
2	Build a Wolf-Proof house	Build a house with blocks to withstand an attack from the big bad wolf
3	Ghanaian Goldilocks	Retelling the story of Goldilocks imagining the character was from Ghana.
4	Why was Frank Bailey important?	End of the unit discussion exploring Frank Bailey - children designed their own fire engine.

## Baseline data

The research approach I used for this impact project was mixed methods, choosing to analyse both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. The quantitative data collected focussed on two areas; the total numbers of words each student spoke during each task but also the number of turns they had in the conversation.

### Quantitative Data:

Below is a table detailing the quantitative data collected. The data shows the particular dominance male students have in both total words spoken and turns taken, in comparison with the female students.

Task	Layla		Anya		Khalid		Billy	
	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns
Task 1	56	8	8	1	142	18	276	23
Task 2	69	10	40	7	162	21	209	26
Total	125	18	47	8	304	39	488	49
*Average	63	9	24	4	152	20	268	25

\*Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number

### Qualitative Data:

The nature of what was spoken and the manner in which it was is also important to consider here. Throughout both tasks the pupils showed very little cohesion when working as a group. Billy initially dominated both tasks, with the majority of dialogue happening between himself and Khalid, the nature of this talk could be classified as disputational, with a lot of individualised thinking and competitive jostling of their ideas to be the ones included.

Anya contributed very little and what she said was largely ignored by the group and could be considered more of a self commentary on her own actions rather than an attempt at engaging with the group. Largely, what Layla said was an attempt to infiltrate the discussion between Billy and Khalid, interestingly Layla initiated dialogue (three times) through questions all to Billy about what he thought the group should do. None of the rest of the group asked a question.

## Intervention

The weekly intervention sessions were all teacher facilitated, with a focus on the following three areas. The tasks (including the observation tasks) were all designed to be open ended problem solving tasks with no 'right' answer, and all had a link to the topic unit at the time. The use of a problem solving task was in order to allow opportunities for exploratory dialogue where students were required to justify and co-construct but also, open ended to allow for multiple ways of answering. By not having a 'right' answer I hoped it would increase the students' confidence, but also shift attention to the justification over the answer. Three areas of specific focus were as follows;

- Praising a student when they asked others to contribute to conversation
- Questions encouraging students to extend their thinking
- Asking the students what questions they had about the task

## Impact

### Quantitative Data:

The data post intervention shows more of an even distribution in the total numbers of words spoken and the number of turns taken. Billy and Khalid still have the two highest number of words spoken, however this was less than their totals pre intervention; of particular note is the decrease in Billy's total numbers of words. There was a rise in Layla's total and a significant increase in Anya's totals (over three times the amount) compared to the baseline data.

Task	Layla		Anya		Khalid		Billy	
	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns	No of words	No of turns
Task 3	95	11	68	8	152	12	180	16
Task 4	139	16	101	12	156	15	221	18
Total	234	27	167	20	308	27	401	34
*Average	117	14	84	10	154	14	201	17

\*Note: These numbers have been rounded to the nearest whole number

### Qualitative Data:

Although Anya still spoke the least of the group, the nature of what she said was interesting as she made more attempts to engage with the group rather than just self commentate. Billy and Khalid still spoke the most and this dialogue was still largely disputational, however there were glimpses of exploratory talk as they began to provide justifications for their answers and attempt to get to a shared agreement. In Task 3, both Billy and Khalid asked Anya what ideas she had, and although these were largely ignored it was positive to see them noticing Anya's passivity and inviting her to contribute to the conversation. Layla again asked more questions than anyone else, and was more engaged with the whole group rather than just Billy.

## Research ethics

To ensure my research was explained clearly I sent out a letter (see appendix) of permission clearly outlining the aims of the research, the process in which the data will be collected, that the data collected will be kept in secure password protected files, that children will remain anonymous throughout and have the right to withdraw at any time of the project. To protect the learners' identities pseudonyms have been used throughout this assignment. Alderson et al (2009: 99) advocate the use of three protective layers of permission, therefore permission was sought from my head teacher, parents of participants and the participants themselves. As I work in a school where 93% of the children and their families have English as a second language, I arranged meetings with the parents so as to avoid any misunderstandings that may have occurred. In these meetings I explained the contents of the letter, outlined the purpose of the research, and went through the ethical guidelines with them.

## Impact

The size of the sample inevitably precludes any substantial conclusions, but the data is interesting in that it does show that there was a more even distribution in instances of talk across the group. The use of quantitative data worked well here, as it shows clear discrepancies with talk across the group clearly. Perhaps in the future a bigger focus could be placed on the nature of talk through more rigorous qualitative data collection. Perhaps what happened here is that there was more talk, but without a finer focus could this just be more disputational talk. There was a huge divide in gender from the baseline data collected ( a larger divide than I had anticipated), this is a concern - is this prevalent across the whole school? Perhaps further interventions in building girls' self esteem would be beneficial to group exploratory talk? A huge benefit of this project was noticing the power decolonising curriculum had on the quality of talk within the classroom.

Task 3 and 4 were products of our school's attempt to develop a curriculum that created space and opportunity for all members of society to engage with, rather than perhaps the status quo curriculum that places a huge emphasis on a white, male euro-centric view of the world. Oracy is a great vehicle to create dialogue and even the location of knowledge within society. My next steps are to explore the role oracy has in the creation of a curriculum and pedagogy that does not overlook female, black, asian and minority ethnic groups, as the UK has traditionally done.

## References

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