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**Developing exploratory talk and thinking in secondary English  
lessons: theoretical and pedagogical implications**

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**Doctor of Education (EdD)**

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**July, 2010**

**Declaration**

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature:.....

## Acknowledgements

This thesis is for my family, Josie and Gay Sutherland and especially my daughter, Livvy, whose dialogic talk has been my greatest source of inspiration. I am also very grateful to Jacqui and Joel Fogden, John and Sally Proudfit, Richard and Jane Fogden, Julian Wilson and Jacqui Shepherd for stimulating my thinking and for their constant support.

Particular thanks go to my teacher/researcher and student collaborators in Sussex schools and supervisors, John Pryor and Judy Sebba, all of whom have inspired me with their work and conversation, acute critical judgement and encouragement. I owe a huge debt of thanks to my colleague and friend, Jo Westbrook, for her intellect, tremendous understanding of English teaching and unfailing encouragement to follow her lead in completing this thesis.

I am also very grateful to all my other teacher and university colleagues associated with the School of Education and Social Work at Sussex University, including fellow EdD students, for their encouragement and the many rich conversations that have set me thinking, in particular: Tamsin Banks, Sally Rodgers, Emily Holland, Paul Shellard, Libby Mathews, Paul Lennon, Maddy Robbins, Eddie Slater, Barbara Crossouard, Pat Drake, Vivienne Griffiths, Andy Grevatt, Elizabeth McCrum, Angie Jacklin, Sarah Aynsley, Duncan Mackrill, Simon Thompson, Lori Altendorff, Jo Boaler, Louise Gazeley, Sally Dudley, Rob Rosenthal, James Williams, Peter Adamczyk, Gretel Scott and the ITE team.

My thanks, go, too, to my patient teaching and other friends, who have provided long-distance stimulation and support with this thesis, including Elizabeth Renton, Peter Lang, Tony and Sage Fuller, Paula Morrisson, Robert and Louis Priday, Sian Carr, Nicky Bingham, Malin Illott, Harriet Arnold, Helen Tyas, Jim Clewlow, Doug Waite, Jo Roeg and Diane Farrell.

My final thanks are to my father, Stuart Sutherland and uncle, Andy Fogden, for stimulating my passion for education and talk.

## Developing exploratory talk and thinking in secondary English lessons: theoretical and pedagogical implications

### **Summary**

This is a year-long, action-research project investigating how to develop pupils' exploratory talk and higher-cognitive thinking in secondary English classes. Four teachers, their Year 8 classes (110 pupils) in Sussex and an ITE educator collaborated to investigate whether the quality of pupils' exploratory talk could be improved by a structured, pedagogical approach, and to explore contextual factors and other conditions for its development. The approach included making the skills of this formal, oral discourse explicit to pupils, using pupils' ground-rules, teacher modelling and structured tasks; regular practice and critical reflection on talk. It also involved cross-school collaboration, for example, classes evaluated each other's developing talk on video; and teachers met throughout the project to reflect on individual and collective issues and to review data and emerging findings. The data include qualitative analysis of pupil discourse taken from throughout the project, supported by associated observations and interviews with teachers and pupils.

The study concludes that a rich, apprenticeship model inducting students in how to use exploratory, dialogic talk, including student critical reflection on this, contributes to the development both of this discourse and its associated higher-cognitive processes, especially in relation to the reading of texts. However, these appear to be necessary, but insufficient conditions for such development. The transformation in students' discourse depends on a more significant transformation in their identities, which is contingent on a similar shift in the range of teacher identities being performed. Practising exploratory talk gives students experience of a wider range of identities, especially for those who are unconfident, low-achieving and/or from low socioeconomic backgrounds, in particular boys, but also girls, enabling them to gain a 'voice' in school precluded by the discourses and identities generally adopted. This, thus, enables students to develop ways of talking and thinking essential for achievement across the curriculum, moving from silence at the margins to speech at the centre. Teachers need to appreciate the extent to which discourse exceeds language structures, encoding ways of behaving, valuing and 'being' and therefore being related to both the relationships and teacher/pupil identities generated in the classroom.

Furthermore, the study concludes that there is a highly significant relationship between pupils practising dialogic, exploratory talk in groups and developing sophisticated reading comprehension skills: critical literacy, a key aim for all English teachers. The study defines a particular type of exploratory discourse that emerges in English lessons, when pupils are reading and collaborating in groups: 'tentative talk about text'. This is characterised by its speculative, tentative and analytical nature; its openness to plural interpretations of texts and its co-construction of meanings.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

APP	Assessing Pupils' Progress in English at Key Stage 3
AR	Action Research
CA	Conversation Analysis
CAS	Critical Analytical Study
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
EAL	English as an Additional Language
IRE	Initiation Response Evaluation
IRF	Initiation Response Feedback
ITE	Initial Teacher Education
IWB	Interactive Whiteboard
KS3	Key Stage 3: 11-14 year-olds
NC	National Curriculum for England: Programme of Study for English
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate of Education
PNS	Primary National Strategy, formerly National Literacy Strategy
RT	Reciprocal Teaching
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SNS	Secondary National Strategy, formerly Key Stage 3 National Strategy



## Chapter 1: Context and Rationale

### 1.1 Introduction

*Any true understanding is dialogic in nature... [ and] strives to match the speaker's word with a counter word* (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 102, original emphasis)

Life by its very nature is dialogic. To live means to participate in dialogue: to ask questions, to heed, to respond, to agree. [...] Consciousness is in essence multiple.' (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 293, 288)

This thesis is a response to the stimulating chain of voices, past and present, proposing the centrality of talk to learning and the development of consciousness, by exploring its implications for talk in the English classroom. More specifically, the study investigates: what does it mean for secondary school pupils to develop their 'voice' and to be able to engage in Bakhtinian (1981) dialogic talk, especially in relation to texts?

Given that this topic has been hotly debated since the 1960s, with work by Vygotsky (1978, 1986) and Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) influencing research, policy and practice (see English National Curriculum, DES, 1995), it is legitimate to ask, what else can there be to say? My response would be to reflect briefly on the history of these last fifty years, in terms of the fluctuations in policy and attitudes towards 'oracy' (significantly, first coined by Wilkinson in 1965).

Initially, there was, rightly, in the context of transmissive forms of whole-class teaching, a concern with 'liberating' pupils to explore ideas together in groups and to use their 'own voice', for example, grappling with complex ideas in colloquial, rather than alien, technical language (Barnes et al, 1969; Britton, 1992). The pioneering work of the National Oracy Project (Norman, 1992), aptly named *Thinking Voices*, usefully consolidated these ideas, exploring cross-curricular strategies for developing oracy in pupils. These ideas informed the National Curriculum for English (DES, 1995, henceforth NC), which established speaking and listening as one of its three key strands.

However, although innovative researchers (for example, Barnes and Todd, 1977, 1995) consistently argued that pupils needed to practise a range of oral registers, advocating, for example, a structured approach to pupil collaborative talk, this was undercut by fears elsewhere

that this threatened the uniqueness of the pupil's individual 'voice' and, of course, identity, viewed primarily as enabling 'personal expression', especially in English (Britton, 1992). The argument was complicated by sociolinguistic emphasis on descriptive, not prescriptive frameworks for speech (Trudgill, 2000). Although this, uncontentionally, simply separated grammatical differences between dialects from ideological arguments in favour of prestige forms, and did not relate to register, it was pounced on by critics (Honey, 1983; Marenbon, 1994), as evidence of an 'anything goes' attitude in classrooms, contributing to a decline in standards of speech, meaning, primarily, the ability to use Standard English and Received Pronunciation (see MacLure's, (2003) Critical Discourse Analysis of the rhetoric of Education Secretary, Gillian Shepherd's, campaign against Estuary English, or 'communication by grunt' in classrooms, and its association with moral decline).

The above debates and political context, coupled with research demonstrating that group talk was often 'social' not 'cognitive' (Alexander, 2000, p. 566; Kutnick et al, 2005) and with low UK performance in international data (Reynolds and Farrer, 1996), triggered a return to a pedagogy centred on whole-class talk in England, represented by the National Literacy and Key Stage 3 Strategies (DfEE, 1997, 2001a, renamed Primary/Secondary National Strategy, DCSF, 2006, 2008a, henceforth PNS/SNS).

This coincided with Alexander's (2000, p. 567) comparative international study of education across five countries, in which, reflecting on the last forty years of classroom talk, he concluded:

English primary pedagogy failed to work out a structured middle ground between silence, rote and chanting on the one hand, and *easy-going chatter* on the other. (emphasis added)

Galton et al (2009) and others similarly critiqued the quality of pupils' collaborative talk in secondary classrooms, while Nystrand et al (1997, 2001) confirmed comparable, undialogic and cognitively unchallenging forms of talk in US classrooms. Alexander (2000, p. 560) cautiously hoped that the UK's new literacy strategy (DfEE, 1997), informed by his and other research, 'may offer an alternative' to the current 'lack' of 'real dialogue and handover', 'consciously emulating' European teaching, by providing a more structured approach, 'to stiffen and collectivize classroom talk'.

Four years later, Alexander (2004, revised 2008) abandoned his optimism, and a range of research critiqued the national strategies (DfEE, 2001a), for, if anything, causing a decrease in

elaborated, dialogic talk in pupils, with their rigid, contradictory emphasis on 'fast-paced', 'whole-class' yet 'interactive' lessons (English et al, 2002; Smith et al, 2004). This is the context for this study, which seeks to refine our understanding of dialogic, higher-cognitive talk, by shifting the emphasis firmly onto pupil collaborative discourse, investigating the conditions for this to flourish.

The thesis is divided into 9 chapters. Chapter 1 outlines the current national and local context of the research and its rationale. Chapters 2 and 3 present the literature review and methodology. Chapters 4-7 focus on data analysis, addressing each of the two research questions in turn. Chapter 8 focuses on discussion of the findings and Chapter 9 is the Conclusion.

## 1.2 The Policy Context

The updated National Curriculum for English (QCA, 2007, henceforth NC) has reinstated the importance of pupil talk in the classroom. This has been eclipsed, in recent years, by the SNS's (DfEE, 2001a, p.17) excessive focus on whole-class, teacher-led talk, as acknowledged in its aims: 'more explicit teaching [...] use of the whole lesson for planned teaching, and less time spent on unplanned circulation around the groups'. Research evaluating the impact of both the PNS and SNS (DfEE 1997; 2001a) has identified the gap between the rhetoric of 'highly interactive' lessons and the reality of a decrease in the proportion of time pupils spend talking in literacy lessons, especially those from the following groups: lower socioeconomic, girls and pupils with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Special Educational Needs (SEN) (Mroz et al, 2000; English et al, 2002; Burns and Myhill, 2004; Smith et al, 2004; Myhill and Dunkin, 2005; Black, 2004 and 2007; Alexander, 2008).

The new NC is precise about the collaborative and exploratory oral skills required:

- g. make different kinds of relevant contributions in groups, responding appropriately to others, proposing ideas and asking questions
- h. take different roles in organising, planning and sustaining talk in groups including 'leading, introducing, chairing, mediating, recording, summarising and challenging constructively' (QCA, 2007, p. 64).

Pupils at KS3 are required to:

e. listen and respond constructively to others, taking different views into account and modifying their own views in the light of what others say' (ibid).

At KS4, pupils should also respond 'critically', in order to 'challenge ideas' and

h. listen with sensitivity, judging when intervention is appropriate (QCA, 2007, p. 86)

Collectively, these objectives represent a sophisticated set of collaborative oral skills, with pupils using talk to modify, extend or challenge their ideas, arriving at fresh, mediated understandings. There is emphasis, above, on developing 'sensitivity' to the dynamics of discussion, waiting for an appropriate moment to intervene. This subtle view of how talk develops collective thinking is reinforced by the view in the 'explanatory notes' that careful 'listening' 'develops the ability to hold different interpretations, and to evaluate their validity in the light of shifts in discussion' (ibid). Critical reflection on talk is also mentioned briefly, although only at KS4 and in association with talk as 'performance' (ibid), not process.

The new NC has, clearly, been informed by the significant body of research, from Bakhtin (1981) and Vygotsky (1978) onwards, promoting a sociocultural view of learning, explored in the literature review below. But it has also been influenced by more recent studies focusing on how to develop pupils' ability to engage in productive exploratory talk. Thus, the language echoes studies advocating a more structured model (Barnes and Todd, 1995; Mercer and Littleton, 2007; Galton et al, 2009; and Alexander, 2000; 2008). Indeed, there is a subtle interplay between the NC and the 'renewed' SNS (DCFS, 2008a), with the latter influencing its latest incarnation. Thus, the SNS recommendations on speaking and listening (DfES, 2007a, pp. 8-10) advised English teachers to encourage 'dialogic' and 'exploratory' group talk, using ground-rules and critical reflection. Pupils should practise collaborative problem-solving independently, with teachers playing a less dominant role, listening at a distance and avoiding excessive intervention. This publication (DfES, 2007a, p.7) cited findings from our first 'Promoting group talk' project (Sutherland, 2006a) in its rationale, with larger-scale research.

Therefore, the NC, the 'renewed' SNS (DCSF, 2008a) and Ofsted's (2005) *English 2000-2005* all advocate dialogic talk. Pupils should be given the space and structured support to develop what Gee (2008, p. 175) refers to as 'secondary Discourses', such as exploratory talk, giving them the power to articulate, defend and change their views, crucially in discussion with other pupils, not

simply the teacher. Indeed, the many references to 'constructive challenges' in the new NC also suggest the idea of debate and disagreement, as well as 'consensus'. This evokes the Bakhtinian (1981, pp. 271-2) idea of 'heteroglossia', or creatively clashing, multiple voices, not the potentially monologic discourse often typifying whole-class talk, with pupil responses heavily constrained by the Initiation, Response, Evaluation (IRE, Mehan, 1979) framework. (See, too, Wegerif's (2008) useful definition of Bakhtinian 'dialogic' as maintaining difference, as opposed to 'dialectic', suggesting synthesis and unity.)

However, there are tensions in national policy, echoing those in Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) own work: 'dialogic talk' is potentially liberating for pupils, but is also, inevitably, a site where power relationships are enacted, both pupil/pupil and pupil/teacher. Applying Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2010) to policy documents reveals some contradictions and gaps, revealing the subtext to the rhetoric. For example, whereas reading and writing were given a new assessment framework in 2006 (DCSF, 2008c), speaking and listening criteria were only officially added four years later (DCSF, 2010a, 2010b). Reinforcing this gap is the paucity of DVD training exemplars of pupil group talk from the SNS from 2001-2010 to support teacher training. A DVD (DCSF, 2010c) demonstrating how to assess talk using the Assessing Pupils' Progress (APP) criteria, does identify some generalised aspects of effective collaborative talk. However, it implies that rich group talk spontaneously occurs across the curriculum, ignoring the extensive research cited below (for example, Kutnick et al, 2005) contradicting this. While this DVD has useful cross-curricular examples, it presents a naive view of collaborative talk: all teachers are equipped to assess its complexity, without theoretical understanding or training in identifying features and degrees of competence. It also reinforces the simplistic assumption that all pupils are equally capable of generating higher-cognitive talk, without any support in how to do this.

These gaps and silences also need to be recalled when reading the rationale for the 'renewed' SNS (DCSF, 2008a, p. 12), which has reversed its whole-class emphasis, being 'focused on learning, not teaching', to increase pupil 'engagement and participation'. This reinforces a key concept of the new NC (QCA, 2007, p. 62), creativity, which includes pupils 'making fresh connections between ideas [...] taking risks, playing with language' and, crucially, 'using creative approaches to answering questions' and 'developing ideas'. This experimentation and problem-solving is only likely to develop in the context of group, not whole-class, discussion. However, the

pedagogy and classroom culture, since the 2001 introduction of the SNS, had caused a decrease in pupil talk (Burns and Myhill, 2004) during the period in which the data were collected: 2007-8.

This research was, therefore, concerned to explore how rich pupil talk and thinking could be developed in groups. The study was also influenced by international research demonstrating developments in pupils' reasoning and collaborative talk through a structured approach, including inducting pupils in these skills, for example, work in Belgium (DeCorte et al, 2001), America (Boaler, 2006, 2008; Pressley, 2006; Reznitskaya et al, 2009; Webb et al, 2009) Australia (Gillies and Khan, 2009), Israel (Schwartz, 2003) and Mexico (Rosaj-Drummond and Mercer, 2003).

### **1.3 Rationale**

All of my doctoral work has been concerned with classroom discourse in the context of secondary English lessons. At the start of the programme, I conducted an evaluation of an action-research project designed to promote the quality of pupils' exploratory talk, by coaching trainee English teachers in five schools in Sussex. This collaborative project (Sutherland, 2006a), with a team of six trainee teachers, their Year 7 classes and mentor/coaches, focused on training both teachers and pupils in discourse strategies to stimulate richer talk and associated higher-cognitive thinking. It built on studies of collaborative work largely in other curriculum subjects and in primary education (for example, Blatchford et al, 2003; Mercer et al, 2004). The findings led, both in terms of methodology and the substantive issue, into the Critical Analytical Study (CAS) and my final EdD thesis.

The first project established that the intervention had improved the quality of pupils' talk, to varying degrees, across the six classes and started to explore reasons and contexts for this. Final interviews with trainee teachers and pupils, transcripts of talk and observations provided some particularly fascinating insights into significant contextual factors, beyond the intervention 'model', which appeared to contribute to pupils' motivation and differential development in collaborative talk. It was this richer context that I wanted to investigate in future work. Indeed, participants thought that one of the biggest limitations of the first study was its relatively brief time period (ten weeks). This implied a rather crude stimulus/outcome model that underplayed the complexity of

developing talk, preventing us from identifying whether gains would be sustained and from analysing fully why and how pupils were enabled to develop their thinking and talk in groups.

In the CAS (Sutherland, 2006), I explored Vygotsky's critical sociocultural theories of learning with those of Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) and other innovative work in this field by, for example, the National Oracy Project (1992), Wells (1992, 1999), Newman, Griffin and Coles (1992), Barnes et al (1969), Britton (1992) and Barnes and Todd (1995). This thesis has enabled me to deepen the theoretical basis of my work, particularly in relation to Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) and Voloshinov/Bakhtin's (1973) concept of 'dialogism', its recent interpretation in the field, and its relationship with sociocultural and situated theories of learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Also influential have been theorisations of formative assessment, which identify rich, dialogic talk as central to transforming pupils' understanding, while being inducted into membership of a community of practice (Torrance and Pryor, 1998; Marshall, 2004; Pryor and Crossouard, 2005, 2010). Further reading on collaborative work in mathematics and science, as well as English (Kutnick et al, 2005; Leonard et al, 2005; Boaler, 2006, 2008; Webb et al, 2009) confirmed the extent to which future work should more explicitly explore issues of gender and social class, teasing out precisely how teacher and pupil behaviour and interaction, as well as language, influences the collective development of collaborative talk. Finally, I have drawn on a body of work in cognitive psychology on pupils' reading comprehension to explore the relationship between the development of exploratory talk and critical reading (Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Rosenshine et al, 1996; Cain et al, 2001; Oakhill and Cain, 2004; Goswami and Bryant, 2007).

#### **1.4 Overview of research content and design**

Like the earlier study, this research uses a collaborative action-research framework. Indeed, three of the four participating teacher researchers were members of the original team, wanting to continue investigating dialogic, exploratory talk in English, two years later. The project could, therefore, almost be seen as the second cycle of action research, since the intervention design is adapted from the first project, taking account of the evaluation in June 2005. However, I prefer to see this as part of the 'reconnaissance' phase, since certain elements changed, including, crucially, the team composition and contexts: teachers were now fully qualified (with the addition of a very experienced teacher) in different schools and target classes were Year 8, not Year 7, as earlier.

The methodology was selected to mirror and enact the central, Bakhtinian (1981, p. 293) idea underlying the substantive topic: meaning emerges dialogically, on the 'borderline' of two or more consciousnesses. Thus, the research team planned to investigate the issue, as 'equal' participants, arriving at joint, mediated understandings. The methodology drew on insights from 'participatory action research' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005), with its emphasis on the development of critical reason in participants. This approach was seen as particularly important since much previous research in this field, for example, Mercer and Littleton (2007) appears to underplay the importance of the teacher's role and attitudes in enabling rich group talk. Such studies tend to use quasi-experimental methods, 'training' teachers and pupils in a specific model of talk and evaluating the outcome. This study aimed to investigate more fully the precise contexts in which a structured model of group talk might develop rich pupil talk, including the roles, relationships and perspectives of teacher and pupil participants. Therefore, we used an interpretive approach, focusing on fine-grained discourse analysis (of group talk and teacher and pupil interviews) as our main methodological tool.

The research questions are:

1. Can a sustained intervention develop pupils' ability to use exploratory talk in groups in English lessons?
2. Which conditions allow, and what are the factors influencing, the development of such talk?

The research team comprised four teacher researchers, their Year 8 English classes (approximately 110 pupils) from three secondary comprehensive schools in Sussex and me, an Initial Teacher Education (ITE) teacher/researcher from the University of Sussex. The schools were all large, urban, mixed-sex and of average- and higher-than-average achievement levels; the four 'target' classes covered the range of attainment 'settings' used in the schools: one 'mixed-ability', one 'lower-achieving' and two 'higher-achieving' sets. In the last three cases, there were only two sets in the year, each with a broad range of ability. One school, Seaview, had both a 'high' and 'low' set, covering the full ability range.

The original team included seven teachers and additional 'mixed-ability' and 'low-set' Year 8 classes in another rural school in the area. Unfortunately, three teachers withdrew during the



project, from work pressures at school, so emerging data from their classes has been excluded. One of the reasons for selecting the original team was to ensure a range of contexts: differently performing schools, urban and rural, with pupils from a range of socio-economic groups, abilities and of both sexes, and a full range of teachers, with differing levels of experience.

The data were collected over an academic year from October, 2007 - June, 2008, with the pupils practising the 'intervention' model of group talk agreed on. All classes were regularly observed and a sample of representative pupil groups per class was audio-taped. The first and last transcripts (October and May) of the same groups in discussion provide a comparison of the quality of talk before and after the intervention. Four videotapes (one group of pupils per class) were also made by the teachers as representative exemplars of 'talk in progress', roughly half-way through the project. These were swapped for their partner schools to assess formatively. Semi-structured interviews were also held at the start and end of the intervention with teachers and groups of pupils. The research team met twice during the project to evaluate progress and collaborate on emerging findings.

### **1.5 Profile of Participating Schools**

Blakely School is a large (1700), urban, mixed, 11-19 comprehensive with students of varying levels of affluence and deprivation, who are predominantly of white British heritage. It has specialist status in the arts, mathematics, computing and vocational education and has above average standards (57% students achieving 5 or more A\*-C GCSE grades, including Maths and English, compared with a national average of 48%). 16% of pupils are identified as having Special Educational Needs (SEN) either with statements, on school action plus or supported on school action, and the school has a lower than national average percentage of English as an Additional Language (EAL) pupils. Ofsted describes the school as 'good', 'with significant strengths'. The targeted class is the 'upper set' of only two broad sets in Year 8; it has 29 pupils (16 girls and 13 boys). Pupils' National Curriculum levels range from 4-6.

Priors School is a smaller than average (837 pupils), mixed comprehensive, which first opened in 2001, as a purpose-built school with good ICT facilities and specialist status in science and mathematics. Students are predominantly of white British heritage, with a smaller than average

percentage of EAL pupils, although the number of minority-ethnic students has been steadily rising. The percentage of pupils with free school meals (FSM) is broadly in line with the national average, although Ofsted describes the school as being in an area with 'significant levels of social deprivation'. It has an above-average percentage (24%) of pupils with SEN, with statements, on school-action plus or supported on school action. Achievement rates currently approximate to the national average (46% five or more A\*- C GCSEs, including Maths and English) and Ofsted describes the school as 'good' with a 'positive learning culture': 'From below-average starting points, students achieve well'. The targeted class comprised 28 pupils (13 girls; 15 boys). Although this was designated 'mixed-ability' for English, it was skewed by setting elsewhere, containing a high proportion of pupils in the top set for Mathematics. Pupils' National Curriculum levels range from 4-6.

Seaview School is a significantly larger than average (1611 on role with no sixth form), urban, mixed, 11-16 comprehensive. Students are drawn from a broad catchment area, including a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds, although there is a lower than average percentage of pupils with FSM. Students are predominantly of white British heritage. 12% of pupils are identified with SEN with statements, on school-action plus or supported on school action. The school has specialist status in sports. Achievement is above average (63% five or more A\*-C GCSEs, including Maths and English) and the school is described overall by Ofsted as 'good' and 'improving' with 'some outstanding features' (2007, p. 2). The two target classes represented the full attainment range in the school, since Year 8 is 'set' in two broad bands: Anna's 'upper/top set' comprised 29 pupils (16 girls; 13 boys), with NC levels of 4-6. Peter's 'lower set' of 18 pupils (8 girls; 10 boys) had NC levels of 3-4.

## **1.6 Profile of Teacher Researchers**

Peter has twenty-two years of teaching experience in challenging, inner-city schools in London and latterly in Sussex. He has worked for sixteen years at Seaview School and has responsibility for KS3 English; he is also a union representative for the staff. Peter joined the project because he has recently become increasingly interested in developing his teaching of speaking and listening in KS3 English, acknowledging that he feels more confident at KS4 since this has long been part of the GCSE assessment framework. Peter ran a project funded by his area's English Secondary National Strategy consultant on speaking and listening at his school in 2004-5. As a

result of this, the school had introduced some assessment of speaking and listening across KS3, but this was based on individual presentations, not group work.

As PGCE trainee teachers, Anna, Ellen and Susan were all members of our first project on group talk. Anna is in her third year of teaching, having taught in a challenging urban, all-boys' school before her current post at Seaview School. As she has only been in her current post for a year, she has not yet assumed any responsibilities. Anna joined the project as she wanted to consolidate her earlier work on group talk undertaken in 2005. Teaching in a challenging school had inhibited Anna from continuing to practise group talk, except for the mandatory oral component of GCSE. She was interested in enabling pupils to use group talk as an end in itself and to develop writing skills, both with lower- and higher-attaining pupils.

Ellen is in her third year of teaching at Blakely School and has responsibility for running the KS3 Assessing Pupils' Progress assessment units in English. She joined the project because she felt she had not continued to develop her experience of group talk at KS3 after the PGCE, and believed it would provide a much-needed challenge for her high-attaining Year 8 class.

Susan is in her third year of teaching at Priors School: she joined the project because she is interested in improving her practice with group talk, following her earlier work in this area on the PGCE. Susan also cited developing pupil independence in learning as a key Ofsted school target: although the English Department is in advance of schools, nationally, in having an oral component linked to end-of-unit assessments, this focused, as at Seaview, on performance - individual presentations - not process, using group talk to develop thinking. Susan also referred to the context of Priors as encouraging action-research: it is a new school with a dynamic leadership, committed to innovative ideas, professional development and teacher research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

Truth is not born nor is it to be found in the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 110)

The starting point for this literature review and the theoretical basis of the thesis is Bakhtin's (1981, 1984) central idea that we only achieve consciousness and thus identity through dialogue, and that this continues to be the main way in which we develop an understanding of our world and ourselves. The notion above of a singular, reified 'truth' is, of course, problematic, but this quotation suggests two critical ideas about the relation between dialogue and learning. Firstly, there is the Vygotskian premise (1978) that learning is sociocultural and that talk is the primary tool that enables the co-construction of meanings and so the development of higher-cognitive functions in individuals. A second implied idea (explored more fully in Bakhtin, 1981, 1984) is that dialogue is also a site in which identities are forged, power relationships are enacted and meanings are contested. It is, therefore, imperative that school should enable pupils to use talk to think and, in the process of 'appropriating' and 'ventriloquating' others' speech (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-4), or being inducted into the existing knowledge, skills and discourses of their culture (Rogoff, 1990; Gee, 2008), to develop their own voices.

Bakhtin's (1981, 1984, 1986) and Voloshinov/Bakhtin's (1973) work on dialogism is particularly relevant to an investigation of the quality of collaborative talk in English lessons, since their concept also embraces the dialogical relationship between reader/writer in the reading of texts; and intertextuality, the interconnectedness of texts, spoken and written. Given that much of the talk in English lessons is talk about texts, Bakhtin's notion of dialogism can function as a useful theoretical framework to explore the development of critical literacy, which combines oral and reading skills. In the new NC for English (QCA, 2007) 'critical understanding' is identified as one of the four key 'concepts' underpinning the study of English.

## 2.1 Problematising dialogic talk

Given the almost universal call for 'dialogic talk' in English from researchers and policy-makers with differing theoretical assumptions and ideas about how this can be achieved, it is important to understand the original concept and how this has been applied or 'appropriated' (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-4). Thus, Alexander (2000; 2008) uses it to argue primarily for dialogic whole-class talk, while recognising the value of collaborative pupil talk, whereas others (Skidmore, 2000; Skidmore et al, 2003; Haworth, 1999) see its potential wholly in a small-group context.

The ideas of Bakhtin and Voloshinov on 'dialogism' (a term coined by Holquist, 2002) provide a useful conceptual framework with which to understand the importance of group talk and particular reading practices in the English classroom. As there is debate about the provenance of the texts of the Bakhtin circle, some key academics (Holquist, 2002) believing Bakhtin to have written all of those printed in the name of Voloshinov, I have borrowed Morris's (1994) method of signalling disputed authorship in references, by citing the published name first: 'Voloshinov/Bakhtin'. Interestingly, the visual form of this reference neatly symbolises both the dialogic nature of these texts' production, and the idea of meaning in language being generated on the borderline between two consciousnesses, two central Bakhtinian ideas, which have clear application to the topic of collaborative talk.

The concept of dialogism provided Voloshinov/Bakhtin (1973) and Bakhtin (1981, 1984, 1986) with an overarching metaphor to explain not only how language functions to produce meaning but how this relates to questions of epistemology and ontology (see Sutherland, 2006b). A key aspect of dialogism is its ontological premise that self and other exist in a creative, though strained, dialogical relationship, mediated through language. Sharing is 'a condition built into the structure of human perception, and thus a condition inherent in the very fact of being human' (Holquist, 2002, p. 34) and dialogue is the central means by which people think and learn (see also Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; Rogoff, 1990). Of course, dialogue could be between reader and written text, but speech is clearly the critical first site where children are 'addressed' and start to make sense of the world, using a 'responsive understanding' (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 95, 69). Genuine dialogue is also 'heteroglossic' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 271), pluralistic, dynamic and non-oppressive, in principle, enabling children from different socioeconomic, ethnic and cultural groups to express

their multiple identities. All of this suggests a clear rationale for creating space for pupils to engage in such rich, equal talk in the classroom.

However, there are tensions at the heart of dialogue, especially in the context of the school: it is, inevitably, the site in which power relationships are mediated and different identities forged, as children struggle to move from ‘ventriloquating’ the voices of others to finding their own voice (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293-4; Gee, 2008). Moreover, this is compounded by the obvious asymmetry of relationship between teacher and pupils, typified by the triadic ‘Initiation-Response-Feedback’ (IRF, Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975) or ‘Evaluation’ structure (IRE, Mehan, 1979); see Barnes and Todd (1995); Dillon (1990); and Alexander (2008). Indeed, Bakhtin (1981, p. 343) cites ‘pedagogical dialogue’ as an example of monologism: ‘someone who knows and possesses the truth instructs someone who is ignorant of it and in error’.

Bernstein (2000, p.114, 34) also sees all pedagogic discourse (spoken and written ways of transmitting ‘thinkable, official knowledge’) as a means of relaying power, arguing that ‘there is no instructional discourse which is not regulated by the regulative discourse’. The latter defines the legitimate manner, conduct and character of pupils. Pedagogic discourse, then, is a ‘grammar’ or ‘principle for *appropriating* discourses from the field of production and subordinating them to a different principle [...] In this process the original discourse passes through ideological screens as it becomes its new form’ (2000, p. 115, emphasis added). Bernstein’s use of Marxist terminology to describe how the agents of his recontextualising field, both the State and ITE departments, reinterpret and recontextualise texts from the field of production also applies to the classroom, where teachers repeat this process. However, here, teachers also assume the right, during whole-class discourse, to ‘appropriate’ or re-shape pupils’ words in their attempt to scaffold their understanding. Indeed, many sociocultural theorists have explored this process, describing as ‘effective’ strategies such as ‘recasting’, by which teachers attempt jointly to construct understanding with pupils (Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Mercer, 1995; Wells, 1999; Black, 2007).

This does, of course, create a tension: how can English teachers establish dialogic talk in the classroom, while directing pupils to adopt new ‘secondary discourses’ necessary for full participation in school and society? Gee (2008, p.175) defines ‘secondary Discourses’ as

occurring between people who are not familiar, cannot assume 'shared knowledge' and therefore act with greater formality, 'taking on an identity that transcends the family or primary socialising group'. These are not to be confused with social dialects. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that pupils themselves arrive differentially apprenticed in these 'school' discourses, making equal participation in dialogue hard.

Firstly, I will evaluate the evidence for teachers needing to induct pupils in a dialogic, but formal, secondary discourse, 'exploratory talk' (defined by Barnes and Todd, 1995, refined by Mercer, 2000, p. 153). Secondly, I will explore the research evidence on the relationship between pupils' collaborative talk and learning.

## **2.2 Extending pupils' repertoire of discourses in the classroom: rationale and challenges**

Research over fifty years has demonstrated that pupils from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds enter school with divergent pre-literacy experiences, more or less matched to those of school, enabling some to progress more quickly in reading and writing (Meek, 1982) and, it can be argued, in the spoken registers of school (Bernstein, 2000; Heath, 1983; Gee, 2008).

However, whereas there is broad consensus about the pre-literacy practices that support reading development (listening to stories, rich talk about image and text, adult scaffolding and so on, Meek, 1982), research is less united in the case of speech. That is, the vast majority of pupils enter school fluent in their mother tongue, in spite of culturally diverse ways of supporting this development (Pinker, 1994) and so, drawing on Chomsky (1965), it could be assumed that all pupils will continue to be able to acquire a broader range of oral registers at a similar rate, since all are programmed to do so. Inghilleri (2002, p. 472) has identified this fallacious reading of Chomsky's notion of 'competence' as one reason for English teachers paying insufficient attention to formally inducting pupils in a wide range of spoken discourses: they believe that 'all children could and [therefore] did acquire the same capacity to represent both the particular and the universal aspects of experience because all were innately endowed with this capacity'.

Inghilleri rightly argues that this view, associated with Britton (1992) and the 'personal growth' view of English, championed the importance of pupils being encouraged to express their 'unique' identity, through their personal, creative language, while ignoring that this was unavoidably

constructed from the social, and that pupils had differential access to the range of society's discourses.

The idea that it is the English teacher's responsibility to 'liberate' the unique voice of each child could also be attributed to Bakhtin (1981, p. 348; 293-4), but again, this is over-simplified, since he argued that it is only by 'ventriloquating' other voices (or discourses) that children can move beyond these to construct their own voice. That is, children need to be able to use, distance themselves from and even critique the discourses of a culture, beyond the narrow range that they happen to be exposed to from home, in order to realise their voice. This, of course, is also the basis of 'critical literacy', a crucial means of those with less power recognising how discourses sustain dominant ideologies and could, therefore, be differently configured (Freire and Macedo, 1987; Freire, 1996).

The problem with this argument is that all speech, including the 'primary Discourse' (Gee, 2008, p. 175) encountered in the home is, of course, deeply associated with identity and with particular cultural behaviours, values and attitudes, signified by Gee in his use of the upper case. Thus, it is hard for a child to acquire a new discourse associated with a different set of ways of being from her primary one.

The conflict is between who I am summoned to be in this new Discourse [...] and who I am in other Discourses that overtly conflict with – and have sometimes historically contested with – this Discourse [...] I can be asked in body and mind to 'mean against' some of my other social identities (Gee, 2008, p. 166).

This self-violating image of people needing to embody each discourse they add to their repertoire resonates with Bourdieu's concept of the 'habitus' (1977) as a set of values, beliefs and dispositions accrued from early socialisation and education that we physically 'inhabit' and cannot elude. It also echoes Bakhtin's (1981, p. 293-4) description of the violent process we experience in struggling to define our 'voice', against the competing voices of the 'other' (see Sutherland, 2006b). Acquisition of secondary discourses can, then, often be hard and painful for 'bi-discoursal' people (Gee, 2008, p. 167), whose primary discourse conflicts with these, but Gee argues that partial acquisition, or 'mushfake Discourse' is possible, crucially 'coupled with meta-



knowledge'. (ibid, p. 180). I will return to the importance of developing meta-awareness of discourses below.

Some critics (Lambirth, 2006) argue that requiring pupils to adopt such 'hegemonic' discourses is oppressive. However, Heath (1983) and Gee (2008) show that lack of access to these contributes to educational under-achievement in 'non-mainstream' pupils (for example, those from lower socioeconomic or minority-ethnic groups). Heath's study (1983) identified differences in the pre-school literacy practices of three divergent communities in the Piedmont Carolinas in the US (white working-class; African-American working-class and white middle-class). It demonstrated that school-age children from the latter group had already experienced the 'school' literacy practices in speech, reading and writing. Children from the other groups had developed significant literacy practices, but these differed from and even conflicted with the school's practices. Such children would only succeed at school if they were allowed to 'recapitulate' the range of literacy practices experienced by the mainstream child, but this stage was never explicitly taught.

Heath's (1983) study demonstrated that teachers could apprentice non-mainstream children in required formal, discursive skills, through a rich context: a collaborative, ethnographic project on their own communities in which pupils acted as researchers. Gee (2008, pp. 168-9), drawing on Lave and Wenger (1991), also argues that children need to be 'enculturated' so that they can acquire not just the language, but can 'perform' the identity and practices of the required Discourse. He shows that the primary discourse of the US white middle-class primes children for school in this way, by importing linguistic forms from secondary discourses in education and creating a congruence that enables children speedy acquisition of these. For example, such children grow accustomed to the IRE and the role of 'pupil' from the age of one, through the bed-time story and other routines.

Hasan (2002), Williams (1999) and Nash (2006) have taken the above ideas one step further, drawing on Vygotsky's (1986) explanation of thought as a fusion of pre-verbal and 'inner speech', internalised linguistic structures and concepts generated by talk. Given that such interaction occurs in differing social contexts, this is likely to generate differences not only in the language,

but in the cognitive orientation of children, making progress in school problematic for some. Their work attempts to examine in a more rigorous way, Bernstein's premise (1971; 1990) that there is a relationship between children's spoken language and their tendency to think in certain sorts of ways. All accept criticism of Bernstein's methodology (lack of naturally occurring speech data) and any idea of unalterable 'codes' that would preclude children from thinking in more abstract ways. (See Labov, 1972; Stubbs, 1983a; Gordon, 1981; and Halliday, 1995, for a full critique of Bernstein's study.)

Hasan's (2002, p. 539) six-year study investigated whether mothers from different social groups 'systematically vary in the meanings they habitually mean' in talking to their children and if so, what effect this had on the children's 'ways of meaning'. She found differences in the discourse of mother/child dyads that broadly correlated with either 'High Autonomy Profession' or 'Low Autonomy Profession' groups (based on level of control in their workplace). She identified two opposing clusters of semantic features that implied either that the mother/enquirer assumed no understanding of her child's 'mental map' and therefore needed to make her meanings explicit and elaborated; or that she assumed an identity between her own and her child's 'mental map', leading to 'assumptive' questions that were less elaborated and answers that were less 'responsive', 'related' and 'elaborated' (2002, p. 543). In both cases, the children's speech also displayed the features corresponding to these different varieties of discourse. Hasan argued that the language of the former group constructed the child more as an individual, so that discourse must be used to close the gap between mother and child. In the latter group, the presumed affinity between mother and child's viewpoints meant that such linguistic explicitness and elaboration were unnecessary.

Hasan's findings (2002, p. 546-7, emphasis added) support Bernstein (2000): the two sets of children have already internalised different 'expectations of discursive engagement' and 'principles for interactive practices' - that is, a 'different kind of *consciousness*'. Therefore, she concludes that children from lower socioeconomic groups have had less practice than their peers in the particular cognitive skills demanded by school. Nash (2006), drawing on Bourdieu (1977), describes these as tendencies to talk and conceptualise in certain sorts of ways, a 'specific cognitive habitus' (Nash, 2006, p. 549). This is a useful analogy because, although the habitus is capable of development, it tends to be durable, unconscious and resistant to significant change

(Bourdieu, 1977). (See, too, findings in Goswami and Bryant, 2007, p. 8, that articulating ideas at a given point in early childhood, using an 'elaborative' style of talk, affects children's ability to recall past events - their encoding of memory.) Nash's key question, which he criticised Bernstein for failing to address, is the topic of my next section: how do children not experienced in this particular 'cognitive habitus' gain access to it?

### **2.2.1 Teaching secondary discourse: exploratory talk, critical literacy and finding a 'voice'**

Exploratory talk (Barnes and Todd, 1995), refined by Mercer (2000, p. 153) occurs when

partners engage critically but constructively with each other's ideas. Relevant information is offered for joint consideration. Proposals may be challenged and counter-challenged, but if so, reasons are given and alternatives are offered. Agreement is sought as a basis of joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk.

Such talk is characterised by a greater equality of participation than is often found in group talk: it is genuinely 'dialogic' in that pupils respond to each other's points, either elaborating or contesting these. This type of talk also fits the Bakhtinian definition in that new meanings are jointly constructed, through a process of what Mercer (2000, p. 153) terms 'co-reasoning'. It also, critically, enables students to start their engagement with a topic from the position of their current knowledge, sharing and making this explicit, as a basis for developing joint understanding. This contrasts with less useful forms of group discourse, such as 'disputational' and 'cumulative' talk (Barnes and Todd 1995; Mercer and Littleton, 2007). The former does not enable the dialogic exploration of ideas as each speaker often aggressively competes for the floor, championing the idea of the individual over the collective voice and leaving little room for reasoned challenge. 'Cumulative' talk is also not related to reasoning as it is typified by constant agreement and the disinclination either to challenge or to elaborate ideas because of the risk to, or intimacy of social relationships. Barnes and Todd (1995), Mercer (2000) and Swann (1992) note an association between each type of talk and either all-boy and all-girl groupings, respectively, but these forms also emerge in mixed-sex groups.

Recent research has focused on the importance of training pupils explicitly in formal, oral discourses, such as exploratory talk, using ground-rules (Mercer, 2000; Alexander 2008).

However, studies by, for example, Bragg (2001), reveal a potential tension between requiring students to use a critical discourse and developing their 'own' voice. As teacher/researcher, Bragg was shocked by the 'subversive voices' of some male students, who rejected the expected critical discourse of A Level Media Studies, and herself, its representative, when studying the horror genre. These boys appeared to celebrate the apparent misogyny and seductive violence of the films, which they articulated in a 'personal, non-academic style' (Bragg, 2001, p. 72), rather than critical or exploratory talk. Applying a Bakhtinian perspective, these students were, arguably, 'finding their own voice'.

Bragg recognised a pedagogic tension between wanting to empower students and ensure that they adopted the 'legitimate' critical discourse. This is also a contradiction noted by Gee (2008, p. 64) in Freire and Macedo's (1987) idea of emancipatory or critical literacy, which must, they argue, also be combined with thinking 'correctly'. Biesta, drawing on Rancière (2008, p. 2), has also argued that critical literacy and its Marxist, 'demystifying' project to emancipate the uneducated from 'false consciousness', is, paradoxically, premised on, and perpetuates, inequality: the knowing agent or emancipator empowers the wholly dependent student.

However, it is Bragg's means of resolving this clash between primary and secondary discourses, and in the teacher/pupil relationship that is significant. Bragg wanted students to reflect on their discourse and identity, as they had required her to do: she therefore read aloud extracts of essays without judgement, and invited comments from peers. Bragg, as teacher, remained silent, leaving a space for students to debate these issues themselves, that is, to engage in dialogic talk, developing critical thinking, without the interference of an authoritative voice or potentially hegemonic discourse. This strategy: 'opened up a gap between the selves who produced [the essays] and who listened to them but did not necessarily recognise themselves within them', which enabled the students 'to reflect on their performance of masculinity' (Bragg, 2001, p. 72).

Rancière reinforces the importance of such 'self-emancipation', as Biesta (2008, p. 17) summarises: 'The emancipatory educator summons his students to use their intelligence "under the assumption of the equality of intelligence".' Dialogic talk provides a space for students to practise both articulating their own ideas and critiquing these, in the performance of a range of

identities. Enabling pupils to speak in their 'own voices' is, therefore, contingent on a radical reconception of the teacher/pupil relationship; and of the teacher's role as authoritative 'expert': it shifts the balance of power (see too, Black, 2007). Practising dialogic talk will also trigger teacher and pupils to reflect on their identities. Bragg's (2001, p. 72) experience forced her to challenge the 'assumption that teachers should or could make students better people, as if there are any easy solutions to questions of identity, or as if teaching can offer transcendence'. She also cautions the 'student voice' movement not just to listen to 'the voices that make immediate sense', but to 'take out time with the anomalous, to allow what doesn't fit or [...] disrupts our assumptions' because 'it is from these that we may, in the end, learn the most' (ibid, p. 73).

Dialogic talk cannot happen without teachers relinquishing some power and questioning their role: maybe its rarity in classrooms internationally is not so surprising. Exploratory/critical talk would, indeed, be a hegemonic discourse if imposed on unwilling students. Instead, students must be able to see it as a means of enabling them to develop their thinking, initially with their peers, until they feel sufficiently confident and willing to use it in a more public context. It is significant that in the Bragg (2001) study, pupils were expected to use the formal discourse in the public space of class talk, which they presumably saw as dominated by the teacher. It is only when she removed herself, through silence, that students felt able to engage dialogically with each other, shifting their register to a more exploratory and critical form than they had been prepared to accept earlier.

I would argue that the very nature of group, exploratory talk may offer pupils the chance to assume an identity and associated collaborative type of learning that is different from, rather than in conflict with, their other identities, potentially resulting in personal empowerment and higher achievement. Evidence for this comes from work on gender, identity and achievement by Leonard et al (2005) and Davies (1997).

Leonard et al's (2005) research was based on twelve schools with a disparity between boys' and girls' achievement in the core subjects. A key finding was that there was a correlation between schools focusing on teaching and explicit modelling of collaborative forms of learning, including group work, and the achievement of boys categorised as 'low-ability', and of 'low socioeconomic

status'. Leonard et al (2005, p. 4) theorised that this pedagogy offered a 'wider definition of what it means to be a boy', replacing a competitive, individualistic approach to learning, culturally associated with boys, with one that was more helpful to this group. The competitive ethos and discourse of boys' under-achievement in the other schools paradoxically generated a 'performance anxiety' (ibid) and paralysis in this group that prevented them from seeking help from others, reinforcing their under-achievement. Successful schools both challenged the boys' culturally constructed, gendered, learning orientations and gave explicit teaching in the collaborative skills of educational help-seeking and help-giving, enabling this category of boys to become more effective learners.

Davies' (1997, p. 19) work on masculinities and critical literacy is also pertinent: she investigated the ways that schools either reinforce narrow definitions of masculinity in relation to literacy, or challenge these, by offering a 'wide range of performances that might be called masculine'. In a case study of an Australian, rural primary classroom, Davies (1997, p. 19) shows how the teacher, Mr Good, revealed his own preferences without censoring the boys' reading of how to be masculine. Rather, he invited them to broaden their range and celebrated their achievements in articulating a range of possibilities. Mr Good did this through creating a collaborative classroom, in which he and the children shared personal and emotional responses to the topics studied. Transcripts show Mr Good encouraging dialogic talk in the classroom, which is sensitive and cooperative, although whole-class. (See, too, studies by Paetcher, 1998; Epstein, 1999; Frosch et al, 2002; and Renold, 2004 on the pressure on boys to conform to hegemonic versions of masculinity that exclude collaborative ways of working).

### **2.2.2 Inducting pupils in exploratory talk: tensions between teacher guidance and dominance in the apprenticeship model**

The evidence above presents a strong argument for schools to create opportunities for pupils to be inducted in, and engage dialogically with, a wide range of discourses, including that of 'exploratory' talk. The next question is: how? Research by Lave and Wenger (1991), Heath (1983) and Gee (1999, 2008) suggests pupils need to practise this discourse in a meaningful context. In the artificial forum of the classroom, this means at least integrating collaborative-talk activities into rich units of work so that they are seen as purposeful, whether this is discussing

how to test a hypothesis experimentally in chemistry or evaluating the effectiveness of charity advertisements in English. The talk must arise from, and be linked to reading and writing, not being seen as a set of decontextualised skills.

The above research suggests a 'guided' model of learning, with teachers inducting pupils in the required discourse, modelling and engaging pupils with it, rather than 'teaching' them. However, there is significant evidence that teachers also need to be explicit about the structure and associated values of such talk, giving pupils the tools and the metalinguistic understanding to be able to evaluate their own and other speakers' talk. This is illustrated by Gee's (2008) discussion of Minnis' (1994) study of the discourse of law school in the US. Here, students are expected to behave like lawyers, writing succinct 'briefs', and arguing their cases publicly, while being subjected to rigorous questioning by their professors, in the form of a Socratic dialogue. As students must work solely from within this discourse, they are denied any formal training in it or opportunity to gain greater control, by reflecting on it.

The students who, typically, fail to master the discourse are from non-mainstream backgrounds and Minnis (1994, p. 362) hypothesises that this is because they have not, in their previous school or social life, experienced the 'competitive' ethos and 'other survival skills appropriate to the situation encountered in the law school classroom'. That is, the students struggle to adopt a different way of being, as well as speaking, at law school. Similarly, pupils expected to engage in confident, exploratory talk in which they must defend their arguments, need to have the full 'rules of the game' (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 80) spelt out to them, both discorsal and behavioural.

This, again, leaves teachers in a difficult position. On the one hand, their role as 'experts' in the required discourse must be to act as 'discourse guides', modelling and then scaffolding pupils' learning (Rogoff, 1990; Rojas-Drummond and Mercer, 2004; Mercer and Littleton, 2007). They also need to give some explicit instruction in the form and values of exploratory talk to enable pupils to develop meta-awareness and capacity for critical reflection. (This is reinforced both by Vygotsky, 1986, p. 195, in the context of the learning of 'scientific', as opposed to 'spontaneous' concepts and by Halliday, 2000). On the other hand, teachers must openly acknowledge the tensions inherent in 'dialogic' and 'exploratory' talk, in terms of power relationships, including that

of teacher/pupil (see Bourdieu's concept of the 'linguistic market', 1993, p. 62). This means teachers moving towards greater equality of discourse during group-talk sessions so that pupils practise creating meanings dialogically for themselves.

The difficulty of resolving tensions in sociocultural theory between teachers guiding or 'scaffolding' (Wood et al, 1976) and dominating; and between inducting children into the genres of the culture and leaving space for them to generate new forms or voices has been much discussed in the context of whole-class talk (see Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Wells, 1992; Mercer, 1995). Indeed, there is a body of literature on the function of the third slot in the IRE structure, debating whether it is inevitably constraining (Wood, 1992; Burns and Myhill, 2004; Coles, 2005; Pressley, 2006) or whether, if reconceptualised not as 'evaluation' but as 'follow up' (Newman et al, 1989; Wells, 1999; Wells and Arauz, 2006; Alexander 2008; Sharpe, 2006; Smith and Higgins, 2006; Black, 2007) or 'prompt' (Nystrand et al, 1997), it can scaffold pupils' thinking, eliciting 'dialogic' talk.

What many of the above studies fail to acknowledge, with the exception of, for example, Black (2004; 2007) is the full extent to which what is at stake is identity – of both teachers and pupils – so mere changes in language would be insufficient to resolve the contradiction. However, Rogoff's (1990, p. 39) description of apprenticeship, in deconstructing the false model of a single master and apprentice, provides a more useful way of reconceptualising the teacher's and pupils' roles and identities in whole-class, and especially group talk:

The apprenticeship system often involves a group of novices (peers) who serve as resources for one another in exploring the new domain and aiding and challenging one another. Among themselves, the novices are likely to differ usefully in expertise [...] the expert too is still developing breadth and depth of skill and understanding [...] Hence the model [...] is one of active learners in a community of people who support, challenge, and guide novices as they increasingly participate in skilled, valued sociocultural activity.

To establish Bakhtinian dialogic talk, then, teachers may need to reflect on the different identity and ways of being that this would entail, creating a space in which pupils can also explore a wider range of identities. Pedagogic discourse, in particular the IRE structure, in which the teacher controls the structure, pace, turn-taking, content and direction of the talk (see Edwards and



Westgate, 1994 and more recent studies, Black, 2007) is an obvious way in which teachers' power is relayed. If teachers intend to change patterns such as this and allow pupils to assume different roles, they need to make the new 'pedagogic rules' (Bernstein, 2000) explicit and enable pupils to reflect critically on their progress in these.

### **2.3 Formative assessment and dialogic talk**

Recent theorisation on formative assessment (Marshall, 2004; Pryor and Crossouard, 2005, 2010) identifies rich, dialogic and exploratory talk, both teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil, as critical to pupils' learning and their understanding of what it means 'to be good at' a given curriculum subject. This is because learning is seen as partly ontological, 'involving students engaging with prospective and current social identities' (Pryor and Crossouard, 2010, p. 265). Marshall (2004), drawing on Sadler's (1989) ideas of 'guild knowledge', argues that pupils learn to become English experts by being members of a community of English practitioners, constantly practising their trade and engaging in debate about the criteria for excellence. Marshall uses the helpful analogy of English teachers hotly debating coursework and assessment criteria at GCSE moderation meetings to illustrate how meanings are constantly negotiated and contested in this community. Being able to use this discourse - exploratory talk about texts - is critical to success in the subject. Marshall's data show how asking pairs of pupils to generate questions of a published text triggers both a deeper understanding of this and enables pupils to infer 'quality' criteria for evaluating each other's writing afterwards. That is, pupils are asked to use dialogic talk to draw links between themselves as readers/writers and critics of texts.

It is significant that effective dialogic talk about text, in relation to formative assessment, tends to occur in the small-group, rather than the whole-class, context (see Marshall, 2004; Torrance and Pryor, 1998; Pryor and Crossouard, 2005). The next section will review the literature on group talk, examining the rationale for seeing the group as the best site for developing pupils' exploratory talk.

## 2.4 Group talk and its relationship to learning

There is extensive evidence of the difficulty of achieving sustained, exploratory and dialogic talk in the whole-class context (for example, Nystrand et al, 1997; Burns and Myhill, 2004; Smith et al, 2004; Wells and Arauz, 2006; Alexander, 2008; Fisher, 2008), suggesting pupil groups as a more likely site. The reduced size of the group clearly makes greater equality of participation and a provisional kind of talk more likely, as, in the words of Barnes and Todd (1995, p. 15):

the price of failure is lower.[...] members can risk hesitation and confusion, changes of direction and rejection of their ideas by others.

So, the group can enable pupils to engage with ideas in relation to their current knowledge and to test out their understanding, by this tentative probing and articulation of half-assimilated ideas. In Mercer's words (2000, p.71), pupils can start to relate the 'given' to the 'new', a critical aspect of constructivist theories of learning. Clearly, in a class discussion of thirty, it is not practicable for the teacher to be able to gauge the precise starting-point of each child. Research has identified this weakness of teacher, unlike parental, scaffolding through talk (Tizard and Hughes, 1984; Wells, 1999; and Webb et al, 2009).

Reviews of studies in collaborative talk from the 1980s and 1990s suggest that group work was associated with relatively small academic gains, but considerable improvements in social and attitudinal aspects (Slavin, 1983, 1987; Kulik and Kulik, 1992; Lou et al, 1996; Kutnick et al, 2005). Since then, many researchers have shifted their focus to investigate the most effective conditions for collaborative talk to increase academic achievement, higher-cognitive skills, analytical reading skills and the overall quality of the talk.

However, 'naturalistic' UK research, mainly in the primary sector, suggests that collaborative talk in practice has not always triggered rich learning or exploratory talk (see Kutnick et al's 2005 review). Pupils often sit in groups, but work individually, with lower-cognitive tasks, not requiring interdependence: talk is therefore not 'exploratory', but incidental or social (Bennett and Dunne, 1992; Galton and Williamson, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Galton et al, 1999; Alexander, 2008). When a cognitively challenging group task is set, its potential for learning is unexploited as metacognition is not required (Edwards and Mercer, 1987). Teachers focus excessively on outcome, not process (Corden and Westgate, 1993) and pupils are too concerned with teacher evaluation to

take risks in talking. Groupings are often social or practical, not maximising learning and reinforcing the under-achievement of low-attaining pupils and those from lower socioeconomic or minority-ethnic backgrounds (Kutnick et al, 2005).

## 2.5 Exploratory group talk

Recent international research on 'higher-level' peer talk, variously termed 'collaborative reasoning' (Reznitskaya et al, 2009; Baines et al, 2009) or 'exploratory' (Mercer et al, 2004) has demonstrated a clear link between effective practice of this form and the development of reasoning and achievement. These studies are in primary and secondary sectors, across a range of subjects, often Mathematics and Science, but also English, ICT, philosophy and Citizenship, and a variety of contexts, for example, the UK (Haworth, 1999; Mercer et al, 1999; 2004; Skidmore, 2000; Blatchford et al, SPRinG project, 2003, 2005; Baines et al, 2009; Galton et al, 2009), Belgium (DeCorte et al, 2001), America (Clark et al, 2003; Webb and Mastergeorge, 2003; Webb et al, 2009; Boaler, 2006; 2008; Pressley, 2006; Reznitskaya et al, 2009), Australia (Gillies, 2003, 2004; Gillies and Khan, 2009), Israel (Schwartz, 2003) and Mexico (Rosaj-Drummond and Mercer, 2003).

All of these studies focus on training pupils (and to a lesser extent, teachers) in the practice of exploratory talk, often using ground-rules to establish norms of communication, including pupil questioning and explanations (Webb et al, 2009). There is also an emphasis on explicitness, reflection on talk (Cohen, 1994) and the valuing of process, not outcome. This, of course, links to Vygotskian ideas on teachers inducting students into cultural and linguistic forms.

Innovative work by Mercer and his collaborators ('Thinking Together', Mercer et al, 2004; Mercer and Littleton, 2007) has been critical in establishing the importance of exploratory talk, initially in primary, but recently across a range of KS3 subjects, including one study developing pupils' writing in response to non-fiction texts in English, which coincided with this project. The body of work has demonstrated the relationship between group talk and increases in individual and collaborative reasoning, and has identified some of the necessary conditions for effective exploratory talk. These include using higher-cognitive tasks designed initially by researchers; training pupils, and to a lesser extent, teachers, in formal discourse strategies; using ground-rules

and requiring pupil reflection on talk. A multi-method, quasi-experimental approach is used in the above studies (Mercer and Littleton, 2007), comparing the performance in group talk and writing tasks of 'target' and 'control' groups, with non-verbal reasoning and other written tests of subject understanding and skills.

Although Mercer et al (2004) and Mercer and Littleton (2007) use some convincing qualitative analysis of videotapes to illustrate developing talk, the focus of their research is on measurable changes in thinking. It therefore, arguably, underplays the complexity of the classroom contexts influencing talk, including grouping, identity, relationships and roles adopted by teacher and pupils and the interplay of the forms of discourse performed in different phases of the lesson, whole-class and group (see Corden and Westgate, 1993; McVittie, 2004; Pryor and Crossouard, 2005).

Galton et al (2009) also demonstrated that a programme in exploratory talk across 32 UK classes in KS2-3 developed learning attainment in English, Mathematics and Science, with a greater effect size for boys when comparing class and group performance. The Social Pedagogical Research into Grouping project (SPRinG, Blatchford et al, 2005; Baines et al, 2009; Galton et al, 2009) also enhanced pupil motivation; behaviour; and the quality of pupil talk, in terms of elaboration and reasoning. The study used a 'relational' approach to the training of pupils; trained and involved teachers in the project design and group tasks; and created a broader classroom context for group work than earlier studies. Methods included rotating 'controls', comparing 'target' classes using a group-work approach for two units, with those focusing for that period only on whole-class teaching; classes were reversed for the last two units. The study was multi-method, including data from written pre- and post tests (in English, on imaginative and discursive writing); 'target' pupil observations of behaviour and type of interaction, based on time-sampling; some qualitative analysis of exploratory talk; and pupil questionnaires.

SPRinG seems to have addressed some potential gaps in Mercer and collaborators' work (Mercer and Littleton, 2007). Thus, it focuses on pupil relationships, and training of pupils and teachers in collaborative skills, reducing researcher intervention; it also aims for a rich classroom context for group work, embedding it in the curriculum as part of usual practice. However, there

are tensions in the research design: the study is predicated on using a 'naturalistic' setting and associated interpretive methodology, yet several factors seem to conflict with this. For example, there is a reliance on coded, systematic observations to evaluate pupil learning and motivation in group talk, a method that has been critiqued for discourse analysis by Edwards and Westgate (1994). They argue that a more open-ended format, with researchers spending longer in the field would enable greater accuracy 'because meanings [in dialogue] depend so heavily on the participants' past encounters and their consequent stock of shared knowledge' (ibid, p. 97).

Participant perspectives from interview were also not sought in SPRinG (Blatchford et al, 2005), preventing a richer picture of the talk from developing. This is compounded by the use of questionnaires, not interviews, to gauge pupil motivation and learning, which is problematic in terms of reliability, given pupils' tendency to respond to teacher/researcher expectation (Galton and Williamson, 1992). Most significantly, the idea of target classes functioning as rotating controls for each other implies that a group-work model can simply be added or subtracted from a classroom and its effect on learning 'measured'. This underplays research on dialogic talk and identity: instituting such talk is likely to affect teacher and pupil identities and relationships, influencing the subsequent quality of talk, thinking and interaction in all phases of the lesson. These are all elements that needed to be addressed in our project design.

## **2.6 Peer scaffolding of talk**

A number of studies, particularly in mathematics and science, have identified cognitive benefits for higher-attaining pupils in mixed-ability groups. For example, giving explanations is correlated with achievement (Webb and Palinscar, 1996; Howe and Tolmie, 2003; Howe et al, 2007; and Webb et al, 2009). Gillies' (2003, p.45) review of five studies in primary and junior subjects including English, found that students trained in group skills, who were encouraged to promote each other's learning actively, used a wider range of 'cognitive language strategies', including detailed explanations and concrete examples to illustrate ideas. They also offered more solicited and unsolicited explanations to their peers. The latter is an example of 'proleptic instruction', which Forman (1989) defines as being implicit and informal, so not necessarily triggering the metacognitive activity necessary for enhanced learning in the help-giver. However, Gillies (2003) concluded that the intellectual task is magnified if a pupil has to analyse when a peer might need additional explanation and decide on the most useful form for this. Indeed, this is the kind of

precise analysis and intervention that teachers find challenging (Edwards and Mercer, 1987; Sutherland, 2006b).

All the above studies have also identified cognitive benefits of group work for the less capable peers, but Webb and Mastergeorge (2003) in particular, have shown that effective peer scaffolding only occurs when both help-seekers and help-givers enact certain roles. Drawing on Ames (1992) and Dweck (1986), they argue that help-givers tend to provide explanations when they see the seeker as oriented towards learning, not performance, by asking precise questions and persisting with these, thus showing active engagement with the topic. In other words, the help-seeker must externalise and explain her lack of understanding precisely (a role usually associated with the help-giver) and her persistence reflects her motivation to apply independently, not waste, her peers' explanations. Thus, it is largely the identity that the help-seeker projects, through her questions, and the precision of these, that stimulates a helpful response in her peers. Boaler et al (2000) and Boaler (2002) also indicate the central importance of identity, in relation to achievement and motivation in mathematics. This is highly significant, as it adds another dimension to the discussion of why some group talk achieves a high cognitive level, whereas in another context, an apparently similar task and training may yield much lower-order talk.

Webb and Mastergeorge (2003, p. 77) also present a more nuanced view of how scaffolding occurs in groups, which echoes Rogoff's (1990) notion of apprenticeship: groups do not contain only 'experts' and 'novices', but rather a 'range of competence and a variety of unique capabilities and areas of expertise'. This means that pupils' roles will not be fixed and, particularly with subjects such as English, opportunities will arise for all members to both give and receive explanations or analysis at different times, in discussing alternative interpretations of texts. A key strength of the Webb and Mastergeorge (2003) and Mastergeorge et al's (2000) research designs are the inclusion of fine-grained qualitative analysis of transcripts, which enable the reader to recognise the complexity of the topic.

The model of pupils with a range of competencies and skills mutually scaffolding learning is at the heart of Boaler's (2006, 2008) innovative work on collaborative talk in mathematics in the USA and UK, in schools in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage. These studies demonstrate that

discussion-based pedagogies, involving pupils solving problems in mixed-ability groups, promote greater mathematical understanding and pupil motivation across the ability range than traditional, didactic approaches. Boaler (2008 p. 185) attributes this partly to the 'multidimensional nature of the classes', in which a range of competencies were valued as essential mathematical practices, including explaining, clarifying and questioning, enabling all 'to be successful'.

## **2.7 The teacher's role**

Whereas there is consensus about the importance of providing pupils with some 'training' in interactive skills, research is divided on the precise role teachers should play during collaborative talk. Many studies suggest that pupils need space to develop independent interactive and cognitive skills, with minimal intervention from the teacher, especially in the early stages (Galton and Williamson, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Barnes and Todd, 1995; Sutherland, 2006a; Galton et al, 2009). Key reasons include allowing pupils 'wait' or 'thinking time' (Alexander, 2008) and, critically, given the above discussion of power relationships in the whole-class context, changing the discourse structure and climate of the classroom to empower pupils to practise speaking in the more hesitant, exploratory form required. Indeed, Galton et al (2009, p. 136) cite early teacher interventions ('teacher take-over'), which were 'resented' by pupils, as potentially preventing further gains in achievement. Here, English teachers, following Neil's (1997) findings that space and posture determine pupils' perceptions of teachers, often positioned themselves in 'neutral space' to signal their non-interference.

Some studies draw distinctions between types of teacher intervention, for example, Gillies (2004) found that interventions focusing on 'process' (reminders of ground-rules or open-ended questions), were more effective in triggering detailed explanations than 'high-content' interventions (explanations or answer-giving). However, Webb et al (2009) found that simple reminders of ground-rules were less effective in prompting explanations than classrooms in which teachers also regularly asked 'probing', precise questions, both whole-class and group, based on listening to pupils, diagnosing their thinking and phrasing questions requiring elaboration. Two key points are implied by this research: teachers must act as discourse guides, modelling how to ask effective, probing questions, but they must also establish communicative norms, encouraging pupils to request, and give, peers similarly detailed explanations. Boaler (2008) suggests that this shift in classroom culture, with pupils taking responsibility for their peers' learning, can be effected

by teachers explicitly valuing group, not individual, achievement, reinforcing Ames (1992) and Mastergeorge et al (2000) on teachers developing 'mastery' goals, by praising pupils' effort and development, not speed and 'correct' performance. Parker and Hurry (2007), critiquing literacy practice in UK primary lessons, caution that teacher modelling, for example, of questioning strategies to self-monitor reading comprehension, must be explicit and combined with immediate opportunities for pupils to practise these, to be effective.

## **2.8 Dialogic, exploratory talk in English**

All of the above studies have direct relevance to the use of exploratory talk in English, especially in relation to reading, since the development of skills in reasoning, including giving and receiving explanations, using evidence and being able to analyse, synthesise and evaluate are central to this (see NC, QCA, 2007). Useful research has been done demonstrating a clear link between group talk and the development of pupils' imaginative and discursive writing skills in English (Gelatt, 2003; Reed, 2005; Galton et al, 2009). However, I will focus now on evidence for the use of group talk to develop pupils' reading skills, starting with a summary of work in cognitive psychology and literary theory on how readers comprehend texts.

Harris and Hodge (1995, p. 207) define comprehension as 'intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader'. Readers strive to construct a 'mental model' (Johnson-Laird, 1983) or 'situation model' (Kintsch, 1998) of a text that is coherent at local (sentence and paragraph/stanza) and global (whole-text) levels (Oakhill and Cain, 2004). To achieve this, readers must use a range of inference strategies to fill in gaps in the text, both across small units (using knowledge of grammar, for example, anaphoric processing, or semantics, inferring that 'pedalling' refers to a bicycle, Cain and Oakhill, 1999), and larger units (Graesser et al, 1994). The most sophisticated form of inference (elaborative) requires readers to integrate the different elements of a text, synthesising their understanding across its whole, both by applying knowledge gained in earlier to later parts and, crucially, applying external knowledge to the text (such as, understanding of human behaviour, a historical period or of story structure) to construct full meaning (Oakhill and Cain, 2004). However, readers must also constantly monitor their comprehension so that they draw on this knowledge at critical moments. For example, Cain et al (2001) with their creation of the fictional planet 'Gan', found that even when weak



comprehenders had the requisite general knowledge to make a correct inference, they did not know when or how to apply this.

The US National Reading Panel's review of reading research (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, N.I.H., 2000) concluded that a multiple-strategy approach was the most effective in developing pupils' comprehension. This includes enhancing pupils' comprehension-monitoring and reflection on reading; practising reading strategies in groups; and prompting pupils to ask and answer questions about texts. Applebee et al (2003, p. 693) also found that pupil questions and encouraging multiple perspectives on texts through 'dialogic interaction' supported students' comprehension and 'envisionment-building' (capacity to develop a flexible and expanding mental representation of a text). Many studies have identified that training pupils to generate questions of texts in class and in groups develops comprehension, as this heightens pupils' awareness of gaps in understanding and requires them to practise inferential skills to address these (Yuill and Joscelyne, 1988; Rosenshine et al, 1996; Perfetti, Landi and Oakhill, 2005; and see Wolf et al, 2004, on the importance of students generating extended talk about text). Rosenshine et al (1996) also found that the most effective scaffolding of pupil questions was using generic, not content-based, question stems, such as 'how does...affect...?' or 'What does...mean?' They hypothesised that generic stems 'promote deeper processing, initiate recall of background knowledge, require integration of prior knowledge, and provide more direction for processing' than single words (ibid, 1996, p. 200). These findings confirm Manzo's (1969) research on 'reciprocal questioning', in which the teacher models higher-order questioning with a pupil, who then takes a turn in questioning the teacher, using similarly phrased questions.

Palinscar and Brown (1984) were the first to demonstrate gains in comprehension for 12-13 year-old, weak readers, using collaborative talk in the form of 'reciprocal teaching' (RT): here, the teacher 'guide' models reading strategies with a group of pupils, who then practise using these independently. The strategies are: summarising, asking questions, clarifying content and making predictions. These all require pupils to be active in constructing meaning from the text, by collaboratively monitoring their comprehension, asking questions and applying inferential strategies to fill gaps left by the text. This model is, of course, premised on all the above theories of reading, combined with a sociocultural view of adults using talk to induct pupils into cognitive

processes (Rogoff's 'guided participation' 1990, p. 191). It suggests that pupils are gradually internalising the comprehension-monitoring strategies, moving from intermental to intramental understanding, by this process of 'inter-thinking' (Mercer, 2000, p.1). These results have been reproduced with primary children in Belgium (DeCorte et al, 2001) and in a range of different contexts (Rosenshine et al, 1996).

Pressley's (2006) guided group work, 'transactional strategies instruction', developed the theoretical basis of RT, positing a three-way 'transaction' between reader, text and other readers. Echoing 'reader response' theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), meaning is constructed in the act of reading: each reader interprets the language through a lens constructed by personal, social and cultural factors. The word 'transaction' signalled two other, related meanings: firstly, drawing on developmental psychology (Bell, 1968), teachers should be responsive, reacting to pupils' speech, not leading the group; secondly, they should recognise the creative potential of collaborative talk about text: the group would invariably arrive at a new interpretation, which no single individual would have produced.

Pressley's model, though not explicitly acknowledged, brings the argument back to Bakhtin's (1981) concept of intertextuality and poststructuralist (Barthes, 1999; Derrida, 1981) views of texts generating plural readings. All texts, spoken and written, are interrelated: dialogic talk about text requires speakers to articulate and explain their different interpretations, providing a visible model of the reading process, as in the process of talking, fresh meanings or 'texts' will be created. These readings, then, become available for other readers/pupils to explore, creating chains of texts; readings are both infinite and in some sense, always collaborative, as they rely on the rich interchange between speaker/speaker and speaker/text, both in the present and with speakers/critics/texts from the past. Group talk also inevitably emphasises the provisional nature of readings, as each speaker strives to articulate their initial interpretation, while being obliged by peers to acknowledge alternative views. This requires speakers to develop nuanced, tentative language, as well as finding evidence and developing reasons for their interpretation.

Pressley (2006) and Gaskins et al (1993) found that the transactional model was effective at enhancing pupils' comprehension skills and that it stimulated a more dialogic form of talk, with

teachers moving away from IRE cycles, encouraging elaborated pupil responses. An apparently similar model of reading in groups can be found in English schools, forming part of the 'renewed' PNS and SNS (DCFS, 2008). However, recent findings on this context have been more mixed than those described above in the US. For example, both Skidmore (2000) and Fisher (2008) have demonstrated that guided reading is often 'monologic' (see Sutherland, 2000b). So, the key question is: what are the conditions in which groups of pupils reading texts can achieve dialogic, exploratory talk that enables them to become active constructors of meaning from text - comprehenders, not decoders or passive receivers of the teacher's, or other pupils', authoritative readings?

Soter et al's (2008) US review of nine discussion-based approaches to reading comprehension found that the most effective forms were structured, but not dominated by the teacher, enabling pupils to give extended responses; were stimulated by open-ended questions and involved teacher modelling and scaffolding of discourse and reasoning strategies. Soter et al (2008, p. 373) also found that 'affective connections between readers and text' were significant in generating sophisticated 'critical-analytic responses' to texts, reinforcing Pressley's (2006) work. 'Collaborative reasoning' (Clark et al, 2003; Reznitskaya et al, 2009), for example, requires pupils to discuss moral dilemmas in texts. Transcripts demonstrate that fourth-grade children learnt how to be 'internally persuasive' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345) through talk and that teachers used low-control discourse strategies (Wood, 1992), allowing pupils responsibility for managing effective interaction. Being empowered to speculate about characters' motives and actions, as well as being trained in how to argue, developed pupils' exploratory talk.

Corden and Westgate's (1993, pp. 117-118) study of the contexts in which exploratory, dialogic talk develops in Year 8 English lessons provides a useful reminder that context is 'developed by the talk, rather than pre-existing it or as constituting a set of factors which might shape it in some determinist fashion'. Rich discourse developed when pupils perceived the teacher's talk as being authentic or 'honestly' dialogic, rather than being triggered by isolated features, such as question-phrasing. Examples included teachers expressing uncertainty and inviting pupils to adopt a new role, by speculating as equals about the meaning of song lyrics; and teachers explicitly valuing speech over writing (see, too, Alexander, 2008). Corden and Westgate (1993, p. 119) argue that pupils' cumulative perceptions that their work will be exposed to public and *individual* evaluation

and that they should produce 'examinable [written] artefacts' can 'cast a shadow of inhibition...onto later and differently intended [group] talk'.

This confirms Nystrand et al's (1997) research on the importance of 'authentic' teacher questions, which is corroborated by Torrance and Pryor's (1998, p.107) study of formative assessment in primary classes. They conclude that 'naturally occurring' contexts in which teachers ask 'genuine' questions, for example, eliciting talk about a lesson taught by another teacher, enable teachers to 'transcend' the IRE and engage in richer dialogue, swapping an 'evaluate' for a probing follow-up or 'counter-argument'. Critically, Torrance and Pryor (1998, p. 121) argue that it is the teacher's 'positioning' of herself as a learner, 'this mixture of knowing and not knowing which seems to condition the discourse'. This is reinforced by Smith and Hardman's (2006, p. 500) conclusion that teacher 'intentions' in 'feedback', rather than types of questions, are critical to their ability to elicit elaborated pupil responses in class talk. They critique a 'tool-kit' approach to teacher training, since teachers need to understand why certain types of feedback are useful in encouraging particular 'pupil behaviour' (not just 'talk'). In terms of my central argument, teachers need to understand the basis of dialogism.

## 2.9 Conclusion

There is consensus in research about the need for pupils to engage in 'dialogic talk' (Alexander, 2008) in order to learn and to comprehend texts, but as many enter the classroom without experience of its dominant discourses, teachers need to induct pupils into modes, such as exploratory talk, in a more explicit, structured way than is the norm, to ensure equity of access for all. The 'group talk' model implied by the literature (although not all elements are fully present in one study) suggests rich teacher and pupil training in strategies; teacher scaffolding and explicit discourse modelling in the whole-class phase; pupil-generated ground-rules for discussion; regular practice; and reflection on the talk.

However, this emphasis on 'training' in exploratory and collaborative oral skills may be a necessary but insufficient condition for pupils' confident development of these. Since all discourse is associated with a set of values, attitudes and behaviour, it is essential to discover the subtle

contexts, including types of classroom interaction, roles and relationships, that prompt pupils to embrace new ways of behaving, as well as speaking - that is, to move beyond mimicking or 'ventriloquating' a discourse, to inhabiting it. It is this area that remains relatively under-researched, especially in relation to English and the reading of texts. Recent evidence, largely in primary English lessons (Oakhill and Cain, 2004) and in secondary English in the US (Soter et al, 2008), confirms the value of collaborative talk for developing sophisticated inferential and critical reading skills, but much of this work is with weaker readers only and is either teacher 'guided' or whole-class. This leaves a gap for research exploring the relationship between independent group talk and the development of reading, reasoning and discourse skills in secondary English lessons.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### 3.1 Collaborative Action Research and Dialogism

The focus of this study is how to enable pupils to engage in rich, dialogic talk, its key premise deriving from Bakhtin's notion that knowledge and understanding are constructed intersubjectively, through language: truth/s are born 'between people, collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction' (1984, p. 110, emphasis added). Indeed, Bakhtin's work (1981, p. 293, 280) is saturated with references to meaning lying on the 'borderline' between self and other and to understanding forming as a 'response' to the other's words, whether spoken or written. Each conversation also becomes part of the chain of utterances echoing through time and forming relationships with all discourses before and after it.

Bakhtin's central metaphor therefore provided the overarching framework for both the substantive topic and chosen methodology of this study - collaborative action-research. This was designed to mirror and enact the idea of dialogism: a community of researchers would investigate the issue, as 'equal' participants, arriving at joint, mediated understandings. The methodology drew on insights from 'participatory action research' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005), with its emphasis on the development of critical reason in participants and on Lather's notions of 'research as praxis' (1991, p. 52). However, just as the Bakhtinian concept of equal dialogue in any context has been presented as idealised above, similarly, participatory action research will be problematised, in terms of researcher identities and the inevitable power relationships and tensions existing in projects involving teacher, university researcher and pupil participants.

The methodology is qualitative and interpretive, inevitably using as its main data-source transcribed discourse, generated in naturalistic settings. This took the form of naturally occurring pupil group talk; and dialogic, 'quasi-naturalistic' interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009) from all participants, held throughout the project. The third source of data was observations of the talk, supported by field-notes. The emphasis on the naturalistic setting is a critical part of the research design and draws on similar studies of classroom discourse by, for example, Mehan (1979), Galton and Williamson (1992), Alexander (2000) and Torrance and Pryor (2001).

The relatively long time-scale was planned both to allow pupils the opportunity to develop their talk, since acquisition of any discourse occurs gradually (Gee, 2008) and, more profoundly from a methodological point of view, because this enabled a deeper understanding of the context of the talk being examined to be built up, enhancing the dependability (LeCompte and Preissle, 1993) of the resultant discourse analysis; thus comparative data in subtly different contexts was collected at different points. This reinforces Bakhtin's (1981) idea of chains of utterances, accruing relational meanings over time: the study of talk demands that the researcher is seeped in the situated, sociocultural contexts which produce it (see Edwards and Westgate, 1994; Mercer, 2008). In this study, teacher researchers are inevitably 'insiders'; the extended period in the field was to enable me, as the university researcher, to inhabit the insider/outsider borderline and ideally, to move between these positions.

The main means of enhancing validity was to use different forms of triangulation and to build Lather's (1991, p.56) concepts of 'reciprocity' and 'dialectical theory-building' into the research design. Drawing on Denzin's (1970) definitions, time triangulation or diachronic reliability (Kirk and Miller, 1986), included data being collected at different points over the year, for example, in the form of 'sequential' teacher interviews (Lather, 1991), which produced multi-layered, arguably, more authentic data. This was combined with multi-method triangulation of the transcriptions, observations and interviews, comparing the different perspectives of the participants and enabling 'thick descriptions' of the discourse to be developed (Carspecken, 1996). Although Silverman (1985) has argued that triangulation implies a positivist yearning to reduce a complex unit to a single truth, the idea of gathering a range of different 'voices' and perspectives on the talk, instead reinforces the overall interpretive and dialogic, methodological stance of this study.

Lather's (1991, p. 57) notion of 'reciprocity' or 'a mutual negotiation of meaning and power' was central to the action-research (AR) design, although with the paradoxical, prior assumption that this was aspirational, rather than achievable. In other words, reciprocity was planned in the design in a range of ways to enable participant teachers and pupils to have agency, as subjects and co-researchers (McNiff and Whitehead, 2002). This started with collaborating over the intervention; being involved in regular critical reflection and evaluation of the developing talk (with the teacher researchers, this was both individually and as a research team); refining the intervention and then continuing with the spiral of implementation and review. (The development

of participants' critical and reflexive tools so that they can understand and change their situation is, of course, central to research as praxis.) This format was informed by studies such as Torrance and Pryor (1998; 2001) in which teacher researchers in a later study tested and refined theoretical and analytic categories (divergent and convergent forms of assessment), generated by the earlier study. The role of the university researchers included providing the conceptual tools at the start of the second study, enabling teacher researchers' 'practical arguments' (Torrance, 2004) to develop and, of course, writing final reports, which were taken back to collaborators before publication. This example illustrates that 'reciprocity' in action research does not erase role differences and aspects of power.

Reciprocity in the group-talk study also underpinned the methodology for interviews: these aimed to be dialogic and exploratory (Oakley, 1981; Lather, 1991; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009), approximating to natural conversation, although inevitably not always resembling this, given the pressures of time (snatched moments at the end of lessons) and the presence of audio recorders. Some data, including transcripts, emerging analysis and conclusions, were also taken back to the teacher researchers (not, regrettably, to the pupils) to gain their interpretations in review meetings.

In Lather's (1991, p. 62) definition of research as praxis, the final key factor is the importance of having a flexible theoretical framework: 'Data must be allowed to generate propositions in a dialectical manner that permits use of a priori theoretical frameworks but which keeps a particular framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured.' In this study, we started with a clear theoretical model, based on findings of the previous project, teachers' professional practice in the intervening period and published research, but we also remained open to the possibility that fresh categories may emerge from the data.

Emancipatory action research with its roots in critical theory has been critiqued, using a Foucauldian framework, for its tendency to conceal the workings of power. Couture (1994) exposes the potentially exploitative relationship between university researchers and their student 'co-researchers' in an AR study at the University of Alberta that introduced new critical reflection journals for trainee teachers. Drawing on deconstruction and postcolonial theory, Couture (1994,



p. 128) uses the extended metaphor of 'Dracula as action researcher' to show the 'epistemic violence' involved in colonizing and 'probing into the silence that belongs to the Other'. Although the title of the project was 'Teacher Identity Research Project - Students Speaking Back to the Programme', Couture (ibid, p. 127-8) shows how this process was inverted, with the university 'incorporat[ing]' and 'feed[ing]' on students' life stories.

Similar criticisms of emancipatory research have been levelled by a range of theorists, including Lather (1991), Gee (2008) and Rancière (cited in Biesta, 2008): it is premised on an unequal relationship in which 'the oppressed' are apparently only freed from Gramscian 'false consciousness' by outside agency - the superior knowledge of the emancipator - not by themselves. Two key questions about AR remain: firstly, is it possible to undertake a form that transcends the merely 'technical', or the 'tinkering' with 'what works' (Torrance, 2004, p. 188) in order to generate what Elliott (2001, p. 555) calls significant, 'actionable knowledge', including greater self-awareness and capacity for transformation for all participant researchers? (See Elliott's (ibid) critique of Hargreaves' (1999) 'engineering' model and Stenhouse's (1983) contribution to this debate). Secondly, recalling the image of Dracula, how achievable are either equality or dialogism in a project such as this, where I, as university researcher, am responsible for generating the initial project design; managing the work across the three schools; undertaking the final written report; and crucially, personally benefiting from the intellectual labour of my collaborators, by presenting the work as a doctoral thesis?

In answer to the first of these questions, the model of action research adopted is informed by Reason and Bradbury's (2006) analysis of action research in a postmodern framework. They argue for research and a 'worldview' that is 'participatory' and 'asks us to be both situated and reflexive, to be explicit about the perspective from which the knowledge is created, to see inquiry as a process of coming to know, serving the democratic, practical ethos of action research' (2006, p. 7). Reason and Bradbury's definition of 'participatory' not only implies all participants in AR having power to produce knowledge, but on a more profound level, that research itself, in the twenty-first century, needs to focus on action, in addition to discourse. That is, it needs to move beyond the 'linguistic turn' (2006, p. 5). While fully accepting postmodern and poststructuralist approaches as useful in exposing 'the myth of the modernist world', Reason and Bradbury (2006, p. 6) rightly fear that there is too little focus on relating 'the crisis in representation' to 'knowledge

in action', drawing on Lather's (1991, p. 12) concern with research as praxis: 'The question of action [...] remains largely under-addressed within postmodern discourse'.

I have found these ideas helpful in guiding me through the 'Scylla and Charybdis' path between the untenable, positivist belief in certainty about truth and the extreme relativism of postmodernism, which in the hands of Baudrillard (1983) , posits that the Gulf War did not exist. My methodological approach thus seeks to create research conditions in which 'provisional, fallible, intersubjectively based claims to truth can be explored' (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2005, p. 580), generating plausible, not definitive, accounts of the world that, crucially, enable participants to develop criticality and take action. The second question hinges on researcher identity.

### **3.2 Researcher identity**

Dunne et al (2005), drawing on Spradley (1980), have convincingly demonstrated the problematic nature of typologies designed to identify the level of participation in observations. Therefore, I have assumed, simply, the 'inevitability' of my 'affecting the research' as observer, and have focused instead on the 'nature of the effect' (Dunne et al, 2005, p. 25). I also accept McCutcheon's (1981, p. 9) definition of the participant researcher as a 'perceptual lens through which observations are made and interpreted', although I intended this to be distributed across the team of teacher researchers, enabling some triangulation. During lessons, I constructed myself as a friendly, but distanced observer, and referred pupil questions to the teacher, rather than answering them myself. Inevitably, I was occasionally briefly drawn into the lesson, for example, by a teacher to remind her of what another class had reported about her pupils' videotaped talk and by threats to the audio equipment. Thus, I unintentionally intervened to stop a recorder from being accidentally bounced onto the floor in an early lesson of Peter's class, spontaneously saying 'Hey! I've just paid £265.00 each for these', which achieved the desired effect, but triggered concerned questions about whether I could claim the money back. In spite of allowing pupils to indulge in 'microphone talk' (Bennett and Dunne, 1992, p.32) as recorders were being set up, this did not eradicate pupils' interest in these in early lessons. However, the regularity of my observations over nearly an entire academic year did make pupils habituate to the presence of the recorders and me.

I also recognise the tension between the transformative aim of participatory action research, in terms of dialogism and equality of participation and my role as co-ordinator of the project. I have identified a set of factors above that militated against the teacher researchers (and pupils) having equal power to me, as co-ordinator and writer of the final report or version of our collective story. While the report has been shown to the team for comments, it remains my voice and therefore excludes those of the other members. The only truly dialogic way of presenting the final text would have been either to have co-written the entire report (as in the tradition of co-authored interviews, see Tripp, 1983) or to have woven in extracts of commentary from the teachers themselves so that the text became a heteroglossic palimpsest, including extracts that contradicted the central conclusions. This form would have neatly represented Bakhtinian 'dialogism', as it would have maintained the emphasis on 'difference', as represented by the competing, arguing voices. (The distinction between dialogism being premised on difference, whereas 'dialectic' seeks to synthesise and unify competing viewpoints is well made by Wegerif, 2008). Unfortunately, such a text may not conform to the conventional notions of coherence expected of a research report, as well as being unacceptable for submission as a thesis. There is, in any case, always a danger of exacerbating the problem with a tokenistic approach. For example, in Skidmore (2000), the university researcher gave his trainee teacher researchers the opportunity to 'write back' and comment on the analysis of their lessons in the final report. However, even here, the author's words remain at the centre; his collaborators' words being rather noticeably relegated to the margins of the text.

I have rejected, as distracting and unsuited to the seriousness of the substantive topic, other ways of emphasising the provisional, discursive nature of the 'truths' claimed in any research report, such as Maclure's (2003) suggested use of an ironic, playful style to evoke the 'textured' nature of reality. Therefore, I accept that the problem of avoiding monologic, authoritative discourse in this study of group talk may not have been addressed. However, I have tried to preserve the voices of both teachers and pupils, by including extended extracts from interviews, including final evaluations of the project. I was also aware of a Bakhtinian process occurring during the writing of the report: that is, I envisaged the 'voices' of the teachers responding to arguments presented and tried to use these to ensure that counter positions were considered.

### 3.3 The Action Research Spiral

The research design uses the AR planning, implementing and evaluating spiral over an extended period of time, in that it continues work started with three of the four participating teacher researchers two years earlier, albeit in different schools (Sutherland, 2006a, 2006b). In the earlier study, the emphasis was on training teachers - that is, using a 'coaching' model to enable trainees to develop their expertise in stimulating pupil group talk - as well as on the pupil discourse itself. This follow-up project focuses primarily on the pupil talk, using teachers, rather than trainee teachers, who were more active collaborative researchers. The study was similar to the first in that it investigated the effectiveness of an intervention, but it was over a significantly longer time period (an academic year) and aimed to explore more fully the subtle web of contexts that enable rich, exploratory talk to develop.

Therefore, the typical AR 'reconnaissance' stage of this project also functioned as a further 'evaluation' of the findings from the first project. Thus, teacher researchers reflected on their practice of group talk for the two-year period in between the projects, leading up to their current position, while also reviewing the findings of the first project, including some transcripts of pupil talk. As the university researcher responsible for steering the project, I synthesised ideas, presenting an initial project design, including a skeletal intervention, at an early meeting; the team added to this model throughout the project. Review meetings during and at the end of the project were designed to enable comparison of emerging findings across the four classrooms, using some transcript evidence, and refinements to the model. A key change suggested by the team was to enable pupil dialogue across the schools, by swapping videos of group discourse between schools. This enabled pupils both to peer-assess another class's progress, sending them feedback and to use this exercise to reflect more deeply on their own progress at that point in the project. A key reason for wanting to exchange video evidence of group talk was also the dearth of such material available, nationally. This reinforced the collaborative and dialogic element of the project, with pupils recognising the reciprocal role of their exchanged, taped discourse in supporting the development of their partner-school peers' talk, as well as their own.

### 3.4 Methods of data-collection

The data were taken from four Year 8 classes (twelve to thirteen year-olds) in three schools in Sussex, all located in urban areas. The Year 8 classes comprised two sets designated by their schools as 'high-attaining', one designated as 'low-attaining' and one designated 'mixed-ability' (henceforth 'high', 'low' and 'mixed-ability' 'sets'), although for timetabling reasons, this class had a preponderance of pupils who were higher-performers in Mathematics, not English. There is a progressive focus in this study on two of the classes from the same large school, Seaview, partly because these represent the full range of ability at this school, as there are only two broadly banded 'sets': 'upper' and 'lower'.

The data were collected over an academic year, from October, 2007 - June, 2008. The pupils practised the model of group talk agreed on during this period regularly, ideally once a week (achieved for most of the project by the classes at Seaview) and not less than once every two weeks.

During this time, all classes were observed undertaking group talk and a sample of pupils was audio-taped at least once a month, within the naturalistic setting of the classroom (that is, a total of 37 lessons were observed: 21 at Seaview). Field-notes were made of the groups observed, using a semi-structured schedule. The sample of pupils audiotaped, per class, comprised: three groups of four or five pupils, deemed to be representative of the class by the teacher. Thus, a total of 114 audiotapes of pupil groups talking were collected and the majority were transcribed. The group discussions lasted between 10-20 minutes, but where these have been compared, longer tapes have been analysed, based on the first fifteen minutes only. The first and last transcripts (October and May) of the same groups in discussion have been used to provide a comparison of the quality of talk before and after the intervention. Four videotapes (one group of pupils per class) were also made by the teachers as representative exemplars of 'talk in progress', approximately half-way through the project. These were swapped for their partner schools to assess and are included in the data.

The third main form of data, in addition to observations and transcripts of pupil discourse, is taped, semi-structured interviews. These were conducted at the start and end of the intervention

with individual teachers, and brief, informal, post-lesson discussions between teacher and observer throughout the project were also taped. Group interviews with a representative sample of pupils (5-11 pupils per class) at the start and end of the project were also undertaken. In addition, the two 'review' meetings for teachers in February and June were audiotaped. These were established to enable teachers to evaluate progress and collaborate on emerging findings from their different classes with a sample of transcribed tapes; to identify key issues affecting the development of group talk; and to share ideas on the future direction of their work within this project and beyond. (See Appendix 2 for a table of the full data-set).

### **3.4.1 Capturing high-quality tapes of group discourse**

One of the primary aims of this project, methodologically, was to collect data within the naturalistic setting of the classroom to enable fine-grained analysis of the talk. One of the issues discussed in the first research meeting was whether the project should make use of video, rather than audiotape, which would, of course, capture a fuller record of the discourse, including paralinguistic features. At this point, the team was concerned about the Observer's Paradox effect of bringing video cameras into classes unused to being filmed, especially given the number of planned observations and tapings (ten per class over two terms). This was especially the case as the nature of the project meant that three video cameras, with microphones to the 12-15 pupils involved, would need to be set up simultaneously in the first part of the lesson, which would be highly visible and inevitably wasteful of lesson-time. This also raised ethical issues, drawing an overt contrast between those groups being monitored and those groups seemingly being ignored by the project. It was therefore decided that discreet, digital audio recorders should be used instead. Significantly, the decision not to use videotape was confirmed by some experimentation with sophisticated technical audio-equipment, including sound mixers and individual pupil microphones, in some pilot lessons. Setting up this complicated, individualised equipment was distracting to pupils and it was, therefore, exchanged for simpler digital recorders with in-built microphones. This also meant that recorders could be switched easily to different groups during the lesson if more than one group discussion were planned. This not only enabled a greater number of groups to be monitored, but also meant that all pupils felt as though they were participating equally in the project.

### 3.4.2 Semi-structured observations

An aide-memoire format was used, rather than instant coding of utterances, since the speed of judgement required precludes full analysis of the function, rather than mere form, of an utterance in context (see Halliday, 2007). The observational record sheet (see Appendix 3) was designed to distinguish between low-inference description of the context, including paralinguistic features, and high-inference comments so that the latter could be re-analysed, against the original data. This drew on ideas from Torrance and Pryor (1998), whose model illustrates the researcher's 'complicity' in the production of different texts in the course of the research. In reality, the speed of talk made this format hard to sustain and the field-notes were usually not so neatly delineated.

### 3.4.3 The Intervention

Each class agreed to practise group talk at least every two weeks, ideally once a week for the duration of the project (originally planned for two terms: September to April, but in reality starting a little later and therefore running from October to June). Groupings took the form of four-five pupils and were non-friendship, mixed-sex and 'mixed-ability', within the parameters of the given classes, three out of four of which were 'set' for English. Teachers aimed to create stable groups, which would be sustained for at least a number of weeks to achieve trust and rapport between group members; and groups were always stable when comparative audiotapes were being made. However, teachers were free to experiment with different groupings within the guidelines above, during the project.

Teachers used an early lesson for pupils to generate their own ground-rules for exploratory group talk, although they guided classes with more subtle points if important aspects were not raised spontaneously, for example, the need to speak more fully and explicitly in a group of less familiar peers than with friends. Role-play was used to stimulate the rules: teachers asked pupils to enact as many examples of poor group talk as they could think of. The class then extrapolated from these, inferring a set of rules for effective, exploratory talk. These included: everyone must contribute equally/respect other's views; try to agree as a group; give reasons and examples/evidence from the text; ask questions to clarify understanding, to develop the talk and to include others; use challenges with reasons; speak fully so that unfamiliar people can understand your argument.

Pupils recorded these rules in different ways, both in their books and on the wall, in the form of colourful posters. Teachers elicited the ground-rules from pupils each time they practised group talk, although they were free to focus on, or elaborate particular ones for given sessions, for example, effective questioning. After every group-talk session, groups were asked to engage in reflection on the quality of their talk, setting themselves targets for future sessions. Some teachers encouraged pupils to record these in writing, others orally (see Appendix 3). Pupils were asked to recall their group's target/s at the start of their next discussion.

As group talk was conceived of as being part of ordinary practice in English, tasks for this were simply added to existing schemes of work, rather than requiring a new curriculum. Different tasks and approaches to scaffolding these, including resources used and varieties of feedback, were discussed at the review meetings and conveyed by me in post-observation discussions. Other elements were added into the intervention as it developed, largely as a result of teachers exchanging ideas in the review meetings and via me, following observations. For example, experimenting with pupil roles in groups was planned, but the impetus for this came from Anna's class, who were the first to do this and to formalise the roles (chair, scribe, questioner to include others and to elicit more elaborated explanations, and devil's advocate to introduce greater challenge). Ellen also passed on the idea of practising two group discussions in one lesson, using reflection in the middle for pupils to set themselves targets to implement straightaway in the second talk (see Appendix 3). Half-way through the project, teachers also decided to strengthen the dialogic or 'community of researchers' element of the project, by a formative-assessment exercise to share their developing practice with another school. Therefore, each class videoed a representative group of pupils and exchanged this with a class in a different school, who evaluated their progress. Each class gave feedback (strengths and targets) to the other pupils, at that point in the project and used the exercise to reflect on their own developing talk.

### **3.5 Methods of Analysis**

The main tool was discourse analysis of the group-talk transcripts and interviews, using a broadly Conversation Analysis framework (Ten Have, 1999; see Appendix 1). However, following Halliday (2007), I have reduced the detail typical of CA on transcripts, in order to present the features that are significant to the discussion of exploratory talk and will enable the reader to assess the validity of the analysis. Purists of CA may well argue that the analysis does not conform to its



methods. The rationale for this is that pupil group discourse of this kind requires atypically extended transcripts to be analysed, which would not benefit from systematic, microscopic inclusion of features such as intonation. Additional commentary on such features, where relevant, is included.

Developing analytical frameworks by Soter et al (2008) for reading comprehension and talk, and Mercer and Littleton (2007) on talk alone, the comparative level of exploratory talk in first and last transcripts was qualitatively assessed, by identifying the overall balance of the following features:

1. Reasoning and evaluative processes, signalled by words such as 'I think' and 'because' or in a task based on reading texts, by reference to relevant textual evidence. Higher-order questions, such as 'why?' 'how do you know?' 'how does the poem do...' also indicate pupils seeking justifications from peers, though these may not result in reasoned answers.
2. Challenges with reasons: 'but', 'I disagree', 'no, because...'
3. Analysis or inference, signalled by phrases such as 'it means'/'s/he says'; by pupils pointing to a phrase, using deixis: 'there'; or by quoting the text. This does not include literal comprehension of texts.
4. Extended utterances in which there is greater elaboration and explicitness of ideas (one 'turn' is measured as continuing if there are only brief overlaps and back-channel feedback: 'yeah', 'hmm'; but an interruption, where another speaker seizes the floor is counted as terminating the original turn)
5. Speculative or hypothetical talk, triggered by 'if' and 'may'
6. Indicators of the process of summarising, in which a pupil functioning as 'chair' attempts to synthesise and sum up elements of the discussion, in order to draw it to a conclusion and move on, such as, 'so' or 'we've agreed that...'
7. Tentativeness features, indicating the group's openness to exploring a range of ideas (for example, use of modal verbs, such as 'may', 'could' and 'might'; and adverbs such as 'perhaps' and 'maybe')
8. Proportion of talk 'on task'
9. Relative equality of participation, signalled by all members participating and by questions inviting a quieter member to enter the discussion

No attempt has been made to undertake a quantitative analysis of transcripts (See Sutherland, 2006a for reasoning). However, it is clear that it is challenging to weigh up nine potential factors to evaluate the extent of exploratory talk. I have, therefore, below selected extracts from transcripts of sufficient length to illustrate the quality of the talk at the start, middle and end of the project. Here, I am following in the tradition of whole-class discourse analysis by Mehan (1979), Torrance and Pryor (1998) and Alexander (2000), in which rich, extended transcript evidence and accompanying analysis enables readers to interpret and evaluate the data, in relation to claims made of them. Inevitably, this method means that the number of transcripts cited has had to be limited, calling into question the representativeness of the sample. This is mitigated by extracts from all the first and final transcripts being used. Following Stubbs' advice (1983b), a complete data set is available for scrutiny on request. (See Appendix 3 for an example of data analysis, illustrating how transcripts of group talk, pupil spoken and written reflections and field notes were triangulated with informal teacher interviews, post-lesson.)

### **3.6 Ethical Considerations**

The project followed the Sussex Institute's recommendations on ethics contained in 'Research Ethics Standards, Guidelines and Procedures', including the Research ethics checklist ([www.sussex.ac.uk/si/1-7-6-2-1.html](http://www.sussex.ac.uk/si/1-7-6-2-1.html)). Anonymity for pupils, teachers and schools was guaranteed in all data. Permission for audio- and videotaping and observing classes was sought from parents and children, the Head Teacher and Head of English, in addition to the teacher researchers, who volunteered for the project. In the small number of cases in which parents objected to recordings, it was ensured that these pupils were not in the three groups per class being monitored. Teacher researchers were consulted about work in progress, in terms of commenting on data, preliminary findings, and therefore contributing to the final report, and were told that they could withdraw at any point from the project. Three of the original seven exercised their right to do this, from work pressures at school, and their data have been excluded.

For detailed exploration of the dangers involved in my dual role as teacher educator and collaborative researcher in a project that will directly benefit me, through submission for an EdD, see earlier work, including Assignment 2 and the CAS (Sutherland, 2006b).

### 3.7 Limitations

One of the limitations of the research design is that there is a tension between scale and methods that has been difficult to resolve. The team was committed to using fine-grained discourse analysis to identify the subtle factors contributing to pupils' developing talk, but the original design also encompassed seven classes across the county, six of which we monitored for half the intervention, with four remaining until the end. This generated a body of transcript data, to which it has been difficult to do justice. The inclusion of a breadth of contexts was also part of the original rationale: rural and urban schools in varying socioeconomic areas, with different levels of achievement, and with classes across the full ability range. One rural, lower-than-average achieving school, with a lower and upper-ability set, in addition to a second, lower-ability set from the remaining schools withdrew, leaving us with a disproportionate number (two of four) of upper-ability sets. Fortunately, Seaview School contained a lower and upper-ability set, which accounts for the progressive focus on these classes.

A second limitation has been a primary focus on audio, as opposed to videotaped data, which prevented paralinguistic features from being recorded on all transcripts (one group was observed each lesson, thus field notes recorded paralinguistic features). This exacerbated the difficulty of achieving the desired high-quality transcripts because of noise interference, overlapping voices, and so on, but was ameliorated by the fact that I, as observer, became familiar with individual pupils' voices over the year and was immersed in the classroom contexts.

The enormity of the task of managing the transcription and analysis of group-talk tapes (114 in the final data set), which are notoriously hard to transcribe, led to another limitation: the time required made it impossible to take transcripts regularly back to teachers for commentary. This discussion was limited to review meetings, in which we analysed key tapes. My dual role as co-ordinator of the project and ITE educator also made me acutely aware of not wanting to further pressurise or exploit teacher researchers, by expecting them to analyse data or attend additional meetings. A way of resolving this in future research might be to aim for a joint publication. The conflict was less acute in our first project, as trainees benefited by exploring aspects of the intervention independently for their PGCE research assignment, although power-relationship issues were intensified (see Sutherland, 2006b).

## **Chapter 4: Data Analysis: comparison between first and last transcripts**

This study set out to investigate the following questions:

1. Can a sustained intervention develop pupils' ability to use exploratory talk in groups in English lessons?
2. Which conditions allow, and what are the factors influencing, the development of such talk?

The first question will be addressed primarily by a comparative analysis of the first and last transcripts, supported by observational data and pupil and teacher interviews from all four classes. The second focus - the conditions for exploratory talk - will initially draw on data from all schools, then progressively focus on the two classes in Seaview School: an upper and a lower-ability set. Here, two key strands emerging from the previous analysis will be explored: identity and collaborative talk about texts.

In all four classes, after the intervention, there was richer, more exploratory and more independent talk than that at the start, based on a comparison between a range of early and later tapes in the twelve small groups (three per class) being monitored. Eleven of the twelve final transcripts showed a greater proportion of exploratory talk than the parallel first tapes, in terms of: reasoning, analysis, peer questioning to elicit developed responses, length of utterance, 'on task' talk and level of participation by all. Pupils in the two classes in Seaview School ('high' and 'low-ability') made the most significant and consistent development. Interviewed pupils in all schools highly rated collaborative talk at the end of the project, nearly all saying that they found it more 'useful' and 'enjoyable' for learning than whole-class talk, with a few saying that they regarded both equally. There was a significant reversal in attitude for some pupils, especially boys (notably from Peter's class in Seaview and Susan's class in Priors) moving from scepticism or dislike of group talk to valuing it for learning.

#### 4.1 Seaview School, top-ability class: Anna

In the three first transcripts of this top-ability class, there was some evidence of exploratory talk, in terms of attempts to use reasoning and to challenge another person's ideas with evidence, by individual pupils. However, significantly, pupils in two of the three tapes easily lost concentration, spending considerable time off-task and much of the talk was individualistic and competitive: pupils saw talking, not listening, as the valued skill and sought to score points, with or without reasons, rather than engaging in collaborative, exploratory talk. Thus, although the talk appeared, in some ways, more sophisticated than that defined by Barnes and Todd (1995), as merely 'disputational' as some reasoning was attempted, there was no sense of the groups developing new understanding through talk. In the third tape, although the group was more consistently exploratory in its talk and maintained focus, one boy with English as a Additional Language (EAL) remained silent for the entire fifteen minutes, with no attempt by the others to draw him into the discussion, and the talk as a whole was heavily dominated by the other boy.

Pupils were in role as a social-services housing panel, deciding which of three deserving cases to prioritise for housing. Transcript 4.1 starts with a 98-word emotive speech by Louise, who heavily dominates the group, continuing thus:

##### Transcript 4.1.1

- 1 Martin: It's a bit *mean*. (*referring to Louise's pejorative description of one of the candidates*)
- 2 Louise: I'm *not* mean (*defensive, indignant tone; glares at Martin, leaning forward*)
- 3 Martin: Will you stop looking at me like that? You're like my sister. (*nervously*)
- 4 Louise: (*turns to Tom*) I think the sixteen-year-old. What do you think Tom?
- 5 Tom: I think number one.
- 6 Martin: When you glared at me (.) you glared at me like my sister
- 7 Louise: It's a *girl* thing (*contemptuously*)

This transcript illustrates the extent to which all dialogue is saturated with power, with pupils using talk to position themselves and their peers as more or less powerful. Louise here uses discourse strategies often associated with boys (dominating the 'turns' and adopting adversarial language, Swann, 1992) to assert her dominance, silencing others and exposing the potentially problematic nature of 'collaborative talk' in its 'naturalistic' form, unmediated by any teacher intervention (see

Davies and Harré (2001); Baxter (2002); and Renold (2004) on gendered talk and subject positioning). Exploratory talk can only be achieved if group members recognise such patterns and learn how to interact to enable all peers to contribute their ideas (Corden & Westgate, 1993; Barnes and Todd, 1995). This does not mean pupils simply altering their language, but changing their perception of themselves as learners and reflecting on the purpose of collaborative talk in the community of the classroom (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Gee, 2008). The following final transcript shows the progress this group made during the project, in terms of all members participating more equally and generating exploratory, not disputational, talk.

Anna asked pupils to analyse some data (bar charts and percentages) about bullying at their own school, compared with other local schools, identifying what they found significant and to ask questions about the data-collection and presentation. Anna said that the data had been presented as factual evidence in a recent staff meeting and she was 'unsure' how to interpret these:

#### Transcript 4.1.2

- |    |         |  |
|----|---------|--|
| 1  | Martin: | I mean I'm interested in um how um (.) how like as it goes through the <i>years</i>            |
| 2  |         | the um the [Seaview] percentage gets low gets um gets <i>lower</i> than like the               |
| 3  |         | average in [Sussex] (2) so sort of (.) so so it's like the bullying bullying's                 |
| 4  |         | getting less as it goes along  |
| 5  | Gill:   | Yeah   |
| 6  | Tom:    | Where it says this percentage here ( <i>points to the data sheet, referring to the</i>         |
| 7  |         | <i>number of pupils bullied in each year group</i> ), it's not that it gets more or less as it |
| 8  |         | goes up the years, it's around the same  |
| 9  | Martin: | Yeah   |
| 10 | Tom:    | It's like (1) ( <i>trails off as he tries to think of an explanation</i> )                     |
| 11 | Louise: | I think, though, Year 7's got the <i>most</i> bullying I think that's because                  |
| 12 |         | like when you start off not many people <i>know</i> each other so they so they're all          |
| 13 |         | kind of trying to make friends (.) and I think (.) Year 8, there's not really much             |
| 14 |         | because you just get you you've already got used to [the school                                |
| 15 | Martin: | [Yes   |
| 16 | Louise: | then Year 9 it goes up a little bit, but not as bad as Year 7 and then Year 10 it's            |
| 17 |         | kind of quite bad but I think that's because they're just about (.) they (.)                   |
| 18 | Gill:   | Stress of their exams and stuff?   |
| 19 | Martin: | Yeah   |
| 20 | Louise: | Yeah and they also have like <i>loads</i> of coursework and they <i>know</i> each              |
| 21 |         | other better than they did like most other years like Year 11 you don't really                 |
| 22 |         | know (.) don't really see each other and in Year 11 (.) 14% that's because they                |
| 23 |         | don't see each other much, I don't think, because they all go off                              |
| 24 | Gill:   | They all have fewer lessons  |
| 25 | Tom:    | I also think em with Year 7 as well it's also (.) like (.) because they're younger             |

26		they're sort of easily bullied
27	Gill:	And also because they're in the same classes, aren't they? ( <i>referring to pupils being in the same tutor group</i> )
28		
29	Tom:	[Yeah]
30	Louise:	[Yeah]
31	Tom:	and the older people like push them around a bit maybe?
32	Gill:	and also because you're not settled, there's people who are getting <i>jealous</i> of people who are <i>clever</i> maybe and things like that
33		
34	Louise:	Yeah that's a really good point [...] Tom? What – no, Martin? What
35		question would you like to ask about the data to do with (.) percentage of
36		students who reported bullying?

The talk is notable for the participation of all members and the shift to a more collaborative dynamic in the group, compared with the earlier transcript. Although Louise still speaks at length, her manner, tone and language are not excessively controlling, inviting the others to respond, which Gill and Tom do (lines 18, 24, 25, 27, 31, 32), developing the argument with additional evidence. Significantly, all pupils are aware of the importance of showing interest and respect to peers and collectively take responsibility for this: they use eye-contact and back-channel feedback, avoiding interrupting and at times, acknowledging each other's contributions in enriching the debate: 'Louise: That's a really good point'. The talk is much more balanced, in terms of participation, and it is significant that Martin, who was so inhibited in the first talk, feels confident to open it, with a perceptive analysis, which he presents in a form – a statement of personal interest - that invites others to collaborate, either by building on his point, or offering an alternative one: 'I'm interested in ...'. Tom adds to the group's collective understanding by analysing the bar chart and concluding that there is the same percentage of bullying in each year group (lines 6-8).

All pupils demonstrate the features of exploratory talk: they develop their ideas explicitly, holding these up for public scrutiny, for example, Martin and Tom at the start analyse and interpret the data, drawing conclusions from it, signalled by words such as 'so'. Significantly, while the group does not here develop Martin's point about Seaview's relative success across time, this point is developed later on in the talk, showing that pupils have paid attention to his analysis. The way that challenges are negotiated forms a particularly sharp contrast across the two transcripts. Louise tactfully disagrees with Tom's interpretation on line 11, softening her claim, by prefacing it with 'I think' and using reasons to support her claims: 'I think, though, that Year 7's got the most

bullying [...] because...' Louise uses the phrase 'I think' three times in her long turns, signalling to the group both that she is constructing an argument, using reasoning (a key aspect of exploratory talk) and that this is open to challenge: it is not being presented as 'fact'. This pattern of reasoning and speculation is present throughout the tape, signalled by the use of 'because' and the constant reference to evidence from the data on bullying.

The tone used by the pupils represents an apparent shift in their attitude to group talk: it ranges from being supportive, encouraging, and enthusiastic to being tentative and speculative. Group members are testing out ideas, offering them up for joint consideration and seeing each other as sources of understanding, not competitors, in stark contrast to their combative methods in the first transcript.

Louise also adopts the key role of informal Chair in the full transcript, monitoring the group's and her own talk and showing effective metadiscoursal (Gee, 2008) or 'metasocial' skills (Pryor and Crossouard, 2005), as evidenced by her last turn (lines 34-36). Here, Louise decides to move the group to their next task: to create a question that will help to interrogate the data further. She turns to Tom initially, but then changes, mid-utterance, to address Martin, as she registers that he has spoken least in the last part of the talk. Her question thus serves three functions: it structures and lends direction to the talk; it requires higher-order thinking, as pupils need to analyse what is missing in the data presented to them and then evaluate which question would be the most useful; and it draws a quieter member back into the talk. Louise's question is also precisely phrased, which is an aspect that the class has agreed is important in eliciting comments from a shy member, in earlier sessions (the phrasing here is her own, not read from a sheet).

What is very noticeable in the tape as a whole is the way that ideas are developed collectively, through debate. For example, in lines 11 to 33, pupils construct a joint argument, hypothesising about reasons for the disparity in levels of bullying across year groups, including the pupils' age, transition from primary school, the effect of setting and the impact of exams and timetabling. A similar process can be seen in a later extract, in which pupils start to question the way that the statistics have been presented to justify certain claims:



**Transcript 4.1.3**

- 1 Gill: 74% of people state their reasons about bullying in our school but 31% of pupils said that they took part in the survey  
[...]
- 2 Louise: Only 31% took part in the survey so it's not true
- 3 Martin: Yeah 31% is like (.) a bit less (.) like (.) er a third so -
- 4 Gill: Yeah but why did they only choose 31% of people?
- 5 Louise: Yeah (.) We did it in Year 6 on the computer
- 6 Tom: and I wonder if they um (.) they picked the right - the same amount from each year?
- 7 Louise: They picked people from um (.) like just random numbers from the register I think because that's what happened with me
- 8 Tom: Yeah (.) I wonder if they picked maybe a few more of year of (.) of a certain year maybe? Well they would have tried to have got it equal
- 9 Louise: It has to be fair

Gill's initial statement, spoken slowly and emphasising the tension between the two figures, is an interesting example of her thinking aloud to clarify her understanding. Significantly, all her peers immediately draw out the significance of her thoughts, by agreeing that the 74% is misleading, given the small sample of 31% and Tom adds that there is no way of knowing if this number is equally representative of all year groups. Thus, Gill's statement 'it has to be fair', referring to the representativeness of the sample, functions as a summary of the group's questioning of the process of data-collection and presentation.

**4.2 Seaview School, lower-ability class: Peter**

In the first transcripts of this class, groups 1 and 2 spent between a third and half the time 'off task'. In the third group, one boy was totally silent and one girl spoke very little, which meant that the ensuing talk, between a dominant boy, Chris and an assertive girl, Rose, took the form of pair talk. However, Rose was also the scribe so spent the entire time trying to record Chris's fast talk, rather than being able to contribute herself. A similar pattern occurred in group 2: the girls talked in a pair, one boy spoke very little and the other boy focused wholly on taking notes.

The following transcript from Group 3 (Rose, Joanne, Chris and Josh) illustrates typical features of early group talk. Pupils were asked to think of the advantages and disadvantages of three sorts of technology: mobile phones, CCTV and computers. One pupil, Josh, rarely speaks.

**Transcript 4.2.1**

*(30 seconds of whispered, off-task talk between Chris and Josh)*

- 1 Rose: *(frustrated tone)* Right, what's the negative feature about computers?
- 2 Chris: That they help pollute the world.
- 3 Rose: *(writing)* Do they?
- 4 Chris: Yeah *(loudly with a mocking accent)* They help pollute the world
- 5 Rose: Oh
- 6 Chris: *(singing loudly)* COMPUTERS HELP POLLUTE THE WORLD.
- 7 Rose: And what else do they do?
- 8 Charles: *(half-singing, loudly)* Get cha they have DISGUSTING CHAT ROOMS
- 9 Joanne: They help like people get on with, and attack children
- 10 Chris: *(singing, rapping)* They help paedophiles (.)
- 11 [which is a very bad thing, little boys and girls] *(facetious, mocking tone; very*
- 12 *conscious of digital recorder; overlaps with Rose, who ignores this comment)*
- 13 Rose: [They help paedophiles um help paedophiles ] what? Help paedophiles, what?
- 14 *(looking at her writing, puzzled)*
- 15 Chris: like get contact with children and stuff
- 16 Rose: *(repeating the words slowly, as she writes)* Get contact (.) with children (.) and stuff (.)
- 17 get contact
- 18 Joanne: Like they contact the children
- 19 Rose: *(writes words verbatim, not attempting to make notes)* They contact the children
- 20 Chris: They email different kids and tell them to meet
- 21 Rose: *(writes, simultaneously repeating the words)* kids and say they're not who they are
- 22 Chris: Yeah *(playing noisily and distractingly with money on the table)*

The group sees the purpose of the talk as being to collect written notes to report to the class, making the discourse stilted and repetitive. In lines 2, 4 and 6, Chris repeats his idea with no development for Rose to record; the same pattern occurs with Joanne (16), whose utterance 'they contact the children', repeating the two previous turns, is aimed at translating Chris's fast words into a more manageable sentence for writing. Rose's main contribution is simply to echo the other pupils' lines as she records them, slowing the pace and preventing spontaneous development. Although Chris is articulate, initiating points and naming concepts ('paedophiles'), he is easily distracted, singing his contributions at times and inhibiting others with his dominance and refusal to listen. Later, in the full transcript, he stands, swinging on his chair and physically dominating the group, before wandering off to talk to another group. Although the talk is not 'disputational', using Barnes' and Todd's definition (1995), it is very competitive, with Chris in particular seeing 'success' as making as many individual contributions as possible, rather than arriving at a collective understanding of a topic. Indeed, his abrasive tone, interruptions and shouted ideas also function to inhibit the two quieter pupils.

The talk remains on a simplistic level: one pupil records the ideas of another member, with two passive, silenced spectators. Again, as with the transcript 4.1. above, there are issues of power, relationships and identity, particularly in terms of gender, in this group, which militate against the development of exploratory talk. This means that the mere usage of particular language structures associated with the discourse is insufficient for this to develop: what is at stake transcends language (Fielding, 2001). Rose's potentially higher-order question to Chris: 'Do they?' (functioning as a request for an explanation, meaning: 'how do they?') is a good example of this. Given that observations showed that Chris could at times, provide examples of reasoning in other early transcripts, why did he fail to do so here? My field-notes at the time were confirmed by the final pupil interview. Chris was one of the pupils who seemed (and later admitted he was) most conscious of the audio-recorders, periodically 'performing' or directing comments to them in early tapes. This seemed to be connected with Chris' identification with a 'hegemonic form of masculinity' (Butler, 1990; Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Frosh et al, 2002). In the discourse he used to position himself thus with his peers, elaborated responses, enthusiasm about work and willingness to collaborate would be incongruent. This could be seen as a clash between Chris's primary and secondary discourses (see Gee, 2008) and was reinforced by other aspects of his talk: 'rapping' and facetious handling of taboo subjects (paedophilia). All of these signal to peers Chris's disruption of the required discourse, linked with school authority, and his assertion instead, of a discourse associated with heterosexual masculinity, non-conformity and subversion (Paetcher, 1998).

The final transcript for this group showed a significant gain in terms of collaboration and equality, with all contributing. The group also remained on task for all but a minute of the ten-minute talk. There was some evidence of exploratory talk, although the task did not stimulate such extended talk as much as another late transcript (Transcript 6.2.1 below). The final task was to evaluate another DVD of a partner school's group talk, in terms of the group's and the individual pupils' performances:

#### **Transcript 4.2.2**

- |   |       |  |
|---|-------|--|
| 1 | Josh: | They ( <i>the pupils</i> ) always stay on task, on track with the situation  |
| 2 | Rose: | And then just say, violent behaviour occurred with number 4 and 5 ( <i>numbers refer To pupils on the DVD</i> ) because only one of them was being wrong |

- 3 Chris: Say with 4 and 5  
 4 Rose: Violent behaviour occurred with number 4 and 5  
 5 Joanne: How could they improve their discussion?  
 6 Chris: [More louder]  
 7 Josh: [They need ] more reasons  
 8 Rose: More loudness (.) it wasn't loud (.) there was loads of noise in the background  
 Going on and you couldn't really hear it.  
 9 Chris: Don't you mean speak louder? (*Smiles. Rose shrugs her shoulders, but smiles*)  
 10 Joanne: Much more opinions  
 11 Rose: Yes, much more opinions, less silliness (.) less violence and silliness going on

The talk shows evidence of higher-order thought: pupils collectively evaluate the other pupils' discourse (staying on task; giving reasons) and analyse how it could be developed. Whereas in the earlier tape, questions were ignored, here: 'how could they improve their discussion?' elicits logical reasons from Rose and Josh (increased volume; more reasons and opinions).

Significantly, Chris no longer dominates and when he wants to challenge the way that Rose has expressed her point, his tone and facial expression, as well as the form of his question are respectful. Rose also elects to play a key role in summarising the group's points (last line), which she does throughout this discussion, helping to maintain the purpose and direction of the talk.

Interestingly, there is, still, a tendency for the group in this, though not in other late transcripts, to over-emphasise the written outcome, signalled by Rose's utterance: 'And then just say, violent behaviour occurred with no 4 and 5'. In the italicised phrase, Rose appears to alter the formality of her register rather artificially to one she feels is more suited to the written record of the talk. However, this is also an example of Rose trying to use language precisely, accurately summarising the group's earlier points in order to achieve a particular effect: here, she deliberately removes agency, using the abstract noun, 'behaviour' since earlier in the discussion, her group had debated which of two pupils was off-task and distracting the other with a ruler. Summarising a series of fast-moving points requires considerable linguistic and argumentative skills, as Palinscar and Brown (1984, p. 119) indicate, when they make this one of the key aspects of reciprocal teaching: '[The strategies of summary, questioning, clarification and prediction] comprise a set of knowledge-extending activities that apply in a wide range of situations other than reading; these are the basic skills of argument.' So, the pupils are not simply

subordinating speech to writing here, but are linking the two, in order to develop their inter-thinking (Mercer, 2000).

### **4.3 Priors School, mixed-ability class: Susan**

The first and final transcripts here indicated significant progress in pupils' use of exploratory talk, which was confirmed by teacher and pupil evaluations in interview. Interestingly, the baseline tapes were the weakest of all four classes, although this set has, on average, pupils of higher attainment than, for example, Peter's class in Seaview. However, the class had a greater proportion of boys than girls and roughly half the pupils interviewed at the start (all boys), expressed either scepticism for, or thought they learnt less from group talk, compared with writing or whole-class talk. Their reasons were predicated on a competitive and individualistic approach to learning: Callum: 'I like working on my own most of the time [...] I just like to know that I've done that, instead of like those people have done that.'

The three first tapes indicated that the pupils had weak skills in group talk: pupils were off-task for more than half of the discussion; talked in gendered pairs or as a three, with some pupils remaining totally silent; and did not develop points at all with reasons or evidence from the text. Utterances were very brief, comprising less than ten words. Rare questions were lower-order and procedural, not cognitive. Exploratory talk was entirely absent: at its best, the talk showed pupils offering a collection of individual ideas, without these being developed or challenged. The talk was also dominated by a focus on the written outcome. The extract below is typical of the richest, on-task talk and represents all of the above. The pupils are imagining that they are one of the classes of society from the novel *Mortal Engines* (Reeve, 2004) and they are trying to describe their view of London.

**Transcript 4.3.1**

(1 minute of off-task talk)

- 1 Steve: It's alright I know what to write (writes on sugar paper)
- 2 Diane: Snobby (.) some people are snobby u- there they are [...]
- 4 Jim: Snobs
- 5 Diane: Yeah
- 6 Steve: What's snobs?
- 7 Diane: Where you're like really like [stuck up -
- 8 Steve: (interrupts) [shall I shall I write scummy parts?
- 9 Diane: You can't write scum, that's really harsh
- 10 Jim: Write downtown London, mate
- 11 Steve: down town-
- 12 Jim: No, no do under under London (*pointing with his finger to show where to write*)

All of the pupils, as in Peter's class, see their aim as the production of attractively written notes on sugar paper: the talk is slow, with comments being made to the Scribe to record, not to the group to explore. Indeed, the pupils spend the previous four minutes discussing how to display their names and the two successive minutes off-task. Significantly, although the group appears to be discussing language, it is on a superficial level. Thus, Diane challenges Steve here over his use of the word 'scummy', but she does not explain whether her objection is based on the inaccuracy of the phrase or on the non-Standard usage here, so the conversation does not develop at all. Equally, Diane's excessively brief definition of 'snobbery', in response to Steve's question, is also unhelpful - the colloquial phrase 'stuck up', with no reference to meaning in this context. Jim suggests Steve use the falsely synonymous phrase 'downtown London' instead, but he does not develop or clarify his meaning and there is no indication that any of the pupils understands this American usage. There is no co-construction of meaning in the whole transcript.

In all of the first transcripts, it is notable how passive and dependent pupils are on the teacher to motivate them to stay focused and to manage their learning: all groups constantly request her presence, asking procedural or low-level questions (clarifying the task or the note-taking; checking spellings; or saying they are 'stuck'). Susan therefore darted between the groups, looked harassed, trying both to maintain the groups' concentration and raise the level of debate, often with little success.

Below is the first transcript of the second taped group, which is particularly dysfunctional, pupils being largely silent or off-task, except when the teacher joins them. The boys remain silent and look bored during the following interchange, which takes the form of the teacher talking to the same girl, with a one-word contribution from the other girl. Again, the talk does not develop, partly because Lauren is only really concerned with the end product, half of her utterances focusing on what she should write. However, significantly, the teacher is also unwittingly contributing to pupils' over-valuing of outcome, rather than process, by saying 'It's important that you get that down'. In fact, in interview at the start of the project, Susan was intensely aware of the dangers of valuing writing over talk. Indeed, her later comment, spoken with slight frustration, 'You don't have to ask me. These pens are for your use' is an attempt to signal to pupils that the writing is a less important by-product of the talk and that she wants the group to take responsibility for both their talk and note-taking. However, when faced with a silent group, whose members are clearly not producing any worthwhile talk except in her presence, Susan reaches for a pragmatic and visible means of motivating and assessing pupils' 'work': writing.

#### **Transcript 4.3.2 Callum, Jay, Lauren and Estelle**

- Teacher: So you're looking at (*points to name of character on sheet*) we've just met him in the last chapter, haven't we? So we know he works in the guts. What were the guts like?
- Lauren: Smelly
- Teacher: OK, so just in terms of -
- Estelle: Horrible
- Teacher: Horrible? Yes, so he sees this all the time so his surroundings were smelly and horrible environment (.) so, it's important that you get that down
- Estelle: Miss can I write something?
- Teacher: Yes, you don't have to ask me. These pens are for *your* use (*encouraging but rather frustrated tone of voice*)
- Estelle: He thinks that um people shouldn't have medical care ( )
- Teacher: Ok, Yes
- Estelle: I don't know what to write
- Teacher: Yes, so he knows it's a smelly environment but he thinks the people who live there don't deserve medical -
- Estelle: They're criminals
- Teacher: So, even though he can see that it's smelly and horrible, he doesn't necessarily have a problem with that, does he, because of who's there? (*pupils do not nod or look as though they fully understand this point*)
- Estelle: Shall I write that? (*speaks uncertainly; looks anxiously at the paper*)

Significantly, without pupil training in collaborative talk, this class, with a large proportion of pupils identified as above average in ability, appear to be incapable of operating independently or of producing any rich talk, making even the group talk with the teacher unproductive and frustrating. Above, the teacher is trying to scaffold her questions to enable the group (in reality, one pupil) to use inference to describe the scene, not from their own, but from a particular character's point of view. The six times repeated connective 'so' functions in two ways: firstly, using this initiator, the teacher signals to the non-functioning group that she is taking charge of the talk and expects pupils to re-focus and listen to a series of key questions. Secondly, 'so' is a scaffolding device, indicating to pupils that the questions are in a logically progressive form and that they need to see the connections between these and to deduce meaning, starting with the facts they know about this character and culminating in what can be inferred about his view of London. Unfortunately, at the end of Susan's questioning, there is no evidence that pupils have made the necessary connections and understood the central point, as indicated by Estelle's anxious desire to regurgitate the teacher's points: 'Shall I write that?' Susan's coaxing tag question, 'does he?', in the middle of her final utterance also suggests her realisation that the pupils have not grasped the point of this sequence.

Susan said she was 'horrified' by these transcripts of early group talk and thought that they appeared to confirm what many teachers secretly suspected about the futility of group talk. Of course, such teacher/pupil sequences are also typical of much unproductive whole-class talk (Coles, 2005). Observing the dynamic between teacher and group here, it appears that the reason for pupils' failure to understand was largely because the teacher felt pressurised by the other groups bombarding her with questions and being unable to function independently, so she wanted to move this group on swiftly. She was, therefore, unable to spend sufficient time judging pupils' current level of understanding, resulting in questions that were pitched too high and an overall approach that was excessively dominant and was against all her intentions for shifting power and responsibility for the talk onto the pupils, as expressed in an early interview: 'I know that I'm a control freak so I really want pupils to talk more and me to talk less.'

In the final transcript with the first group cited above, pupils have been asked to explore two 'unseen' poems on the same theme with a set of bullet points to consider if they need these (on



subject, viewpoint, imagery and so on). The poems are 'First Love' (Dorcey, 1991) and 'Before you were Mine' (Duffy, 2006). Pupils are put in 'envoy' groups, each with responsibility for a pair of poems, and are told to make brief notes to feed back to their 'home' groups in a second group discussion later in the lesson. Whereas in the first group talk, the pupils could not sustain five minutes of 'on-task' talk, in the final transcript, they were totally on task and independent for fifteen minutes:

### Transcript 4.3.3

Jay:	so far so good we haven't come off subject (.) see if it was usual I'd be off subject by now
Lauren:	you're coming off subject now ( <i>all laugh</i> )
Jay:	I know (.) exactly so we did really well then
Estelle:	the (.) third paragraph in the second poem is sort of like it's kind of scary because it just says 'the decade ahead of my loud, possessive yell ( <i>she proceeds to read the whole stanza aloud, emphasising the words with sinister connotations: 'relics', 'ghosts' and 'bites'</i> ).

Interestingly, although Lauren teasingly reminds Jay not to come off task now, Jay's comment has a specific function here: as Chair, to cement group solidarity, by praising his peers' collective level of concentration, which he does through celebrating 'we' ('we did really well') and contrasting it with his own personal failings: 'I'd be off-subject...' It is fascinating to note the way that Jay has, by this stage of the project, internalised the need to be self-reflective, monitoring the quality of the talk without reminders, in the same way as a good reader constantly monitors their level of textual comprehension (Cain and Oakhill, 2004). It is also significant that Estelle quickly steers the conversation back to the poem in her last, precise utterance, and uses an effective reading strategy to stimulate joint analysis of tone: she re-reads a key stanza, highlighting significant words and asking the others if they find these, collectively, 'scary'. In previous collaborative talk activities, Estelle, who is a minority-ethnic, EAL pupil, has often been very quiet indeed, seemingly daunted by this context. In this final talk, she assumed a key role, as unofficial second Chair, supporting Jay, by guiding the analysis (as here) or asking questions, as in the following extract:

**Transcript 4.3.4**

Estelle: Which one do you think is the most effective?  
 Jay: The first one  
 Callum: [hmmm]  
 Estelle: [hmmm]  
 Lauren: Because the second one don't make sense  
 Jay: Yeah, [I mean ] (1) (falls silent and pores over the poem)  
 Estelle: [Has anyone], has anyone got a reason why apart from the fact that it doesn't make sense?  
 Jay: Don't know (3) (all pupils re-read the poem) I'm I'm guessing 'First Love' as in your first - not the first person you go out with or anything, it's your mum, the first person you love and then the second one (*poem*) is like yeah *before* you were *mine* so when all their friends and your mums and dads were important but before you were around  
 Callum: Yeah (2) I found the first one easier to relate to  
 Estelle: Yeah me too  
 Callum: Because that's like a baby and that's sort of like a child (*points to each poem in turn*)

Estelle's persistence in questioning is impressive: she gently prompts her peers to consider more effective reasons than their own inability to understand one poem fully. Interestingly, this question prompts all of the pupils to re-read the poems and although Jay does not appear to be answering it directly, he is doing so in stages, firstly, by trying to clarify for the group the meaning of both poems so that they can then move beyond comprehension to assess which is the most effective. Indeed, Callum builds on Jay's ideas, by providing a richer reason for preferring one poem, namely that it is easier 'to relate to' the persona of a child speaking than the abstract notion of a foetus in the womb.

The transcript as a whole shows pupils using exploratory talk consistently to analyse the poems. Although all of the pupils are making brief notes of the talk to feed to separate home groups, the writing never interferes with the talk, assuming a secondary position. Indeed, pupils are now clearly aware that what matters is the quality of the discussion, a point that has been made constantly, through requiring pupils to evaluate their talk; and in this lesson, by separating and inverting the writing and oral modes (Corden and Westgate, 1993). Thus, Susan started the group talk by allowing seven minutes of silence for pupils to read and annotate both poems on their own, explaining that she wanted pupils to use this thinking and writing time to feed into their

talk, making it richer. Another notable feature of the talk is its slow pace. In between bouts of analysis, which are spoken quite haltingly, the pupils return to re-read the poems silently, thus there are pauses of, for example, 18 and 14 seconds, where the pupils are wholly on task, but are absorbed in reading for inference.

What is notable in the whole transcript is the way that pupils consistently rely on each other as a source of understanding, co-constructing possible meanings of the poems, using tentative language (the repeated phrase 'I don't know' and use of modal verbs, such as 'could') and questions. But perhaps most significantly, the transcript shows the pupils' ability to connect their analytical reading and their exploratory talk strategies: pupils are constantly quoting lines from the poem, using their voice to emphasise different words, almost as if simultaneously 'thinking aloud' (a phrase Susan used afterwards to describe talk in this transcript). This enables the pupils to listen again to, and reflect on, key words (considering meaning, sound and tone), displaying this evidence for scrutiny by the group. Indeed, pupils show a sophisticated understanding of inferential strategies – that comprehension requires revisiting key words and images, exploring personal and other connotations; finding connections between these and other patterns set up by the text as a whole; and applying external general knowledge (Cain and Oakhill, 2004). They are, therefore, using a key 'teacher' discourse strategy identified by Nystrand et al (1997), namely, 'using the text as a third speaker', so that they are questioning and holding dialogue with the text, as well as their peers. This is the moment when the pupils collectively work out the central idea of the second poem:

### Transcript 4.3.5

*(Pupils share A3 versions of the poems: they point to significant lines and keep quoting from these)*

1. Jay: The first poem's like really quite emotional but I mean I just don't really get the
2. second poem [much] *(all turns are slow-paced, with pupils re-reading the poems)*
3. Lauren: [I don't] get the second poem (.) [it's like ]
4. Estelle: [it does - ] it doesn't really have  
rhyming couplets *(pointing to the lines, seeking for meaning in poetic structure)*
5. Callum: Is it about time or something? Because you know there's like the 'five' and the  
['ten' ] and then is says like
6. Lauren: [yeah] What does that mean?

7. [...]
8. Callum: I thought that because in the second one it says like 'I'm not here yet'
9. Jay: Is it yeah (*reads aloud*) 'I'm ten years away from the corner you laugh on with your pals' (.) so (.) so it could be (.) I don't know
10. Estelle: I think it is to do with time because his Mum's young [then]
11. Jay: [and 'I'] - and 'I'm not here yet'
12. Callum: Yeah and 'the decade ahead' (*pace increases in lines 12-14*)
13. Jay: and 'you *would* teach me the steps'
14. Lauren: 'cha cha cha'
15. Jay: (*hesitant but excited*) I - I know what it - it could be (.) a little baby (.) and it's like
16. they're seeing [ten years ahead]
17. Lauren: [their future]
18. Jay: Yeah it's their [future]
19. Estelle: [yeah]
20. Jay: So I'm ten – so, in ten years time I'm gonna be in the same place where you are with your friends on the corner (3) and the thought of me doesn't occur so (.) me being alive doesn't occur to you
21. Estelle: It's as if the person wants something, but it can't get it until it's like ten years older or something

Callum suggests that time is a key theme and the other pupils enthusiastically search for evidence to prove his hypothesis, citing key words and clues in the text, as well as drawing on general, including linguistic knowledge, such as Jay's understanding of modal forms ('you would teach'); and Estelle's understanding of the implied youth of the mother. The pupils' utterances, often starting with 'and', followed by a quotation, show that they are jointly gathering evidence for each other to approve and interpret, sometimes repeating particularly significant lines, for example, Jay's repetition of Callum's line 11 ('I'm not here yet'). Jay finally synthesises all of this in his suggestion that the poem is narrated by a baby in the womb, who is talking about the future, which is met with agreement. However, Jay's penultimate utterance is even more interesting, as this more refined explanation shows understanding of the complex time sequence of the poem, which shifts both backwards and forwards in time, being told by a foetus ten years before his conception.

This extract shows pupils using collaborative talk to achieve rich analysis of a complex poem, both practising and modelling to peers exploratory talk and reading skills. Lauren is clearly less advanced in her understanding of the poems and in her analytical skills than peers, but her

contribution, 'cha, cha, cha', shows her imitating their technique of selecting key evidence for the group to consider. Although Lauren may not be able to articulate the meaning of her quoted line, her choice is significant, as it reinforces the idea that the poem is about a past era – the fifties.

Susan confirmed in interview that the richest talk emerged at the end of the project, based on her monitoring and the annotations on pupils' poetry sheets, which she described as, 'more sophisticated than my GCSE class make on poetry'. Susan attributed this to several factors: firstly, pupils' perception of group talk appeared to have undergone a transformation (discussed below); secondly this was associated with a development in pupils' ability to be collectively independent, seeing each other as sources of understanding, instead of deferring to the teacher's greater knowledge; thirdly, skills in exploratory talk developed through practice; and lastly, the nature of the poetry tasks and more varied groupings ('jigsaw' forms, with different home and envoy groups) stimulated a greater engagement from pupils. Susan said that 'the talk really took off when we started poetry' and thought that the tasks both challenged pupils intellectually, but also made explicit a 'reader response' approach to criticism, encouraging pupils to generate original ideas, by exploring the range that was bound to be articulated in each group. This seemed to empower pupils and several confirmed in interview that they were excited by the freedom and creative aspects of the poetry tasks:

*Estelle: I think the reason why most people like group talk is because there's no right and wrong answers and just everyone gives their opinions.*

Significantly, Estelle, a pupil with EAL, who was virtually silent in the early group-talk sessions, except if the teacher intervened, developed into a confident speaker by the end of the project, as evidenced by her contributions above.

#### **4.4 Blakely School, top-ability class: Ellen**

One of the three first transcripts comprised mainly off-task talk; the other two were notable for their individualistic quality, fast pace and lack of collaborative exploration of ideas. Pupils, especially boys, tended to assert points, competitively seeking to have their contribution recorded, rather than that of another pupil, using increased volume or emotion to present their case, rather than reasons, although these were sometimes used, as was occasional speculative talk. The pupils' aim was to produce a written product at speed, with both groups shouting

breathlessly across the class: 'We're done, Miss!' long before the time allocated. Pupils frequently interrupted each other, showing little awareness that they should be responding to each other's points, rather than following their own train of thought, as the transcript below illustrates.

The task was to identify six disadvantages of being homeless and then to rank them, in terms of the impact on people's quality of life:

#### Transcript 4.4.1

Ben: Having no money  
 Kate: Having no money (*repeats and writes*)  
 Denis: Nowhere to sleep (*Kate records*)  
 Kate: Getting mugged?  
 Lilly: Yeah, um  
 Ben: Nowhere to sleep  
 Denis: Uhm  
 Kate: Two more  
 Ben: No shelter (*section omitted*)  
 Kate: [...] What one's the worst out of them? (*of the disadvantages agreed on*)  
 Denis: [Money]  
 Kate: [Getting] mugged [or getting, having] no money?  
 Denis: [Having no money] (*all overlap and none are listening*)  
 Kate: Or no jobs [because you won't get money]  
 Lilly: [I think it's facing the weather ]  
 Denis: [Money, [weather], [mugged] or jobs and sleeping (*none listening to reasons*)  
 Lilly: [Because when you're] -  
 Denis: [Jobs ] [and sleeping ]  
 Lilly: Just imagine sitting in the cold in the freezing, freezing cold -  
 Denis: (*interrupts*) it's not *that* -  
 Lilly: I mean if you had the money, if you, if you have the money then you can -  
 Kate: (*interrupts*) OK, I think money should go first (*she records her decision as the group's notes*)  
 Ben: No, bed (emphatically)  
 Denis: And then weather  
 Ben: NO BED, NO NO BED, NO BED  
 Denis: No that would be *last* (*dominant tone*)

Lilly is the only pupil to attempt reasons, encouraging empathy in the others, but she is constantly interrupted, with neither Kate nor Denis allowing her to complete her points. Denis simply shouts his rank order over everyone else's talk and, at the end, both boys assert their points over the other without reasons.

In the final transcript, pupils have been asked to evaluate the effectiveness of two descriptions of a Gothic painting. The talk is noticeably slower in pace, with pupils thinking before they speak and clearly responding to, and trying to develop, each other's points. All the pupils engage in reasoning, by constantly using textual reference to justify their points and, significantly, although the talk overlaps, there are few interruptions.

#### Transcript 4.4.2 (19/05/8)

1. Denis: In my *opinion* I reckon that the top one is better
2. Lilly: I think the top one is a lot more *descriptive* and
3. Ben: Better use of adject - adjectives?
4. Lilly: Yes, *this* one (points and silently re-reads) hasn't really got any, hmm, yeah
5. Ben: because this one doesn't really have any adjectives ( ) [it has pale and white]
6. Kate: [Yeah this one's a bit] like
7. I don't like the way she says 'my heart thumped because she *looked* dead', that's something like I would write so I don't like it (*laughs, self-deprecatingly*)
8. Ben: Really?
9. Kate: and um I like the first one because it's got more information and this one doesn't
10. Ben: [Yeah]
11. Lilly: [This ] one just says she's wearing a 'long, white robe' and this one says that she's wearing a '*beautiful, white gown*' and it's –
12. Kate: [Yeah and this one says, this one doesn't say] (.)
13. Denis: [And this one, this one doesn't tell you anything] about the demon
14. Lilly: And about 'lying on the table her arm hung *peacefully* over the table's edge' (*emphasises descriptive or precise words to justify her point*)  
(*Some talk and silent re-reading of extract omitted*)
15. Kate: I mean, the second one, it does explain like what's going on, but it's not descriptive, [it's just really basic]
16. Ben: [It's more down ] to the point and straightforward the second one, this one's (.) more complex (*waits for Kate to complete her turn before speaking*)
17. (*Teacher asks all whole class to stop talking*)
18. Denis: It's like, *this one*, is like if you're like a ten year old, *that one's* (*pointing to the first passage*) for like if you're like fifteen, someone with better reading skills

Significantly, Ellen also intervenes in a skilful way to stimulate richer talk when pupils appear to have exhausted their points, by asking them to consider sentence structure. This results in pupils noting the more varied structures in the first text, culminating in Ben's observation that this increases the tension and the reader's involvement:

**Transcript 4.4.3**

Denis: [...] if it - we compare them two, the first one is like better on all levels and that one was rubbish

Ben: Yes, the first one and I like the bit it says 'I knew I was too late.' and you're like 'what are you too late for?' so you want to read on, you know.

Lilly: Yes

Denis: Yes, well done

Ben's is a subtle point, which he could only make as a result of the group's previous exploration, but it is also interesting that Denis generously acknowledges this new insight. The talk is now a collaborative endeavour and, critically, the boys seem to have lost the need to competitively score points. Another interesting effect of the project can also be seen at the end of this transcript: the group complete the task a little quicker than the rest of the class, but instead of calling for the teacher, they start spontaneously recording their points, even though Ellen had not specifically requested them to do so. That is, they act independently, making a judgement about how they can usefully occupy the remaining time and indeed, the note-taking itself then triggers further talk, which continues after the teacher has called the groups to stop talking.



## Chapter 5: Data Analysis: Conditions for the development of exploratory talk

This chapter will explore the contributory factors to the development in pupils' talk across the four schools, before focusing on two of these areas - identity, and reading and collaborative talk - to identify the contexts producing the richest 'exploratory' talk. Here, an emerging type of exploratory talk, 'tentative talk about text' will be examined, to refine our understanding of 'exploratory talk' in the context of an English lesson. There will be a progressive focus on the two classes in Seaview School.

### 5.1 Guidance using ground-rules and trusting relationships (Two classes in Seaview School)

In evaluating the intervention, all pupils and teachers reinforced a sociocultural and 'situated' model of learning. Thus, they concurred that key factors in developing the talk were teachers being explicit about their expectations of formal, group talk, guiding students to use their own ground-rules and modelling such talk, combined with enabling pupils to practise it frequently. For example, Kate from Peter's 'low-set' class said 'when we first did it we seemed to be like not sure of what to do but as you get used to it it's quite good and interesting'. Another girl (Rose) looking at a chronological list of all the group tasks across the project, indicated the mid-point section as being a turning point and said:

*'cause when we first done it um (.) well I didn't really know what to do and I mean I knew that we had to put our ideas but I couldn't really think of anything (.) and then cause I got used to it like during about here (pointing at the lesson), I understood and then I got (.) done it more better.*

She went on to attribute her growing confidence specifically to this practice and development of her skills: 'at the beginning I was a bit (.) I wasn't very confident and then at the end I got more (.) um I put my ideas forward more than I did at the beginning'.

However, when probed on why regular practice of the ground-rules made a difference, pupils moved beyond the simple point about developing and practising specific oral skills to discussing more complex issues of relationships (see Blatchford et al, 2003) and identity (Pryor and

Crossouard, 2005), linking their increased self-confidence and independence from the teacher to changes in their own identity and in their collective ability to form trusting, group relationships. This was particularly the case with the two classes at Seaview School (high- and low-ability), who had been 'set' at the start of Year 8, having been taught as a mixed-ability tutor group for Year 7, and were, clearly, feeling more isolated than the other two classes, in which pupils knew each other well. Lee from Peter's class made an explicit link between practising exploratory talk skills and developing relationships with new peers:

*when you first start off you don't know people in that class that well because you've all been mixed up [...] But then you get better as you get more used to doing it and to the people in your groups.*

Pupils in Susan's class also thought stable groupings had enabled them to talk:

*Cheryl: I think it was better over time because we were in [...] the same groups and after a while you got more confident about what you were going to say, like at the beginning you were kind of like, well I'm not going to say what I want to say because these are strange people, but by the end you could just say what you felt like.*

*Tim: Yes, because you don't get embarrassed because at first people might judge you because of your opinions and stuff.*

Having the confidence to speak in any context without risking being exposed as inadequate was a constant refrain with pupils in Peter's 'low-set' class and this was linked to knowing and trusting peers. Beth articulated her fear of being publicly humiliated by comparing speaking to reading aloud:

*In your form [as opposed to the new English 'lower set'] you're much more confident because you've known them [peers] for a year and like in reading, if you get something wrong, people say, like (groans and assumes a mocking tone) 'Oh, you can't **read**'*

The subtext of this comment was that it was even more humiliating for Beth to fail to 'perform' adequately in speech. However, all those interviewed in this class said that, although they took some time to trust their group members and to feel sufficiently confident to speak at length, this was a much less threatening context than whole-class talk:

Rose: *In groups, you can talk to each other, whereas in the class you have to put your hand up and wait and then like **everyone's** just **looking** at you...*

Tanya: *Yes, it's quite scary*

Rose: *Like **pressured***

Thus, whereas Galton and Williamson (1992) found that primary-age students feared group work as it could be threatening to their feelings of psychological safety, pupils at the end of this study referred to the emotional security and confidence they felt in this context, as opposed to whole-class talk. Significantly, the majority of the class, in an informal questionnaire at the start of the project, said that they preferred whole-class discussion and, while this contradiction is explored in depth in the section below on identity, some explanation for this is necessary here. Some pupils, notably boys, but including a few girls, were sceptical about the value of group talk for weeks (or more) into the project, manifesting this by not co-operating with their groups and enacting a range of resistant behaviours, including forms of stereotypical hegemonic masculinity (shouting and singing over peers, interrupting other groups, swearing or discussing taboo topics, and so on, see Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Davies, 1997; Frosh et al, 2002; Leonard et al, 2005). These pupils transformed their attitude to, and performance in, group talk over time, valuing it at the end for making them feel more confident, able to talk at greater length and depth, and, significantly, for enabling them to concentrate more than in whole-class talk, as these three comments illustrate:

*[in whole-class talk] people shout out and stuff so um if you want to say something then you'll probably get interrupted (.) and [...] if it's a smaller group then most people are focused and they're not going off task (Greg)*

*I prefer being in a smaller groups because then there's less people like putting their ideas forward and everyone will get a go at putting their ideas (James)*

*I like both because class discussion you can have quite a lot of opinions (.) and in er group discussions you can have a few opinions but quite heavily concentrated (.) in more detail (Jim)*

These pupils cited guidance through ground-rules, regular practice and developing trusting relationships as critical factors, together with wanting to inhabit the identity displayed by other group members (see identity section below). Interestingly, all pupils interviewed ended up valuing the group as a more equal, safe space for talk, in which others 'listened', allowed everyone to speak and which therefore dissipated the competitive atmosphere that dominated class talk. Thus, unconfident girls, and boys without sophisticated oral skills, saw whole-class talk as a

'frustrating' arena, in which primarily boys competed to dominate and attract attention, precluding others from speaking or listening:

#### Transcript 5.1.1

Lauren: *Chris* normally says something (*tone of exasperation*) [...]

Beth: They *always* push themselves off their chairs (*irritated, shaking her head*) [...]

Kate: I prefer group discussions to class [...] because in class discussions you can put your hand up and [...] then the teacher can move you on to the next thing they want you to do and then you *never* get your say [...]

Kim: Or *they* say they'll come back to you but they *never* do

Lee: It's just they always do that, *they* say they'll come back to you (.) after him and then they don't [...]

Kate: um like people sometimes talk in like little groups and [...] you can't *hear* what the other group are saying

Lauren: And then the teacher has to wait so *you can't* say what you actually want to say

Lee: Or if you've got like something really good that you wanna say and then like someone (.) someone else had their hand up first like *Chris* and then he asks him, and then he's just being like (.)

Beth: *Childish*

Lee: Yeah, he's just like wasting the time like saying (.) oh yeah and like um is this, that and that? and then that wastes time so he [*the teacher*] goes, 'Oh we've gotta move on now'

Beth: Yeah he [*Chris*] asks random questions

What is most striking about this transcript is the extent to which these pupils feel silenced by whole-class talk, literally unable 'to get their say'. The text itself, with its constant references to speech being either 'allowed' or denied, neatly represents the binary between the powerful speakers and the silent majority, echoing all the literature on the exclusion of marginalised groups in class talk (Burns and Myhill, 2004; Black, 2007). The teacher and the most dominant boy, *Chris*, are empowered to speak; the only way that other pupils successfully enter the forum is by disrupting the pattern, either falling off their chairs or breaking into small groups that no one can hear (see Baxter, 2002 on intersecting discourses operating to privilege or silence particular pupils in whole-class talk). Those playing by the 'rules' of bidding for a turn are doomed to frustration. Interestingly, this tight-reined, model of competitive classroom talk is exactly the one that Peter and Anna described, regrettably, as typifying that in low-attaining groups, which they wanted to change. Peter's vision of group talk provides a striking, dialogic alternative:

*everyone's encouraged to contribute by other people in the group [...] a willingness to make mistakes or change your mind or it's acceptable to try out an idea [...] a sense that people can comment on other people's ideas but not dismiss [these].*

It is also significant that the two boys in the transcript above both 'preferred' class to group talk at the start of the project. Lee was one of the boys who initially resisted and disrupted group talk, deliberately introducing taboo subjects and language, thus enacting the very form of hegemonic masculinity that he resented Chris for performing in the whole-class context (see Frosh et al, 2002; Renold, 2004). The process of practising group talk with peers enacting different identities changed Lee's behaviour, talk, and, crucially, his attitude towards collaborative work.

Significantly, interviewed pupils in Anna's class also all identified group talk as enabling more trusting relationships and risk-taking in talk than were possible in the whole-class forum:

*Simon: I think part of the good thing about group talk is you can be a lot more open than with your hands up just sitting, because if you make a fool out of yourself in group talk, only like three or four people will hear but then it's a lot better than thirty people [...] because you know you're probably not going to be humiliated **really publicly** in group talk.*

Interestingly, all the pupils interviewed from both Peter's and Anna's classes thought that the model of group talk practised should be instituted at the start of secondary school, rather than in Year 8 and they constantly associated 'knowing' - or understanding - their peers with the skills of 'knowing how to talk' collaboratively.

*Lee: I think we should have started it [the project] in Year 7 (.) because then (.) **you know people** and then you can move up to year 8 and **get to know different people** so you **know what to do** so you'll have better skills in Year 8.*

Lee has, however awkwardly, in highlighted phrases, articulated a key epistemological idea that lies at the heart of the findings: 'exploratory talk' cannot be constructed as an abstract set of discursive skills that can be added to a pupil's repertoire, simply by regular imitation and 'practice' (see Swann, 1992; Nystrand et al, 2001). It is a way of talking that develops in the process of interacting, forming relationships with others and, critically, as explored below, by reflecting on the identity of oneself and the group: it is a way of being.

Developing the confidence to articulate reasoned opinions, is of course, contingent on having the necessary linguistic tools: pupils in Peter's class said that they found practising asking effective questions and being reminded to give reasons useful in developing their talk.

In Anna's 'top ability' class, pupils agreed with the parallel class above that ground-rules were important and that the teacher needed to structure and guide their talk at the start of lessons: Julie illustrated this when she contrasted the 'deep', 'expanded' talk they experienced in English groups, with informal, pair talk elsewhere:

*In my Science class we often like get told to "just talk about it" but just like with who we're sitting with and you could be sitting with your friend and then you could just talk about **anything**.*

Importantly, all interviewed pupils in the project rejected friendship grouping, believing that productive talk emerged in mixed-sex, trusting, stable, but non-friendship groups.

Two other girls reinforced the importance of teacher modelling:

Geraldine: *Because it kind of gives you like a structure [...] something to build on*  
 May: *Yeah and something to refer to if you're stuck so you can think about what she's [the teacher's] said and like maybe make up your own questions*

Significantly, Anna's class identified that group talk required a complex set of skills - intellectual, discursive, social and emotional - both from themselves and the teacher and that it took time to develop these. They consistently spoke of it as being more demanding and 'deeper' than class talk, requiring total concentration, as Sarah articulated: 'because it's really noticeable if someone doesn't speak, but in a class the teacher doesn't really know, can't keep track'. Havi, an EAL speaker, confirmed this contrast:

*If you're in a group talk people notice that you don't speak, they usually ask questions so you're like forced to speak (smiling)' [... This is helpful] because then you can put your ideas out.*

Another unconfident boy, Martin, reflecting on the high expectations of group talk, both cognitively and emotionally, gave this rather harsh self-evaluation:

*sometimes it was like a Friday and it was the end of the day and I didn't feel like doing it and I wish I could go back and do it again because sometimes [...] I don't know, I just didn't feel like going on and saying lots of things, I just felt a bit tired.*

In fact, Martin's contributions had greatly increased over the project, but his comment represents the collective responsibility that working in groups engenders. Simon confirmed this and the intellectual demands required when collaboratively analysing poetry:

*When you don't give reasons it's really noticeable in group talk because you're finished like immediately pretty much because in group talk you are given something pretty simple and you're told to advance on it and make it more complex.*

Simon is conceptualising a key point about understanding here, particularly in relation to literature, namely, that texts can be read in plural ways and with different degrees of analysis and evaluation. He recognises that group talk is expected to be performed at a high cognitive level, rather than completed at speed, which challenges a crude model of learning that many able pupils have acquired through schooling that equates 'success' with fast task-completion (see Ames, 1992; Cohen, 1994; Boaler, 2002).

Interestingly, pupils in Anna's class recognised the inherent complexity of group talk and wanted to simplify the model, allowing themselves greater freedom and independence to practise talking and adopting the unfamiliar identity of group, not individual, learner. They, therefore, criticised lessons in which the model became too complicated, over-emphasising ground-rules or assigning rigid pupil roles, as inhibiting rich talk:

*I think having a role restricted you [...] because you wanted to say things but couldn't because that wasn't your role (Tom)*

*Sometimes when you're talking, you're worrying about like if your devil's advocate is doing enough and then like if each different person is doing their job and you can't really **just speak** (frustrated tone. Geraldine)*

However, the group and whole-class reflection that followed the use of assigned roles (Chair, Scribe, Questioner, Devil's Advocate and Observer) showed that pupils had definitely gained a more precise understanding of each role through the process of 'performing', then analysing these. That is, explicit modelling of the roles by group members had clarified for all pupils the range of possible identities that they could assume in future, including the language and behaviour associated with each. Interestingly, when pupils described how 'hard' and 'frustrating' some of the roles were, this was often because Anna had deliberately assigned contrasting ones to those they usually enacted, requiring them to expand their repertoire, drawing on theories of drama (Heathcote and Bolton, 1995). Thus unconfident pupils played Chair/Devil's Advocate and boys played helpful 'Questioners', taking responsibility for maintaining co-operative talk, a role typically associated with girls (Swann and Graddol 1988; Swann, 1992). One sensitive girl 'found

it really hard not to do other people's jobs' as 'it was [Tom's] job to include everyone but he wasn't really doing this or including himself'. Another dominant girl, Louise, unusually allocated a role she typically played - devil's advocate - thoughtfully reflected, 'If we do this again, I'd probably like to have a role that's not me'.

Pupils also explored the tension between scaffolding more formal, exploratory talk and enabling students to talk spontaneously, realising a balance is hard to achieve. All teachers also recognised this paradox: they were rather 'overwhelmed' by the weight of guidance and scaffolding they felt necessary at the start of earlier lessons. For example, in a lesson cited below on analysing texts about World War 1, this included: gauging pupils' prior understanding of two sets of skill - discursive and reading analysis - reminding them of targets set in previous lessons, based on metadiscoursal reflection, often combined with modelling of a particular discourse strategy; establishing the substantive content (World War 1), and the extent of pupils' prior knowledge of this; and explaining the first task. Peter summed up his anxieties in the early stages of the project thus: 'It was rather ironic that in my attempts to hand over power to the pupils, I was conscious that practically half the lesson could be spent whole-class, with me telling them what to do!'

Anna also reflected on the complex set of skills required in collaborative talk:

*It's not utterly consistent - the progress - because there are times [...] when [pupils] seem to forget the ground rules completely [...] and I think sometimes that's because [...] there's quite a lot to consider and if you're teaching them [...] right this lesson I want you to be focusing on analysing this and doing the task and if the task is complicated then it's a bit much as well to have to consider making sure you're doing the ground rules really proficiently at the same time and I think **that balance**, for me as a teacher, that's what I've found or struggled to get [...] right.*

Significantly, Anna then reflected that it was establishing the expectations of exploratory talk that was demanding: once these were internalised, both teacher and pupils would not need to evaluate progress so minutely each lesson:

*the ground rules are only really there to teach them the skills but it's not a test every time to see whether you tick all those six boxes so as it becomes more of a routine and becomes more ingrained [...] it's less important that they are doing all those things all the time as long as there's an awareness that that that's the sort of aim to develop those kind of skills.*



Teachers and pupils are here articulating the tension at the heart of the sociocultural model: how to balance teacher guidance with giving pupils the space to practise a new skill and, crucially, the freedom to find their own voice/s and independent understandings. Anna's class, while recognising the importance of scaffolding, had unanimous advice for a teacher wanting to initiate rich group talk, arguing for greater pupil autonomy:

*Simon: Give maybe a ten-minute explanation on what you're going to be talking about, kind of like a few ideas of how the conversation could go [discourse modelling] and a few facts about it and then I think they should just stay out the way, and walk around to make sure everyone's on task but like not input*

*Rhian: Maybe observe*

The pupils here invert traditional roles of teacher and pupil, casting themselves as speakers at the centre of learning and the teacher as a satellite 'observer', whose function is to remain silent, but engaged with their talk, only commenting on it afterwards.

Prompted to explain their reasons for the teacher 'not input[ing]', the pupils explored some highly significant ideas about identity and power:

### Transcript 5.2

Interviewer:	Why not input out of interest?
Julie:	'Cause that's like putting ideas into their [pupils'] heads and you kind of need to let them think of their own ideas to discuss as a group rather than all the teacher's
Simon:	Yeah because if a teacher does speak you'll think, they're a teacher, they know what they're talking about, let's only work on that idea, you can't really see any other way than the teacher's way
Geraldine:	I think teachers might not come up with ideas that the children might
Rhian:	I think that like maybe if the teacher's sitting there listening to you, I guess you feel quite intimidated that maybe they might correct you and maybe say that you're wrong so maybe you don't want to share your ideas as much as you would if it was just the children [...]
Martin:	Yeah, it's <i>your</i> group talk, it's not the teacher's [...] I don't like having teachers <i>dictating</i> to you what to say because <i>you're</i> learning the group talk [...]

The emotive language the pupils use here clearly represents the inhibiting nature of teacher/pupil power relationship as mediated through talk. Students perceptively realise that, given the official identity of teacher as assessor, liable to evaluate their talk, virtually any intervention will inhibit and limit their thinking in groups (see Edwards and Westgate on the IRE in whole-class talk,

1994). This is particularly interesting as elsewhere in interview, pupils describe Anna as being non-threatening and encouraging of their talk. This tension echoes Corden and Westgate's (1993) observations about the historical nature of teacher/pupil relationships. If a teacher of one subject in Year 8 is keen to transform relationships in her classroom, enabling pupils to assume a wider range of identities and to be more autonomous, she must tackle the model of 'teacher' that pupils have internalised through eight years of schooling. This means demonstrating explicitly through her talk, and crucially, her silence, that pupils have the right, and are expected to generate original ideas with each other, rather than mediating all discourse through her, as 'assessor'. The ways that Anna and Peter addressed this issue are explored in Chapter 6 below.

Significantly, pupils in Peter's 'low-ability' class were more enthusiastic about using a carefully structured model of group talk, valuing the ground-rules, the opportunity to take on different roles and the teacher's support in intervening at critical moments to support groups:

*Kate: say if we've talked loads and then we can't think of anything else to say and then the teacher comes along and asks us questions [...] they move the conversation on.*

One pupil spontaneously suggested the 'guided' model of learning of Palinscar and Brown's early stage of Reciprocal Teaching (1984), in which teachers 'lead' a series of small groups, but the other pupils opposed this, arguing that this would inhibit their talk:

*because [...] it's a lot easier to give your opinion around your peers than adults (2) err because sometimes you feel [...] like you have to show the adults quite a lot more respect than children (Greg)*

However, this class, too, wanted more autonomy at times. For example, Lee thought that they should have the opportunity to 'self-assign' their roles in the group, rather than being 'made to do it by the teacher'. Interestingly, after group discussion on this, the pupils reached a more nuanced position: teacher intervention was valuable in the early stages, until the groups were able to be more independent. Thus, teachers should initially assign leadership roles to 'less confident' pupils because this 'boosts their confidence' as 'if- the person who's best at it [...] does it all the time then [...] the people who aren't good at it won't get better at it (Greg).

Again, their comments reinforce a model of the teacher guiding pupils in their acquisition of skills towards greater responsibility and independence.

## 5.2 The Task

In evaluating which tasks elicited the richest exploratory talk, there was great variation in pupils' responses across the four classes: some argued for text-based ones, whether media or literature; others for discursive topics, for example, homelessness. Tasks that pupils highly rated and were effective at stimulating rich talk were typical of those set nationally in English, rather than being exceptionally creative. For example, analysing fiction or non-fiction extracts (*Stone Cold*, Swindells, 1993; *Much Ado about Nothing*, Shakespeare, 1981; war posters, or poems, such as Coleridge's *The Ancient Mariner*, 1969, with visual images); peer-assessing charity leaflets; or being in role - a BBC panel deciding whether *Summer Heights High* was appropriate for a British audience; characters from *Mortal Engines*, Reeve, 2004, planning an election campaign for different political parties; or a panel deciding which charities should receive funding.

Common features of recommended tasks were that there should be an element of controversy or evaluation of texts; that there should usually be a text/stimulus (before or during), or structured guidelines, as this 'deepens' pupils' response; that the teacher should 'explain it clearly'; and, most importantly, that pupils had to be motivated by the topic/text. Pupils were adamant that the teacher must take their interests into consideration in determining the task and allow them more power to choose collectively from a range of possible topics. Havi in Anna's class, said: 'I think that students should give their teacher a rough idea of what they want to talk about so they're more interested in it'. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the top set argued for more open-ended tasks, 'big topics', which gave them 'plenty to say' and the freedom to focus solely on talking, as note-taking slowed the pace and constrained the talk. The lower set valued more structured tasks and grid-sheets to record their discussion, recognising that writing in a minimal form was useful, but that it could inhibit talk:

*I think we do sometimes need to be doing the writing otherwise you'd just completely forget it (.) but [...] sometimes we're like too busy writing you don't get enough time and then before you know it the time is up (.) and then you didn't get to share many ideas*  
(Kate)

The criteria for an effective group task are reassuringly straightforward for English teachers; this triangulated with observation notes: there was little correlation between the quality of the talk and the precise type of task, provided these were higher-order and required interdependence (see Cohen, 1994). If students are stimulated by the topic/text, have sufficient knowledge, and understand how to talk in an exploratory way, a wide range of higher-cognitive tasks will elicit effective talk. This recalls Galton and Williamson's (1992) findings: many teachers wrongly perceive the nature of the task as being of primary importance to achieving exploratory talk, ignoring other more salient factors, such as those discussed above - training in talk; grouping to achieve trusting pupil relationships; and, I would add, reconceptualising teacher/pupil relationship and identities. Of course, having adequate knowledge of a discursive topic is important and pupils highly rated all tasks stimulated, before or during, by rich text/s, as they said it gave them 'plenty to say'.

Anna also agreed that 'it's important that [pupils] have got knowledge to discuss or opinions about the topic to base the talk on'. In contrasting a strong with a weak group talk, she identified as being particularly effective, a task in which pupils discussed the disadvantages of young men enlisting in WWI:

*because they were allowed to use a variety of different experiences they'd had and their knowledge from different scenarios and so they were enthusiastic about that topic because they knew something about it (.) and I think when we did the advert one [...] what went wrong there is that they didn't have the background knowledge to be able to talk confidently so the talk kind of fell flat.*

Anna is describing a model that worked particularly well across all classes, in which pupils are saturated beforehand by their reading of different, multi-modal texts, which meant that during the group talk 'they didn't need to have anything on the table because they'd done the preparatory work and they had it in their heads'.

Significantly, Ellen consistently worried about not being able to set an effective group task and she often attributed weaknesses in exploratory talk in some lessons to a failure of task, when in fact, there were more complex reasons for this, including a tendency towards individualism in her 'top-set' class; a devaluing of group work by key, dominant boys in the class; and sometimes, a

failure of 'text'. For example, in Ellen's final taped lesson, pupils had to evaluate the effectiveness of two Gothic texts, before collaboratively writing a description in this genre - both potentially rich tasks. However, the texts for analysis were insufficiently rich, so pupils simply ran out of things to say.

Nevertheless, Ellen noted that the 'pressure' of setting a weekly group task that would enable pupils to engage in independent higher-cognitive thinking had, in fact, developed her entire practice: 'It has made me much more aware of my planning and more ambitious so that I really am challenging these top-ability pupils'. This influenced the topics and texts Ellen chose, for example, *Frankenstein* (Shelley and Pullman, 1990) to enable the class to explore the relationship between science and ethics, drawing on the pupils' interest in science and on cross-curricular knowledge.

Pupils in Anna's class further reinforced the idea that what mattered was not the task, but the training in how to engage in sophisticated collaborative analysis. As an example, some cited as one of the most interesting group tasks analysing an 'unseen' poem, which many students in Susan's class also rated the most highly of all the tasks:

*Because you look at it and you find the obvious reason but then when you talk about it in depth you find more, not obvious reasons, like kind of side passages (Simon)*

Geraldine confirmed this preference:

*Everyone has like a different opinion and you see different things that you wouldn't have seen before.*

Chapter 6 will use the pupils' observations here to examine one of the key factors in the data that stimulates a particularly nuanced form of exploratory talk, which I have called 'Tentative talk about text'.

A final point on 'effective' tasks needs to be noted: the majority of pupils clearly did not think that these had to be related to a specific formal feedback/presentation or written 'outcome', since many of those valued were not, though some tasks required groups to make a decision. That is,

pupils had reached a point where they perceived the value of talk for its own sake. This was linked, logically, with high value being accorded to the metadiscoursal reflection: pupils were keen to evaluate their exploratory talk on its own terms, rather than seeing it as a means of achieving another goal. This finding contradicted the teachers' assumptions or prior experience that a clear outcome was always necessary. Thus, before the project, Peter contrasted poor 'open-ended' group discussions with effective ones in which

*there was some clear thing [pupils] had to do as a result of it whether someone had to (.) kind of report back or it was leading to a piece of work that followed it (.) erm or they were **coming back as a whole group** and something was happening (.)*

Intriguingly, it was Peter who stopped the time-consuming pattern of groups always having to feed back on the substantive issue, group by group, sometimes focusing only on the reflection feedback instead. However, Peter did maintain the italicised idea of whole-class 'sharing' of the group's intellectual work, whether in the form of groups giving their best two ideas or identifying their key successes and targets in group work that lesson. Peter is here clearly encouraging pupils to see themselves as a 'community of speakers', who are interested in the collective ideas and oral progress of the group.

### 5.3 Metadiscoursal reflection (Gee, 2008)

Another aspect identified by pupils and teachers as being particularly critical to developing exploratory talk was the metadiscoursal or what Torrance and Pryor (1998) call the 'metasocial', 'interacting about interaction' reflection undertaken after each group talk. Pupils reflected on their talk as a group, in relation to their own ground-rules, setting targets for the future. This was combined, at times, with appointing a designated 'observer', usually a member of the group, whose responsibility was to analyse the group's talk, helping to objectify strengths and weaknesses and stimulate deeper reflection. Pupils from all four classes valued this space to reflect, with many interviewees saying that the most important role in a group was that of 'observer', as s/he helps the group, during the reflection session, to improve their talk, as Lee from Peter's class explained: 'I only think it's useful to have an observer because [...] if they give you a feedback then (.) if he can say it feels bad or good then you can work on it.' Significantly, the higher-ability pupils in Seaview School were the only ones who criticised the reflection in the latter half of the project as being a little mechanistic, since they had clearly internalised the ground-rules quickly.

The teachers also saw reflection on talk as a critical 'stage', supporting pupils in the gradual transition from explicit understanding of how to talk collaboratively to being able to do it, as Anna articulated:

*It's evident what they know in the metacognitive stage of the talk so they can talk you know really intelligently and impress me so much with what they've just previously not done and that they know that they've not done it (laughs) or what they have done and recognise it in themselves and in other people and I don't think it really matters that they're not doing it all the time.*

Significantly, Anna was totally consistent in requiring reflection after all group tasks, and half-way through the project, she adopted a suggestion from Ellen's practice: to include two group tasks with a brief group reflection and setting of targets in between, so that pupils could immediately implement these, improving their talk:

*Pupils are always being asked to set themselves targets, but in writing these are slow to put into effect from one bit of work to the next. With group talk, they can set a target, test it out and get an immediate sense of achievement, see that they have raised the level of their talk by this reflection (Anna).*

(See Appendix 3 for examples of pupils' reflections in speech and writing.) The collective insights of all four classes' reflections show a sophisticated understanding of exploratory talk, including issues of gender, power and relationships, identifying the difficulty of achieving equal and higher-order talk. The following comments are taken from a range of groups in Anna's class one month into the project. On gender, one pupil reflected:

*We need to be more aware of not splitting up into pairs of boys and girls – that's why we are sitting like this [indicating the diagonal seating structure] so we need to talk across the table to the whole group.*

Another girl added: *'we have three girls and one boy – it's unbalanced – the girls are dominating more.'*

Identifying limited talk, Sam said: *'We were a bit quiet and we ran out of things to say.'* Asked by a peer how to develop their talk, Sam added, *'I think we need to build on each other's ideas so if someone says something, we could add a reason.'*

Lucy commented: *'I think we do develop others' ideas...we gave reasons and evidence for our opinions, but we need to ask more questions, like why? And how?'*

After the group reflections, Anna asked each group to feedback to the class one or two targets, which enabled her to deepen the discussion. For example, Ted said:

*'We just agreed. I think we need to disagree more'* and Anna directed the class to solve the problem of how a group could disagree more if they were actually all in agreement. Mathew speculated that someone in this group should play devil's advocate: Anna asked him to clarify this concept for the rest of the class and suggested that they experiment with this in the next lesson, as it was a key target for several of the groups. This was the genesis of Anna's group experimenting with roles of this kind, which was then passed on to the other three classes in the project, who used it in different ways. This is one of several, concrete examples of pupils steering the development of the project and seeing that their suggestions were validated by being incorporated into the model. Another example came from Susan's class, who were asked to choose whether the groups should remain the same after a few months or be changed; they opted for change: 'You need to mix us up a bit, Miss, as we're getting stale' (Luke). Other pupils in Susan's class cited the stability as a key factor in the project's success: 'Just doing a lot of group work, with the same people and then when we went into different groups, it [effective talk] just carried on' (James). This kind of pupil discussion on stable versus dynamic groups was then explored by teachers in the review meetings.

Having layers of reflection - first with each group and then with the class - in Anna's class resulted in particularly rich discussion, which enabled groups to learn from each other's practice. For example, one group noted a tension between developing trust with other members, triggering openness, and yet maintaining the focus that is easier with people who are less familiar:

*Now we know each other more, we trust each other...we're not embarrassed to say stuff that might be wrong, but sometimes we go off topic.*

However, other groups celebrated the gradual gains that were made with the same group over time, as pupils developed a sense of group solidarity:

*At the start, some were talking more than others, but now everyone talks – we encourage others more.*

Peter's class also engaged in a high level of reflection, which can be seen in Chapters 6 and 8.



The idea of generating metadiscourse about the developing exploratory talk within groups and across each class was widened during this project, by adding an inter-school and formative assessment element. Thus, the four classes knew that they were part of a 'community' of local schools engaged in research to explore ways of improving pupils' collaborative talk. Each school, approximately half-way through the project, filmed a representative group talk and swapped this with another school to give and receive formative feedback on their talk. The pupils' analysis of each other's talk showed sophisticated critical skills and ability to identify and compare elements of successful talk, in relation to their own practice.

For example, Susan's class, dominated by boys who, initially, found it challenging even to stay on task, interrupting each other to assert their views, were impressed by the different way that their paired class (Ellen's) talked. They commented, primarily, on the behaviour of the class, noting how mutually polite and respectful group members were, effectively including everyone and, intriguingly, they linked this to a way of speaking that was significantly different from their own: their use of tentative language: 'Tim: They speak differently (.) They say "it might mean this" and "could it be this?"'

Susan's class also commended Ellen's group for developing their talk with reasons and for using supportive evidence - extensive quotations from *The Ancient Mariner* (Coleridge, 1969). Pupils were impressed by the group's ability to sustain the talk, continually developing each other's points and never 'drying up'. Interestingly, the target Susan's pupils set Ellen's was to 'disagree' with each other more, as they felt that the talk lacked dynamism and controversy. This was a perceptive point and suggested that although Susan's class were, largely, rather critical of their own practice in relation to Ellen's pupils', they recognised a noticeable quality of their own best talk: the confidence to disagree and introduce challenging ideas.

Peter's class, reflecting on Susan's pupils' DVD (Transcript 4.2.2 above), identified as targets, pupils' unequal or disrespectful relationships, leading to patterns of domination; their tendency to go off task; and their failure to use reasons in developing their talk. For practical reasons, Peter's class saw the DVD late in the project so, although all of these aspects had marked their own

earlier talk, they enjoyed contrasting Susan's class with their own current performance, arguing that they were now more effective in all of these areas.

## Chapter 6: Creating a dialogic culture: pupil and teacher identities

In this chapter, I will focus on the two best examples of classes with a dialogic culture - those at Seaview School - analysing how teachers helped to establish such a culture and associated patterns of discourse.

All four teachers at the start of the project identified the unequal power of teacher/pupil relationships and the difficulty for the teacher of reconstituting their identity in the classroom as being potential barriers to achieving dialogic talk. For example, Susan said in first interview: 'I am a total control freak [...] I really enjoy and get a buzz out of class discussion, but I need to make the pupils more independent of me'. Ellen, too, said that teachers 'always wanted to control from the front' and that she 'dominate[d] all class discussions, even though I don't mean to', seeing group talk as a means of enabling her top-ability pupils to speak in a more extended way. But the issue of identity and changing relationships between teacher and pupil was most marked in the classes of Anna and Peter.

### 6.1 Anna's class

Anna's key motivation from the start of the project was to use group talk as a means of enabling all pupil voices to be heard, especially those who were unconfident:

*if it's lot of teacher-led lessons [...] obviously only a small proportion of kids often put their hand up and actually are interacting and engaging um (.) with you [...] group talk gives the opportunity for everyone [...to] be involved.*

Evaluating the project, Anna felt that it was unconfident and less able girls, and to a lesser extent, similar boys, who had benefited most from group talk, as they had greatly developed their ability to articulate their thoughts at length in groups. Pupils from Anna's class in final interview also cited increased independence from, and not being dominated by, the teacher as two of the most essential gains of talking in groups. Asked what role the teacher should play in the group talk, Simon said:

*remember it's our ( ) the pupils' talk, so they mustn't dominate it, by saying what they think about things, otherwise pupils feel intimidated and feel 'oh the teacher thinks that, so it must be right'.*

Martin, a quiet boy, who rarely contributed to class discussion, speculated at the start of the project about the reasons for pupils experiencing so little group talk across the curriculum:

*I think it's because teachers are really scared of letting go and of not being in control [...] it's not fair we do so little. We find it really useful.*

Anna talked of the benefits but also the difficulties of shifting the teacher/pupil power relationship, including adopting a different kind of discourse, but it was clear that the first imperative informed the second, which reinforces Bernstein's (2000) ideas about pedagogic discourse only changing as a result of, rather than being the cause of, a shift in power relations in the classroom:

*They don't look to me for the answers and I think that's really good because they [...] don't see me as a source or that there is even a right answer.*

However, this necessitates teachers reconceptualising their role:

*my role then is maybe [...] not to intervene where it's not necessary but intervene perhaps with [...] raising the level of analysis so something to stretch them [...] a new idea, a new way of looking at something that could be a way of raising the standard of their talk*

Anna also thought that one of the reasons for the project's success was that its exploratory, action-research nature freed her from the role of 'expert': the pupils' views on what worked were essential to our collective endeavour to understand the process:

*They've really benefited from being involved in the evaluation of how of how it's gone [...] so I'll ask them if they thought that was a good task and they're happy to say no, we didn't think it was very good (ironic tone; laughs) [...] and that's fine because we're involved in it together because we're reflecting on what we're doing and it's not about them criticising me or me criticising them we're all just evaluating together*

Anna's self-deprecating laughter, use of irony and the contrast she sets up between personal 'criticism' and detached, mutual 'evaluation' suggests the extent to which she sees teacher and pupils as equals, engaged in research of their joint practice (Heath, 1981; Corden and Westgate, 1993). Validating pupils' opinions, by asking for reflections on pedagogy and then acting on this advice, clearly contributed to students' developing sense of confidence in their voices. Pupils could also see that this power was contingent on their being able to articulate reasons (Bernstein, 2000; Fielding, 2001). Final interviews corroborated this.

*I wouldn't be afraid of disagreeing with the teacher and of giving my reasons why now.  
(Simon; all pupils nodded.)*

Anna confirmed this:

*The class, as a whole, is quite confident, but they have definitely increased their ability to disagree with me and no longer see me as an 'authority'.*

Interestingly, Anna's belief in pupils' confidence to speak at the start of the project was exaggerated, given their stated fears of being 'intimidated' and 'humiliated' in class discussion, as they might 'get the answer wrong'.

Indeed, the tendency of pupils to perceive teachers' discourse as 'monological' was reinforced by transcripts for this class; for example, here pupils are trying to sequence a series of 'unseen' literary letters, using inference:

*Julie: That doesn't look right (pointing to one letter with a quizzical expression)  
Dilip: Doesn't matter. **She** (gesturing towards the teacher) said it was right.*

During another group-talk task there was an interesting debate between pupils, until Anna intervened, inadvertently giving her opinion; one pupil turned triumphantly to the others: 'See, I was right before'.

Throughout the project, Anna kept returning to the issue of the relationship between teacher identity and equality of classroom discourse:

*I've noticed that my language has changed with other classes, too. The other day, I caught myself mid-sentence and I realised I was speaking in a more tentative way than I used to in front of the whole class, saying 'it might mean so-and-so, I'm not sure'.*

It is significant that Anna's heightened awareness of her language was associated particularly with work on reading: this was reinforced by many references to the importance of pupils recognising 'multiple answers' to texts and of validating these as much as her own. Anna's reflection on her identity also spanned her entire practice:

*It's definitely made me more aware of my role. [...] It's in class discussion I'm definitely more aware of how restricted it is, in terms of who is actually taking part in this discussion and how valuable it is [...] I'm more conscious of asking one pupil a number of questions to try and have a more in-depth interaction rather than just keep going superficially from one [pupil] to the next*

Both Anna and Peter articulated the need to rethink the balance of power between teachers and pupils to enable dialogic talk, but they also thought teachers had an important role to play in scaffolding pupils' development of required discourse and reading skills. They selected different approaches for their contrasting classes.

Anna's highly conscious method was to act as a 'discourse guide' (Mercer and Littleton, 2007), explicitly modelling different strategies that the class needed to acquire, in a public conversation with a pupil:

*I was keen for them to ask each other questions [...] and I wanted them to focus on a very short text [...] and try to get a detailed discussion out of it and I thought, that's quite difficult to do without being shown how to do it, so I needed to model how [...] to talk about the effect of particular words. [...] to ask] 'What do you think this is about? What about the effect of that word?*

However, Anna also described modelling possible responses to questions, focusing on speculative language, which is rarely done by teachers:

*And then I tried to demonstrate, using tentative language, and thinking 'Oh, I'm not **sure** what he means by 'sleep'. What do **you** think?' and so modelling how their discussion might take place. (.) But the other thing is [...] when you're modelling something it's OK to say 'This is what I want you to do. I want you to analyse it' and I think sometimes you*

*miss that out as a teacher, you model it, but you don't actually make that link [...] explicitly.*

Anna's point is reinforced by the clear demarcation usually existing between teacher and pupil identities, which is enacted in speech. There is no reason to suppose that pupils would automatically model their language and behaviour on a teacher, unless shown the similarities in their role - of exploratory speakers - as here. (See Hurry and Parker, 2007 on the paucity of explicit modelling in relation to reading strategies in primary literacy lessons). Alexander (2000) argues that it is precisely this kind of formal modelling of analytical talk that teachers in Russia and France, not the UK and USA, frequently used, in whole-class contexts in his comparative study.

It was noticeable the extent to which pupils echoed and gradually internalised such linguistic structures across the year, as Anna commented:

*I've noticed her [Geraldine] deliberately doing those things, in the discussion, asking questions and getting people to develop in a very skilful, almost in a teacher-like way [...] taking control. I've noticed actually some of them picking up on that.*

Indeed, in the final interview, Martin, who was often quiet and unconfident, turned to Geraldine as part of a group discussion and said,

*You really helped me to talk because you kept asking questions and they were very good at getting me to think.*

Another boy also noticed her proficiency in stimulating a quiet girl, who had previously barely spoken, in his group:

*You got Kath to talk a lot and develop her points (.) you asked specific questions, not just 'what do you think?' – that's too hard.*

Explicit modelling of how pupils should generate questions to deepen their understanding of texts is identified as critical to developing pupils' comprehension (Palinscar and Brown, 1984; Rosenshine et al, 1996; National Reading Panel, 2000; Soter et al, 2008). Webb and Mastergeorge's work (2003) also found that effective peer scaffolding depended on precise pupil questioning. Unlike Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar and Brown, 1984), Anna tended to model questioning and the processes of reasoning and textual analysis required by the groups in front of

the whole class, as she did not want to interfere with groups during their talk. However, her approach is very similar to these studies. What is fascinating is that Anna's style of modelling changed across the project, paralleling the change in her perception of herself and her role as teacher. Below, is a comparison between two examples of teacher modelling, from early and then late in the project. In both, Anna is demonstrating how to use questions to deepen the analysis of texts and both are effective in modelling key strategies, such as the use of the 'follow-up' (Wells, 1999; Wells and Aruaz, 2006).

However, what appears to have changed between the two lessons is the teacher/pupil relationship, which is mediated through language. It is significant that in the first example, Anna is dominant: she casts herself as questioner, broadly works within the IRE format and speaks at greater length than her partner, although she said afterwards that her questions were designed to elicit elaborated talk from the pupil. In the second example, a very different, more equal dialogue is established, in which both speakers ask questions, as well as responding, both express uncertainty and move jointly and tentatively towards constructing meaning from the poem, intriguingly drawing the text into the talk as a third 'speaker' (see Nystrand et al, 1997; Bakhtin, 1981).

In the first extract, Anna is modelling to the class how to analyse propaganda posters in World War I and II for their group task, using questions. Significantly, Lauren, who is comparatively less confident and articulate than many of her peers, feels comfortable to volunteer for this public display.

#### **Transcript 6.1.1**

- |          |   |
|----------|---|
| Teacher: | I'm going to ask one of you to go through these questions with me now so that I can show you how to approach the posters. [...] Ok, so what's going on in this poster here? |
| Lauren:  | There's a man standing by his plane so it's trying to get you to join the air force   |
| Teacher: | Right, so it's trying to get you to join the air force, how is it persuading you to do this?  |
| Lauren:  | Because it's got blue skies and stuff and it's persuading you that you're going to see the world.   |
| Teacher: | So what impression do the blue skies give us?   |
| Lauren:  | That you're going somewhere nice  |



Teacher:	Right, so you're going somewhere where the weather is nice? But what about the colour blue, what does it suggest?
Lauren:	Blue skies...like happy, calm?
Teacher:	Yes, if you look at those other pictures, which are dark and grey and black or even red, blue creates quite a calm, peaceful impression of the atmosphere and of where you're going to be. What else did you just say?
Lauren:	That you're going to see the world? To travel
Teacher:	Because of?
Lauren:	Because of the picture – the buildings in the background – and it says 'See the world'
Teacher:	Right, 'see the world' excellent. Anything else (.) any other ways in which that poster is trying to give us a message?
Lauren:	The man looks strong and proud and stuff
Teacher:	Good, the size of the man, the way that he's really tall and strong. What about the way that he's standing?
Lauren:	He's proud
Teacher:	Facial expression?
Lauren:	Happy.
Teacher:	All of those aspects of the poster are persuasive and you can see there as well that the plane looks quite idyllic, like those little planes that you get from island to island and you've got the exotic building in the background and palm trees, suggesting that you're going to be able to travel the world. Obviously, we know that the reality is going to be rather different. [...] Excellent, OK, so do you think that it's effective, Lauren?
Lauren:	umhum. Yes, because (she trails off)
Teacher:	<i>(teacher remains silent, looks expectant and makes an encouraging hand gesture, signalling to Lauren that she needs to develop her reasons)</i>
Chorus of voices:	<i>(spontaneously calling out, good-humouredly) WHY? (Pupils laugh)</i> <i>(Teacher smiles and uses hand gesture again to indicate that the floor belongs to Lauren)</i>
Lauren:	<i>(laughing nervously, hesitant at first)</i> Because it's (.) showing that he's happy and stuff and people (.) in the world were like sad because everyone was dying and so if you join then you'll be happy, but that's not actually true, but then they're like saying that it is
Teacher:	[...] but in terms of what you came up with at the beginning, I think it's interesting to link that because it's making you seem like someone who is courageous, who is brave, who is proud and um confident, saying that if you join, you will be all these things as well [...] OK, so that's the kind of thing that I'd like you to do with these four pictures.

Overall, this illustrates very effective teacher modelling of how to use questions to deepen textual analysis. Strategies displayed include allowing 'wait' or thinking time to process higher-order questions (Gall, 1971), thus the whole dialogue is slow-paced; and using constant follow-ups (Wells, 1999; Wells and Arauz, 2006; Smith and Higgins, 2006) or 'take-ups' (Nystrand et al, 1997) of pupils' responses, echoing their words to prompt a deeper series of questions: 'But what about the colour blue, what does it suggest?' 'What about the way he is standing?' Most

importantly, Anna creates an expectation that all responses be elaborated, using reasons and textual evidence to justify the claims being made: 'because of?' 'how is it persuading?' 'other ways in which the poster is trying to persuade us?' Significantly, the pupils who called out, 'Why?' had clearly internalised this assumption.

In her earlier teaching, above, Anna is clearly in control of the dialogue and broadly uses an IRE format, although, importantly, the third slot is never just an evaluation, as 'take-ups' are more dialogic, since the pupils' words form the basis of the teacher's next question. Significantly, Anna's encouraging manner, including nods, smiles and consistent eye contact, indicating interest in Lauren's answers, as well as hand gestures inviting her to speak, all create a much more dialogic atmosphere, far removed from the quick-fire question-and-answer pattern typifying much whole-class talk (Burns and Myhill. 2004; Black, 2007). The dialogue illustrates how pupils can elicit exploratory talk from other group members, using such scaffolded questioning. Anna also at times models extended answers and comprehension strategies: in the last lines, she shows how Lauren needs to synthesise ideas, drawing conclusions: 'I think it's interesting to link that' with 'what you came up with at the beginning' and she then makes explicit the important psychological effect of the poster on the viewer.

However, the modelling used below, near the end of the project, is qualitatively different and approximates to methods advocated by Manzo (1969) and Simpson (1989) on reading comprehension strategies, which the former called 'reciprocal questioning'. This involves asking a pupil to engage publicly in an extended discussion with the teacher of a very short extract, practising answering and asking questions in turn. In the following extract, Anna wanted to model how to analyse poetry using exploratory, dialogic talk, as preparation for a group of pupils analysing Plath's 'The Mirror' (2002) in front of the whole class (the later task drew on SNS, DfES, 2007b).

Anna displayed three lines of Dylan Thomas' (1988) 'Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night' on the IWB and had the following public discussion with one pupil:

### Transcript 6.1.2

- Teacher: I just want to show you, uhm (3-second pause as she turns to face the IWB and reads the lines to herself, signalling that she wants pupils to do the same. Class falls quiet; pupils silently read the extract), I want to show you what I mean by coming to a meaning of something together, OK. So I've got this quote here and it's from a poem by Dylan Thomas. OK, so I'll just read it to you and I want you to focus on this. Right (reads extract) Right, can I have a volunteer to discuss this with me? Yes?  
(Geraldine tentatively puts up her hand)
- Teacher: Thank you, Geraldine (querying tone, checking that pupil is happy to continue)
- Geraldine: What? (slight laughter; looking puzzled as if uncertain what her role is)
- Teacher: So, uhm (pauses, looking again at the lines on IWB and using a speculative tone, as if speaking her thoughts aloud) what I might start off with when I am looking at something that I've never seen before and, I don't know, OK (re-reads aloud, slowly and ponderingly) 'Do not go gentle into that good night', so what do you think 'good night' might mean Geraldine?
- Geraldine: Uhm, uhm, I don't know
- Teacher: Oh no (reassuringly, smiling) so we're having a discussion so you can say, 'oh, I'm not su::re' (elongating word; high-pitched, speculative tone)
- Geraldine: (imitates teacher's tone) I'm not sure (slight laughter)
- Teacher: What do, what do you think, Ms Brown? (smiles and gestures with hand, as if handing the turn back to the other person)
- Geraldine: What do you think Ms Brown (repeats phrase; slightly nervous tone and laughter)
- Teacher: Oh, I don't know I (.) do you think it might be (.) do you think it's literal or do you think it might be a metaphor for something else? What do you mean, 'Do no::t go gentle into that good ni::ght'?
- Geraldine: I think (.) I think it's a metaphor for something else (.) because when it says 'against the dying of the light', maybe that might be death and if it's saying 'good night' that might be like the start of the death and if it's saying old age then that's quite close to death, kind of, and if it's saying 'should burn and rave', then maybe that's like...go out with a BANG (loud, emphatic last word; laughter)  
(Teacher nods, looking intently at Geraldine and remaining silent)
- Geraldine: Cremation? I don't know (laughs slightly)
- Teacher: Yeah I totally agr::ee, it's definitely, there's lots of references to, to possibly, old age and death in those few lines, isn't there? Uhm, what about (.) what about that repetition of 'rage, rage'? I think that makes the poem (.) feel quite angry
- Geraldine: Yeah, makes it kinda stronger, maybe
- Teacher: By repeating, it makes it or emphasises that feeling of anger a little bit, yeah, good. What do you think the mood of that, that stanza is overall?
- Lauren: Quite angry and, uhm, like, something, at (.) at the beginning, it is totally against the person, 'Do not go gentle...' but then at the end it just seems to accept it [...]
- Teacher: Yeah, that's a good point because it's like, it's like a command, isn't it? 'do not' so you can tell the poet really feels strongly about what they are talking about. (1). OK, good, thank you, Geraldine. (Turns to face the class.)  
So, what I'm trying to show you is when you get the poem and you're talking about it, the way that you can analyse this poem is by asking each other

Teacher: questions and exploring it together (.). So you don't need to panic when you see the poem and you think, 'Oh God, I don't understand this, I don't know what it means' (.). the whole point of what we are doing here is that you're able to talk about it and try to work out some kind of understanding of the poem, by helping each other, talking to each other, asking each other questions.

Firstly, it is significant that Anna announces her modelling to the class here, at the start and end of this transcript, following her reflections on the importance of explicitness above. The second interesting aspect is the way that Anna creates more equal talk here, compared with the earlier example, emphasising the crucial dialogic relationship between text and reader. For example, Anna reads the extract aloud or silently three times before she starts talking about it and directs her gaze from Geraldine to the text and back again, as if signalling that the text is almost a third 'speaker' in the conversation. Indeed, Anna unconsciously uses the second person to address the text: 'what do *you* mean', which illustrates her central idea that textual analysis involves speakers questioning the text collaboratively, having a three-way conversation and teasing out a range of possible interpretations in the process of 'coming to a meaning of something together'. This echoes both Bakhtin's (1981) view of intertextuality and what Pressley (2006) calls 'transactional' ways of reading texts in groups. Raising the status of the text in this way is also a useful way of eroding the teacher's authority and enabling her to ask 'authentic questions' (Nystrand et al, 1997; Torrance and Pryor, 1998; Smith and Higgins, 2006; Soter et al, 2008). Anna is emphasising that both speakers are engaged in an equal discussion to interpret a text, whose meaning is not transparent or singular, twice relinquishing her authority, by saying 'I don't know' and demonstrating how challenging poetry analysis is for her, by repeating the phrase.

Of course, another way in which Anna models equality of talk is that she encourages questions from the pupil and, crucially, moves from the typical IRE format to the structure of ordinary discourse: namely, adjacency pairs of Question/Answer. Where she does want to endorse a good point, she does so by agreeing with, and developing, rather than simply evaluating it: 'Yeah, that's a good point because it's like, it's like a command, isn't it: 'Do not''. (The tag question is also significant as it signals her desire for approval from her partner, which is quite different from the usual authoritative teacher voice.) This utterance also models to pupils how to deepen exploratory talk, by analysing an effect – here, the use of imperatives – more precisely.

Anna further dissolves her authority as expert critic, in possession of monological 'truths' (Bakhtin, 1981; Corden and Westgate, 1993), and models the process of analytical talk, by using tentative language (explored by Newman et al, 1989; Howe, 1997; Torrance and Pryor, 1998), such as the repetition of the modal 'might'; and of 'possibly'. Significantly, Geraldine then echoes 'might' several times, also adding the adverb 'maybe' to their combined repertoire of tentative language. Indeed, throughout this dialogue, Anna validates the concept of uncertainty, implying that it is a useful starting point for interpreting texts dialogically. However, she signals that there is a crucial semantic difference between a pupil's submissive claim 'not to know' with the creative state of 'uncertainty': thus, she dismisses Geraldine's initial 'I don't know' with 'Oh no...we're having a discussion', and she invites her to recast her stance as: 'I'm not su:::re'. (See Appendix 3 on tentative language in Ellen's class).

It is noticeable that Anna's strategies here elicit more confident, developed talk from Geraldine than that of Lauren above, in terms of the length of her turns and the way that she imitates Anna's analytical process, using phrases such as 'I think' and 'because', showing reasoning and supporting her interpretation with textual evidence. Anna also models how to use precise terminology, referring to 'metaphor', 'commands', 'repetition', 'mood' and 'stanza', but importantly, she always starts with the personal: the poem's effect on Geraldine and on her, as readers. Anna only adds the terms afterwards, so that the pupils watching can infer their meaning from the context, focusing their attention primarily on how readers read, and can be excited by, texts, and only afterwards on how this can be supported by key terminology: 'what about that repetition of "rage, rage"? I think it makes the poem feel quite angry...what do you think the mood of that [...] stanza is overall?'

However, what is most significant about this transcript is that nine months of practising and reflecting on how to achieve dialogic talk has caused a shift in the quality of the relationship between Anna and her pupils and, indeed, in Anna's own identity as teacher, both of which are constantly in the process of being constructed through language (Corden and Westgate, 1993; Kristeva, 1984; Butler, 1990).

The two transcripts also illustrate the difficulty of assessing the quality of exploratory talk, especially using quantitative means (Edwards and Westgate, 1994). I have argued that the second is more dialogic and equal, liberating the pupil to think independently, developing original ideas, using reasoning and being receptive to different interpretations of texts. However, on certain indicators of exploratory talk, for example, number of higher-order questions and answers in which reasoning is evident, the first transcript might be assessed more favourably. Exploratory talk is process, not product. The researcher's task is attempting both to analyse the quality of the talk and to infer, from this, the mental processes underlying the language, that is, the extent to which the talk embodies 'intermental' reasoning about texts (Mercer, 2000).

## 6.2 Peter's class

Both Anna and Peter identified the need to hand responsibility to pupils in group talk, shifting the balance of power and reconceptualising their own teacher identity. For Anna, in only her fourth year of teaching, this meant making a conscious set of choices with her higher-ability pupils, whose level of motivation enabled her to take these risks: being a discourse guide, changing her language, and not intervening during the talk. For Peter, as an experienced teacher of twenty-two years, working with a low set, the risks were somewhat greater, as he articulated:

*[teachers] have to be [...] reassured that there's ways of actually keeping your kind of 'control' if you like that don't involve you having to stand at the front all the time and stop people doing things.*

Peter defined the key tension in the teacher's role in group talk as: 'how to achieve an enabling, not a policing role'. Indeed, he admitted to temporarily regretting his involvement with the project in its first few weeks, as it seemed as if his fears were being realised: the pupils seemed louder and were overtly 'off task' for sections of the group-talk sessions. However, he said that this made him reflect deeply on the teacher's role in group talk with lower-ability pupils, rejecting the role of mere 'facilitator' as belonging to an 'ideal world', but problematising intervening because:

*if all your interventions are is a [...] policing role then you're kind of cutting things off as well as enabling them [...] I made a kind of conscious effort to think well I'm not actually going to be concerned with that group for a little while. I'm going to leave them to their own devices because I think I could probably have more of an impact here, through asking a couple of questions or positively reinforcing something*

Interestingly, the facilitator role is precisely the one that Anna did choose to adopt, after a while, with her 'top' set. For his class, Peter recognises the need to make highly 'conscious' decisions about when and how to intervene. His strategies here, which observations suggested were highly effective, need to be analysed in a range of ways. On the level of discourse, they clearly functioned to scaffold pupils' talk, by illustrating how pupils could develop ideas or ask key questions to explore a topic more fully. But on a deeper level, they also signalled to pupils the type of relationship and identity that they could expect from their teacher during the group-talk phase of the lesson. Peter avoids 'policing', in favour of a more equal, dialogic role with pupils: he prioritises talking to a conscientious group that can be helped 'positively' at a critical moment and risks temporarily leaving a non-functioning group alone. This shows Peter's expectation that groups have to learn to become more autonomous, since policing or monitoring themselves is a critical skill in group work. Significantly, this class not only developed the skill of staying on task for the majority of all group tasks, but also commented on this achievement in final interview, specifically crediting it to the increasing maturity and independence of their group (see Chapter 8).

Peter identified the need to challenge ingrained teacher roles as one of the most important aspects he had learnt:

*I realised you need to take risks with the group talk if pupils were going to become more independent.*

This includes being prepared to cope with an unsettled transition period, while pupils gradually acquire both talking skills and habits of working more independently. Indeed, Peter showed that he was continually reflecting on his teacher role, relationship with the pupils and the ways in which these were mediated through language, when asked whether he thought he had developed his skills in managing group talk:

*However long you've been teaching you've always got to be open for sort of learning because you can just become [...] ossified in in what you do [...] I think I developed by actually (.) not rushing in there as quickly, thinking before I went in sometimes about what I was going to do when I went into a group, rather than just on kind of autopilot [...] going in and saying do this, don't do that, why aren't you doing this? So it (.) it was kind of a more considered response to the groups.*

Peter's language here is particularly significant. He explicitly advocates teachers to challenge 'ossified' roles, metacognitively reflecting on their behaviour and language to pupil groups and thus rejecting the 'autopilot' teacher response. This is neatly evoked by his use of a series of imperatives, suggesting teachers' tendency to want to dominate all aspects of the lesson, including independent pupil talk. The idea that teachers need to work hard to establish more dialogic relationships and change entrenched classroom discourse patterns is reinforced by the work of, for example, Alexander (2008), who describes the IRE structure as the 'default' position of all classrooms and of much of Wells' research (1999; Wells and Arauz, 2006).

Peter approached the problem of creating a more equal, dialogic classroom in a different way to Anna, for example, by changing the format of whole-class talk: he often started group-talk lessons with a 'circle time' horseshoe formation, which subtly signalled to pupils a change in the discourse pattern and atmosphere of the class. Pupils sat in chairs away from their desks with Peter alongside. He drew this idea originally from his experience of teaching an integrated curriculum with a Year 7 class in London, to ease transition. Peter thought that this structure achieved 'a kind of calm [...] all being on an equal level', and that it developed listening skills, through the greater eye-contact and visible body language achieved:

*[It] is something I always like to do with um with reading [...] I think it does help to focus um when you're holding discussion and yes it's a [...] more intimate kind of setting.*

The effect of this formation was, undoubtedly, to achieve a more dialogic atmosphere in the class talk, with pupils talking to each other, across the circle, rather than mediating talk through the teacher. The greater intimacy, combined with Peter's questioning, also tended to produce more extended pupil answers. Pupils were aware that Peter would always ask follow-up questions of them in this format and they appear to be less constrained by the thought of teacher evaluation than they were even in whole-class talk in their usual classroom structure. Peter was, therefore, providing a model of more extended 'large-group' discussion, before asking pupils to practise talking independently in smaller groups.

Peter, like Anna, also explicitly modelled effective group discourse strategies in whole-class introductions, using a key focus (asking questions or giving reasons). For example, with



persuasive writing, Peter started with a pre-reading activity, requiring pupils to think alone of one reason only to justify their opinion:

*As I'm reading [two advertisements], think and decide which is most effective and why. Point to one thing and say why this is the most effective aspect of the leaflets.*

After the reading, Peter announced his intentions, allowing more thinking or 'wait' time: 'I am now going to ask four people which of the two is most effective and why?' He then asked the question, directing it after the first turn to specific pupils. When Greg said, 'The first one because it has a picture', Peter said 'OK', paused for 1.5 seconds, smiled encouragingly and used a slight hand gesture, successfully encouraging him to elaborate:

*Yes, it gives detail and tells you the man's name and it's personal and it tells you what it's like for him.*

After pupils had given their whole-class answers, Peter reiterated his central point, making the modelling explicit: 'They were all really good reasons that you gave'. He then set a group talk task that required further use of these evaluative skills – selecting which of ten charities should be awarded lottery money - so that pupils could practise the modelled talk immediately.

Peter's commitment to dialogic talk in all parts of the lesson was linked to his belief, stated in the first interview, that pupils must value the process of talk as an end in itself, unrelated to outcome, such as improving writing. He, therefore, noticeably praised pupils for their 'hard work' and success in group talk at the start, middle and end of each lesson and often used learning objectives on talk alone. This reinforces work by Ames (1992) and Dweck (1986) on motivation, in terms of 'mastery', not 'performance', goals. Peter also gave precise, formative feedback, for example, 'what I liked about your [whole-class] talk just now was that each person gave a reason for their opinions and two people asked questions'; and 'well done for staying on task more in this group talk' or 'for asking questions'.

Interestingly, many of Peter's tasks had a clear 'outcome', such as, inserting group answers on a grid sheet, designed to maintain pupil focus. However, over time, Peter avoided the typical structure of many group-talk sessions – reporting each group's results to the class – and instead,

used a brief whole-class slot to ask for group or individual reflection on the talk, without returning to the substantive issue at all. This confirms research on the importance of valuing process, not product (Corden & Westgate, 1993). Thus, Peter validated the role of group talk to learning in several subtle ways: through his speech to the class; through the constant reflection on talk; and through removing the requirement that pupils repeat the group discussion they have had to the class, to ensure comprehensive coverage of the topic. This last point also conveyed Peter's trust that pupils were talking seriously in groups, understanding its importance, and therefore did not need to prove this publicly. What was noticeable was that the pupils accepted this new format and that the lack of explicit teacher assessment in the whole-class context did not deter them from talking effectively in groups; indeed, their motivation for talk clearly increased over time. This does suggest that pupils had started to internalise the value of talking as an end in itself. Pupils' attitude towards note-taking during group talk also appeared to change from early to later lessons. Initially, writing was privileged and interfered with the talk; later it was demoted to a supportive role, helping the pupils to clarify their thinking, before moving on to a new point.

Peter, like Anna, also grappled with the difficulty of establishing effective talk, balancing teacher scaffolding with giving pupils space, critiquing our model for being over-complex and demanding too much 'teacher talk' in the introduction. Peter simplified it, by trying to focus on one skill (such as, questioning) per lesson, but said that he would do this more explicitly in future, consolidating the skills incrementally. Originally, Peter tried to do two group-talk tasks per lesson, using the reflection in between that Anna later adopted for her class. Again, he decided that for his low-set class, the demands of group talk were such that it was better to introduce group talk gradually, using only one task per lesson. This more concentrated pattern of group talk definitely helped to develop exploratory talk and pupils seemed to enjoy the later lessons more, wholly concentrating on one group talk, rather than losing concentration over two.

Peter, like Anna, also revealed an 'emancipatory' view of action research, clearly conceiving of it as exploratory, enabling a deeper understanding of pedagogy, in relation to learning, not technicist, focusing crudely on results. He accepted the team's initial model of group talk, but was keen to experiment with different tasks, resources, ways of structuring the talk and the pupil reflection to see what - within or without this model - worked for his particular class. Peter also

maintained a healthy scepticism towards the project, announcing in early post-lesson discussions, that we may find that the model did not work for a class such as his.

Peter's constructed teacher identity is also significant. He has a gentle manner and is explicitly not authoritarian, appearing to enact his stated concern with allowing pupil voices to be heard, by not excessively dominating the classroom discourse himself. Peter positioned himself as not omniscient, inviting and celebrating alternative opinions from the pupils, by saying in whole-class talk, for example 'Hmm, that's interesting. I hadn't thought of that' and 'well justified – yes, that's a good argument against my point.' He engages in authentic discourse without this seeming patronising or artificial (Nystrand et al, 1997):

*Beth: Do you put their names down?* [to indicate who has asked a question in the group talk]

*Peter: No, I thought of this, but I think it's simpler if you just do a tick as a group because you're working in a group?* (Beth nods)

Peter explains his process of thinking to Beth, showing that he is grappling with new ideas during this project and is not 'an expert'. He treats Beth as a conversational equal, taking her point seriously, noting the similarity in their original thoughts, then justifying his final decision & offering it for her approval, signalled by his questioning tone and use of the tentative phrase 'I think'.

Significantly, Peter expressed both a strong belief in critical reflection and a coherent ideological position about equality and the responsibility of schools to enable pupils to contribute to society:

*[This] is based on [...] what I've read and what my sort of political philosophy [is...] the idea of it being kind of democratic and people being able to kind of contribute and learn from each other that's definitely true but (.) I think um as important is having been through the experience and always [...] reflecting on what's happened and thinking well how can that be better? [...] what can we do there that would enable um (.) more kids to benefit or would move them on?*

This level of reflection was evident throughout our interviews and resulted in Peter constantly experimenting with new formats for the sessions, including considering how he could engage two of his most challenging boys, who were resistant to group talk. For example, Peter gave them a sense of responsibility one lesson, by allowing them to be rotating observers of all the groups, making notes on strengths and areas for development to aid the groups' reflection. He also sent them out of the room while he allocated 'Chair' and 'Questioner' roles to other pupils in each group to increase their challenge. The boys' task, therefore, included identifying who was acting each role; which clues in their language led them to infer this; and assessing how effectively the pupils were performing their roles. Through such methods, Peter successfully drew one of the boys, Lee, in particular, into committed engagement with group work. This task aimed to develop the two boys' critical skills but, as significantly, it required them to observe and reflect on the precise discourse skills enacted by other pupils that they so clearly lacked themselves. This appeared to be a turning point in Lee's attitude to group work and he spoke enthusiastically about group talk in the final interview, having been uncooperative and sceptical at the start.

Thus, Peter saw developing his pupils' oral skills as part of a much more significant project of re-engaging and enabling students, in his words, 'to take control of their lives' and 'contribute' to society. Indeed, his language echoes Freire's (1990), in seeing oracy/literacy as 'emancipatory' and linked to praxis, capable of transforming people's identities so that they can, in turn, critique and challenge a culture that has marginalised them. He therefore recognised the need to resolve a tension in education between a superficial valuing of oral skills and a culture that 'depoliticises' young people:

*oral work now has more status than [...] twenty years ago [...] which is good but it's gone hand in hand with a thing in society where young people particularly are [...] depoliticised or alienated from the political process and [...] the fact that you've got an opinion itself is seen as uncool, you know it's cooler not to be interested in anything [...] so I think [collaborative talk] is important in terms of engagement and people feeling that they should have control of their lives and they should contribute in a way, which isn't just to do with obviously English it's to do with one's role in society.*

Peter's approach to group talk was, therefore, imbued with ideas about wanting to engage and empower pupils, offering an alternative identity and means of acting in the world to those they had already constructed. This led to Peter selecting texts and topics that he, rightly, anticipated would stimulate personal engagement. For example, pupils analysed the *Summer Heights High*

(n.d. BBC) satirical television series about a school, which deals humorously with educational issues and attitudes towards social class, race and gender; and they discussed topics such as the use of CCTV cameras in schools. Here, he used the stimulus of a 'letter' from their own head teacher to parents announcing that cameras were to be installed in classrooms to enable parents to observe their children's progress in lessons. Significantly, like Anna's pupils above, Peter's class thought that the key to a good group-talk task was mainly finding a stimulating, controversial topic or text that would engage pupils in debate, rather than devising an elaborate task.

Evidence that, across the project, Peter had developed a more dialogic teacher/pupil relationship and had broadened his repertoire of teacher identities came from observational evidence, pupil interviews and his own evaluation of his practice:

*I think I relaxed into [the group talk] more as a teacher (.) the more we went through it um because so much of it is giving up part of your control role (.) well not giving up totally but allowing your sort of control role to be sort of distributed in a way*

Peter developed this point, by emphasising that pupil autonomy and self-regulation could only be achieved by teachers risking 'distributing' the power in the class. This, he argues, has clear benefits for teachers, 'empowering' them, by dissolving the entrenched pattern of what Bernstein terms 'regulatory discourse' (2000):

*I think [...] in handing power over to [pupils] you are in many ways empowering yourself because that relationship becomes more equal and they feel more valued so the kind of teacher telling us what to do and us either doing it or avoiding doing it [...] moves out because it is a more kind of equal thing, where they feel they can listen to what you're saying and you're not talking down to them, you're talking on the same level as them. And I think that's particularly difficult to achieve with low-ability groups.*

Peter uses an unintentional, but intriguing use of pronouns here, which neatly symbolises the more equal teacher/pupil relationship he aims to create, shifting from describing pupils as 'they' to 'us' in lines 2-3. The new relationship is premised on mutual respect, thus pupils 'feel they can listen' to the teacher, as he's 'not talking down to them'. Peter ends by reflecting on the rarity of

teachers achieving this with low-attainment sets because, as he said earlier, their fear of 'loss of control' is greater in this context, constraining them from challenging rigid, pedagogic roles.

It is worth triangulating Peter's reflections on teacher/pupil relationship and roles here with comments both from his own, and from Anna's class. Students in Anna's class echoed Peter's words, when asked why they thought they experienced so little group talk across the curriculum at secondary school:

*I think they're [teachers] scared that it will get out of hand and she won't be able to control all of us [...] so it's a lot more work but it is a lot more effective (Martin)*

Julie elaborated on Martin's point by linking teachers' fear of loss of control with the pressure to 'transmit' a dense National Curriculum at speed, from Year 7:

*Because we've all got more facts to learn. When she puts it up on the board we all learn it, but if we do in the groups and she comes round it takes longer (.) if she does class discussion then she can teach it to all of us at the same time*

Julie's last line betrays her monologic view of whole-class talk: the teacher 'does class discussion' so she can 'teach', not so that pupils can explore ideas. However, other pupils exposed the fallacy of teachers assuming that pupils were all learning from this transmissive form, contrasting levels of concentration in different contexts:

*[in] smaller groups, everyone listens to you carefully but when you're [...] with the whole class, you get distracted and you keep stopping as well because there's like people talking or something (May)*

Greg, in Peter's class, also cites the curriculum as the most obvious reason for the lack of group talk in secondary school, but his hesitation shows him grappling with a more profound point - the value teachers place on it:

*I don't know (.) because of the curriculum or something (.) you've got to do a lot more stuff (2) yeah and it's like teachers don't think it's (.) I don't know how to put it, important or something.*

Other pupils in Peter's class said, sympathetically, that teachers feared group talk as it was hard to manage and might undermine their lesson plan:

*I think it's cause like if they've got something planned for like the lesson they've got to like like start the class get them into groups and then start it like start the class up again (.) and then some people might start talking [... and] some people might moan to say oh I'm in that group and I don't like so and so (Kate)*

However, pupils in Anna's class wanted to reassure teachers contemplating group talk that they should, in their words: 'give the pupils a chance to show them that they can do it'. Pupils also argued that some of the challenges they faced with pupils being disruptive or being unable to concentrate, would, in fact, be resolved:

*I also think that like Julie says, if there's like a group that's quite naughty and likes to talk and stuff if you put them with people who are more likely to focus then it sort of helps the person improve on group talk (Geraldine)*

*I think some people maybe that teachers think are very loud in class and like might not get on with it [group talk...are] loud in class **because** they're not having a chance to speak, so in group talk they can actually kind of get everything out without having to shout above the rest of the class and make a silly comment to get them noticed (Simon)*

Pupils are making significant points about identity here: group talk encourages pupils to model themselves on the most competently performing peers, rather than competing for negative attention. This does not just imply imitating discourse skills, but ways of being, including acting collaboratively, taking responsibility and having positive attitudes to learning. Pupils here recognise these longer-term benefits of collaborative talk and urge teachers to take this 'risk'.

The process of peer modelling is best exemplified by Peter's class in a sixteen-minute discussion near the end of the project. The task is to discuss a series of statements about homeless people, exploring pupils' opinions and reasons. The pupils are on task for the whole time and their talk

develops well: all contribute co-operatively and Chris no longer dominates or inhibits others. The task and resources were well designed for this 'low-set' class: the tick-box feedback sheet had columns headed: 'agree', 'disagree', 'partly agree' and 'reasons'. The scribe's role was straightforward and significantly, pupils are engaged in the talk, not the writing. Requiring pupils to reflect on their degree of agreement is a subtle way of engaging them in more complex reasoning than this group had previously demonstrated and the most exploratory sections of talk are stimulated by the notion of qualified agreement. The teacher assigned roles of Chair and Scribe to each group.

Significantly, these pupils are so keen to start their group talk that they do so, while the teacher is still making some final whole-class comments; the first part of the transcript also shows the pupils' independence, turning to each other, not the teacher, to clarify understanding. Here, Beth, a sophisticated Chair in earlier lessons, models to Aidan and the group how to perform this role:

#### **Transcript 6.2.1 Chris, Beth, Aidan, Tanya and James**

1. Chris: I think that in this discussion about the homeless -
2. Beth: Chris, you're not the Chair, Aidan's the Chair. (*Chris raises his eyebrows but accepts the point, looking towards Aidan*)
3. Aidan: I know, but I need some help here, don't I?  
(*Pupils fall quiet as teacher gives final whole-class instructions*).
4. Beth: (*assertively*) OK, Aidan, you've got to open the discussion because you're the Chair
5. Tim: OK, what are we supposed to talk about?
6. Beth: (*exasperated tone*) about homeless. You don't even have your sheet (*she brandishes hers in the air and points to the other pupils with sheets in front of them*)
7. Aidan: Yeah, where's it gone? (*looks on, then under the table and finds it. Reads first statement aloud.*) Right, 'When people end up homeless, it's usually their fault'
8. Beth: I partly partly agree
9. Tanya: I partly agree
10. Aidan: Do you? (*directed at Tanya; she does not respond*)
11. James: I partly agree, too
12. Aidan: And I partly agree.
13. Beth: Chris, what did you (*looks at Chris, then Aidan encouragingly, signalling the Chair's role*)
14. Aidan: Chris, what did you do for the top one?
15. Chris: um um I partly agree
16. Tim: Well, everyone partly agreed so (. ) (*hesitates as if unsure of how to develop talk*)
17. Beth: Why did you partly agree? (*emphasises the word with a downward hand gesture; glances at Tim, but directs her gaze at Chris*)



Beth outlines the Chair's role, modelling a 'script' for Aidan, reminding him to include all members of the group and tactfully falling quiet, when Aidan imitates her question. On line 16, Aidan knows he ought to summarise the group's findings, but hesitates, not knowing how to prompt pupils to elaborate, perhaps because he has already tried the closed question (do you?) without success on line 10. At this point, Beth models a precise, higher-order question, directed at a specific pupil: 'Why did you...?' Significantly, this question elicits more developed talk:

### Transcript 6.2.2

1. Chris: When people end up homeless a lot of time it *is* their fault because they do drugs and things and they're are like (*piss*) heads
2. Tanya: (*giggles; nods*)
3. Chris: and things but but when it's ( . ) I disagreed as well and that's why I did
4. partly disagree, because sometimes it's their *family* and their family beat them up and
5. Beth: And well, from like abuse, really
6. Aidan: James, why did you partly agree?
7. James: um, Sometimes it's their fault and sometimes it isn't
8. Aidan: Yes and sometimes it's not their fault if like they've got a really really bad job and then they go bankrupt and they lose their house
9. James: Yeah, like £5.50 an hour like minimum wage and then they go out and spend it all on drugs and they can't like pay the rent at all
10. [...*Pupils discussing a later statement: 'Most people don't appreciate how hard it is when you are homeless.'*]
11. Beth & Tanya: We all agreed (*all laugh*)
12. Aidan: Why does everyone agree?
13. Tanya: Because it's going to be hard being homeless because you've got nowhere to go and you're stuck outside on your own
14. Aidan: Why did you agree, Chris?
15. Chris: I agreed because um er even though they are quite dirty, I think that they
16. *are* people and many people, if they were to think about them, they'd
17. hate um being in the cold
18. Beth: James?

Beth continues to model asking higher-order questions, until Aidan is confident to take over this role, imitating the forms of her question. Inevitably, when pupils are learning new discourse structures, there is a certain stiltedness about this type of questioning and sometimes pupils need to allow time for points to be developed, rather than firing another question (see the last few lines), ironically, a weakness of much teacher questioning (see Edwards and Westgate, 1994). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the questioning above does elicit more reasoning and exploratory talk than was evident in earlier tapes, with pupils starting to consider the societal context for homelessness and jointly constructing an argument. Interestingly, the formerly

dominant Chris, who rarely listened to peers earlier, here advocates an empathetic response to the homeless, appealing to common humanity.

Another notable aspect of this transcript is the number of counter-arguments, with reasons. This is definitely a skill that developed across the project: early tapes were characterised either by simple agreement, usually without reasons (cumulative talk), or by emotional disagreement without explanation or evidence. Here, pupils are discussing the statement, 'The police should provide protection for homeless people':

### Transcript 6.2.3

Chris: My Dad's a copper yeah? And they already provide a lot of protection for homeless people already right? So I said 'partly agree' because they already do and I think that they should do even more, but they already do loads.

Beth: So why do the police move the homeless people on, then?

Chris: What?

Beth: So why do the police move the homeless people on then?

Chris: Because they are illegally in a place.

Beth: Right that, that *(falls silent as she is struggling to articulate her point)*

Tanya: Yeah, but, but they need somewhere to sleep

Chris: Yeah, they can go to 'First Base'

Beth: But what if it's [full ]?

Tanya: [Excuse] me *(trying to attract attention with her point)*

Chris: There's four of them in Stamford, and there's not that many tramps in Stamford, is there?

Beth: I don't know

Chris: And one can take at least a hundred people

Tanya: Hey, you know this phrase 'go back to his home' *(pointing to the advertisement)* well, he doesn't have a home, does he, that's why he's homeless *(indignantly and sadly)*

Pupils are starting to synthesise points from a range of sources, drawing on their personal knowledge, fiction and non-fiction texts read at school (N.I.H., 2000). Thus, Chris refers to knowledge gained from his policeman father, while Beth presents an empathetic view of homeless people's difficulties, partly gained from the class's study of *Stone Cold* (Swindells, 1993). At the end of the extract, Tanya supports Beth's argument, by drawing attention to the intended irony of the advertisement studied earlier in the lesson, designed to make the reader feel guilt for their lack of understanding of homelessness. Significantly, at the end of the transcript, all pupils spontaneously imagine themselves in the position of a homeless person:

**Transcript 6.2.4**

- Aidan: Do you know, if I sat up all day like that upright all day, I'd die (*pointing to the picture of the advertisement on homelessness*)
- Beth: If I was homeless, I'd be like (*she shrugs and raises her eyebrows as if unable to articulate her feelings*)
- Chris: Could you sit like that all day? (*directed to Aidan, again, pointing to the picture of the homeless person*)
- [...]
- Beth: But I think, if I was homeless, I'd probably agree to all of these (*referring to statements on homelessness*), so if you were homeless, it would change your whole opinion about things

Ability to empathise with people and thereby to speculate about different viewpoints is a higher-order skill in reading comprehension (Soter et al, 2008) and in constructing an argument. Beth's final utterance here suggests that the process of being in a group, exploring the degree to which she and her peers agree with controversial statements, has heightened her realisation that all knowledge is mediated through consciousness, dependent on context and perspective, rather than being absolute.

Another reason for the effectiveness of the talk here was Peter's use of pupils' formative assessment of the pupils' talk the previous lesson to set a key target for the discussions. Groups reported that they had improved their ability to stay on task, include everyone and not to dominate, but their collective targets were: to give reasons; to ask questions to elicit reasons; and to challenge someone's opinion with reasons. In final interview, Peter identified this lesson as critical in terms of embedding these particular skills. He reflected that it was particularly effective to focus on practising a specific skill (giving reasons), building the full set up gradually.

The task also expected pupils to pause in their talk every five minutes and to try to record whether (and how many), reasons, questions and challenges had been made. While asking pupils to score points in a competitive way may seem counter-productive, in terms of theories of motivation (Dweck, 1986; Ames, 1992) and collaborative talk, in fact, the tallies were presented as representing the progress of the whole class in talk – a collective achievement. Interestingly, the group above ignored the teacher's request to pause every five minutes, which would have

interrupted their flow, evaluating their talk only at the end of the discussion. Significantly, in the pupils' final self-assessment, they defer to each other's judgements, praise each other and demonstrate a strong sense of group identity and confidence, contrasting greatly with earlier tapes:

**Transcript 6.2.5**

Aidan: [...] do you think I asked questions?

Beth: Yes you did it very well – you asked loads of questions

Chris: Did I ask good questions? [...]

Beth: I think we all done really well... I think we all asked questions

Aidan: Yeah, Do you think we we all *supported* our opinions with evidence?

Beth: Yes, definitely

James: Certainly [...]

Aidan: Yes, we all we all *respected* each other's views

## Chapter 7: Exploratory talk about text

During the project, all four classes practised group talk across a range of tasks and topics, following departmental schemes of work. However, transcripts and interviews with teachers and pupils suggested that the richest talk was often based on texts (literary, non-fiction and media). Some examples of this talk have already been presented (pp. 61, 64, 72-5, 78, 103-4, 106 and see Appendix 3); further examples will now be analysed to identify how and why text-based tasks were so effective at generating exploratory talk. This section will synthesise the factors identified as being significant above: training, reflection on talk, pupil/teacher identity and teacher scaffolding, while adding elements specifically relevant to the analysis of text: intertextuality and critical reading.

The transcript below is taken from a lesson half-way through the project, in which Anna explicitly asked pupils to recall their cross-curricular knowledge of World War 1 (WW1) 'from History and Drama', conversations at home, the media, primary school and the arts, referring to the military music playing as they entered the class. Pupils were then asked to generate six positive and negative words associated with WW1. Significantly, the two pairs I was observing made a couple of suggestions before leaning over the table to form a group. The discussion was animated, with all contributing to a rich bank of adjectives, which pupils linked to soldiers' life in the trenches, women's experience of waiting for news, media propaganda and rationing. Asked why they had worked in a group not, as directed, a pair, one pupil said, smiling nervously, 'well, you get many more different ideas and it's more interesting'. Clearly, pupils had internalised the 'rules' for group exploratory talk and were now valuing it as the best means of generating ideas, as well as acting more independently.

The teacher then displayed a series of photographs, paintings and soldiers' diary extracts on trench life for the class to analyse, exploring the view they presented. The pupils were, thus, steeped in a range of written, visual and spoken texts, historical and contemporary, from different perspectives, and they collectively analysed their significance. That is, they were required to practise Bakhtinian (1981) intertextuality, a critical/analytic (see Soter et al, 2008) or, arguably, a cultural materialist (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1994) approach to the reading of texts, emphasising

the context of their production. (See, too, Westbrook, 2009, on the importance of intertextuality to develop students' reading comprehension of whole texts.)

Groups were then given recruitment posters from WWI and WWII and were asked to analyse and evaluate these, ranking them for effectiveness of purpose. The task thus required pupils to practise the key reading skill of elaborative inference (Cain and Oakhill, 2004), synthesising and applying their knowledge of the context, topic and genre (persuasive writing) of a text to generate meaning. The following extract is of a mixed-sex group of four.

### Transcript 7.1 Geraldine, Robert, Jim and Jane

1. Geraldine: (*reading poster*) 'Women of Britain say Go!' I think that's actually very sexist
2. Robert: [No ], because men -
3. Jim: [Why]?
4. Geraldine: Why can't the men say, Go?
5. Robert: No (.) because
6. Jim: (*frustrated*) I don't get it, say Go to what?
7. Geraldine: Say Go, they're (*pointing at the picture of the women*) making the men go to war
8. Robert: (*loudly in a clarifying tone*) What it, what it, what it means is 'Go to war'
9. Jane: It's like wives and stuff, isn't it?
10. Robert: (*loudly*) [Yeah, but women] weren't allowed to fight on the front line and stuff
11. Geraldine: [And children ] (*staring at the picture*)
12. Jane: Wives that stay at home struggling along and all the men die (*sadly*)
13. Robert: No, women were employed to be nurses and stuff but they weren't employed to be fighters
14. Geraldine: They weren't allowed to fight on the front line, they're still not today, I checked
15. Robert: Who says that?
16. Jane: Oh well -
17. Geraldine: I checked at cadets, I'm sorry
18. Jim: That's horrible (*shocked tone, looking at, and referring to, the message of the poster*) alright, but I think it's good because I don't think, I think it's targeting other people, not just the people that *are* going to be *going* to war. It's targeting their wives and girl-friends, etc
19. Geraldine: And children
20. Jim: Yes
21. Geraldine: And that they look kind of worried, like Go (*refers to women's expressions*)
22. Jane: If you don't go, I won't like you anymore
23. Jim: Yeah
24. Robert: Yeah, if you don't go, we're getting a divorce
25. Jim: [I think, I don't know, I don't, I think it's] (.)

26. Geraldine: [Like they want, the men are getting ] encouragement from their wives, even though they probably won't see them again, but they don't know that!
27. Jim: Yeah, it's saying, yeah, yeah, it's like saying that the women like them because they're brave
28. Robert: (*pointing at the picture*) Brave and handsome
29. Jim: Exactly (*laughs*) anyway
30. Geraldine: (*fast-paced, summarising*) Because they're brave and strong and they're going to go to war and be all patriotic
31. Jim: Exactly and then if you, if you (*struggling to articulate his thoughts*)
32. Geraldine: And *look* (*points to the poster*) they're just marching past their window, they wouldn't actually do that
33. Robert: Yes, *they would*
34. Geraldine: No, they wouldn't, they'd be in No Man's Land
35. Robert: I know they wouldn't but it's a poster, it's not, it's not true
36. Jim: But I don't know, I think like (2)
37. Geraldine: (*excited*) Have you noticed that they're all cartoons?
38. Robert: (*teasing tone*) Have you noticed that like cameras were barely invented?
39. Geraldine: Right then, how did those pictures get taken then? (*indicating photographs shown earlier on the IWB*) No, not them ones (*posters*) the other pictures, they were photos weren't they?
40. Jim: It's not a picture (*meaning a photograph; pointing at the poster*)
41. Robert: Yeah, they were invented, but hardly (*reference to cameras*)
42. Geraldine: They're just drawings (*nodding, conceding the point*)
43. Jim: I reckon they're just drawings.
44. Geraldine: Anyway, I think (*fast-paced, excited*) the go is like GO! *Look* because it's in speech marks and it's underlined and it's bold and it's got an exclamation mark and it's (*inaudible*)
45. Jim: Do you think it is persuasive?
46. Geraldine: I think I talk too much (*reflectively*)

This transcript illustrates the process of exploratory talk about texts, in which pupils start with partial or superficial knowledge and progress towards a deeper collective understanding. At the start, both Geraldine and Jim have a less assured understanding than Robert and Jane, but for different reasons. Jim is confused about the literal meaning of the poster, but his first question 'Why?' does not elicit the answer he needs, instead prompting Geraldine's idea that the text is 'sexist', an evaluative comment, inaccessible to someone without a basic textual comprehension. However, Jim persists, recasting his question in a more precise form and using a tone of slight frustration to signal to peers that they need to answer this, before moving to a higher level of talk: 'I don't get it, say 'Go' to what?' This question immediately triggers the information Jim needs, as the three other pupils respond (lines 7-9). Significantly, each response builds on the previous one, moving towards greater explicitness, as the pupils decode the literal meaning. Geraldine points to the picture, but uses the pronoun 'they', whereas Jane, realising that this deictic

reference is ambiguous, uses the explicit noun: 'wives'. Robert also recasts Jane's point in a more explicit way, using the 'teacherly' phrase 'what it means is...' and repeating the slogan 'Go!' with the inferred words inserted and emphasised: 'Go to war'. All three pupils are jointly showing Jim how to perform a critical reading skill, 'elaborative inference' (Cain and Oakhill, 2004), making connections between the visual image, the whole text and general knowledge, including contextual information and understanding of genre.

The transcript illustrates research in Mathematics by Webb and Mastergeorge (2003) and Webb et al (2009) on how group talk develops higher-cognitive processes in less comprehending pupils, such as Jim, who must learn to ask precise, persistent questions, until these are satisfactorily addressed; and in 'help-givers', or pupils with stronger comprehension, who have to explain concepts, making knowledge explicit to others and thus reinforcing their own understanding.

The transcript also illustrates pupils practising higher-cognitive evaluative skills, which are triggered by Geraldine's initial judgement that the poster is 'sexist'. Robert disagrees, imputing Geraldine's belief to an inadequate knowledge of the historical context. He is keen to add to the group's collective knowledge, by pointing out that women had different roles and, by implication, cannot be blamed for not fighting themselves and urging the men to do so. Here, Robert is playing a critical role in developing the group's understanding of how to analyse a text, by applying external general knowledge, here, of the context. It is significant that Geraldine accepts both the general point about the importance of considering context and also Robert's argument that the text is not 'sexist', adding to the collective knowledge about women's role, from her personal experience, as a cadet.

For the rest of the transcript, the group explicitly uses context to inform their analysis, for example, debating whether the cartoon form of the posters is significant to meaning, or is merely because cameras were rare. However, Robert draws the group's attention to another criterion that might conflict with use of context, namely, knowledge about a text's function – in this case, to persuade (See Gee, 2008; Halliday, 2000). When Geraldine practises applying her understanding of context, arguing that the poster is unrealistic because the soldiers would not be marching through towns: 'they'd be in No Man's land', Robert replies, 'yes, but it's a poster, it's not [...]



true'. This is a subtle point: texts are not mirrors of 'reality', but are constructed cultural products, representing particular views of reality (Dollimore and Sinfield, 1994).

Interestingly, in lines 18-19, Jim also tries to explain to the group his new understanding about persuasive texts: they can be exploitative in their manipulation of the viewer, yet effective, in terms of their function. He says with revulsion, having stared at the text for some time: 'that's horrible' and adds 'but I think it's good because [...] it's targeting other people, not just the people that are going to be going to war. It's targeting their wives and girlfriends.' Jane's comment 'And children' shows that she, too, is aware of the manipulative element of the text and the ensuing conversation is particularly revealing of the pupils' sudden recognition of the central technique used in this text. Significantly, at this moment, two of the pupils stop using the analytical register of their earlier talk and, adopt the first and second-person to dramatise the conversation implied by the poster:

- |                |   |
|----------------|---|
| 21. Geraldine: | And that they look kind of worried, like <i>Go</i> ( <i>refers to women's expressions</i> ) |
| 22. Jane:      | If you don't go, I won't like you anymore   |
| 23. Jim:       | Yeah  |
| 24. Robert:    | Yeah, if you don't go, we're getting a divorce  |

The pupils' use of empathy here seems to enable them to grasp the nub of the text, as is shown by the fast-paced lines that follow (26-30), where pupils revert to the third-person to tease out, jointly, the underlying 'message' of the poster: wives will not respect their husbands unless they prove their masculinity as soldiers.

What is fascinating about this extract is the way that the pupils simultaneously present the overt meaning of the text, signalled by phrases such as 'It's saying that...' and expose the contradictions inherent in propaganda texts, which the detached reader, applying general knowledge, can identify: 'the men are getting encouragement from their wives [to go to war], even though they probably won't see them again, but they don't know that'; and the men are only 'liked' 'because...they're going to go to war and be all patriotic'. It is notable how much each pupil builds

on the previous speaker's point, culminating in the fast-paced summary from Jane, who makes the poster's nationalistic and patriarchal ideology explicit.

This extract reveals how group talk can be used to enable pupils to move from a 'reader-response' (Rosenblatt, 1978) to a more critical reading position (see McDonald, 2004). Pupils start with personal, empathetic responses, triggering engagement and basic comprehension, but their peers' alternative perspectives broaden the discussion, requiring the group to adopt a more sophisticated analytical lens, including context and genre, to investigate the ideological basis of the text.

Moreover, I would argue that the transcript not only shows that group talk is useful for developing critical literacy, but also the converse: critical reading of texts helps to develop exploratory talk. That is, asking four pupils to pool their knowledge of a subject, while interrogating another text/s is likely to stimulate rich talk. This is because the task requires pupils to discuss personal, alternative readings and also, crucially, to draw on the context of all the other texts and conversations they have experienced on the topic, that is, to practise analytical, then synthetic and evaluative skills, or to practise Bakhtinian intertextuality. This means pupils presenting their voices as part of an intertextual web of competing 'voices' or texts, written and spoken, past and present, and evaluating these different meanings. A critical literacy group approach, thus, makes explicit to pupils what is involved in the process of reading: critically applying a range of contexts, texts and forms of general knowledge from outside the text, including the views of other readers, in order to make sense of the disparate elements of the text itself. While a degree of coherence is sought in the reading, critical literacy also implies distance, not absorption, accepting some textual gaps and contradictions, rather than seeking a unified, organic reading (see Eagleton, 1996).

The full transcript shows pupils practising a sophisticated range of analytical and exploratory skills. It is notable for the relative equality of the discourse and the way in which meaning is negotiated using textual evidence, reasoned counter-arguments; and questions for clarification or to elicit elaboration. The talk was also marked throughout by excitement, as the group arrived at fresh understandings, culminating in Jim saying: 'Well done, team'. The teacher hovered at a

distance, listening twice during the talk; she only spoke once to suggest that pupils might like to move to another poster, to cover all four. The pupils took her suggestion and immediately continued their analysis independently, without glancing back at her.

The talk was also linked with a high level of metadiscoursal reflection, autonomy and sense of collective identity. Thus the group Observer's feedback included:

*Well I thought you [...] started the conversation well and you gave lots of reasons [...] but I thought that you could maybe ask a few more questions [...] and you all spoke fully and you disagreed and gave your reasons for why you disagreed.*

When Geraldine said: 'Do you have any targets for us? No?' the Observer replied, 'We have to all agree the targets, don't we?' This illustrated one of most obvious aspects of this group, which was the extent to which they identified themselves as a 'team'. An extended discussion followed, in which the group agreed that their key targets were: 'Challenge other people's ideas and don't interrupt'. Geraldine, who spoke a little more than the others, as she reflects on the last line of the transcript, spontaneously set herself an additional personal target: 'OK, I think I should stop interrupting and stop taking control, but I'm the chairperson?' Jane, reinforcing the idea of collective responsibility through the use of her change of direction, mid-utterance, added, 'Yeah, I think you should try, well, everyone should kind of try and see if they can speak equally.'

This lesson contrasts with one in which, although pupils were analysing a set of texts - this time, modern advertisements - the talk was more superficial. Anna concluded that because the lesson was isolated, the pupils simply did not have sufficient knowledge of how advertisements work, in relation to target-audience and overall 'image' to explore connotations in any depth. Peter gave a similar evaluation of one of his early lessons on CCTV. Although the stimulus for discussion appeared rich - an imagined letter from the Head teacher announcing that CCTV cameras in classrooms would be piloted to allow parents to monitor children's progress - the pupils did not know enough about the subject to be able to engage with it. This remained an isolated text, not one in which the kind of intertextuality seen above could be practised.

The transcript below illustrates how exposing students to a range of texts (literary, factual and multi-modal) and then asking them to practise intertextuality, synthesising understanding, while

maintaining critical distance, supports particularly rich, exploratory talk. Of course, the extract, taken from the second half of the project, also illustrates the extent to which students have by now internalised ground-rules, developing their skills (questioning, using reasoning and participating more equally). The task was to evaluate the five strongest arguments a soldier could use to dissuade his sister from becoming an army nurse, drawing on all previous study, as preparation for a formal, writing assessment (a persuasive letter). The extract follows initial discussion, in which Havi, the EAL pupil who was silent in early tapes, spoke less than the others:

**Transcript 7.2 Maisie, Rhian, Havi and Robert**

1. Maisie: What do you think, Havi?
2. Rhian: Yes (*turning to him and smiling, encouragingly*) have you got any ideas?
3. Havi: Well, um you know um after the war when people um when people have come home, they get these visions and stuff? well, they might get that
4. Rhian: Oh right, yes
5. Maisie: What's that?
6. Rhian: Well, you know as I was saying about how it would haunt you, like how you'd still see, even after the war is finished, you'd still have all the pictures of the dead bodies in your head of the war?
7. Robert: Yes, because that would never go away from you if you do get that
8. Rhian: Yes, like even
9. Maisie: And we should get the brother, when we are doing this sort of play-thing, we should get the brother to actually tell her about shell-shock that you'll see these people dying over and over again and re-live what happens (.) and you'll go completely mad
10. Robert: What is shell shock?
11. Maisie: It's when like the bombs go off and at first, you can't see or hear anything and then you get images from your past life and then you're in the middle of a battle and then you're hallucinating and you think you're in actually in that time again
12. Robert: Oh, yes

Here, Havi is sensitively drawn into the discussion, initiating a fresh point about psychological trauma, which other pupils develop. Significantly, Maisie provides the term 'shell shock' and all clarify their understanding, with Robert explicitly requesting a fuller definition. Maisie also uses peers to cement understanding: below, she applies the understanding about propaganda gained from the earlier poster-analysis lesson, eliciting key vocabulary from them:

Maisie:	And you could tell her ( <i>the soldier's sister</i> ) how fake the um (.) what's that thing with the posters called again?
All:	PROPAGANDA
Robert:	Yes, not to believe in propaganda

The next extract shows pupils skilfully practising intertextuality, transforming texts previously studied (Owen's 'Dulce et Decorum Est', 1994) and factual texts into their own original text.

Whereas the previous task focused on using reasoning and evaluating sources of knowledge, this one emphasises language: pupils must practise the persuasive register, by creating an illustrative anecdote to use in the soldier's letter.

### Transcript 7.3 Maisie, Rhian, Havi and Robert

1. Robert: I think I also think the um *mustard* gas because that's *horrible*
2. Maisie: Yes, shall we do a full description of how the mustard gas processes?  
(*nervous laughter*)
3. Rhian: And it could be like you could say, Oh like my friend, you remember *him*
4. Maisie: Jim?
5. Rhian: Yes, you remember him from high school? Well the mustard gas got him and he got rotted from the inside to the out
6. Maisie: Oh, could we say (*pace quickening*) we were in one of the trenches and a bomb got set off and we didn't know what it was, I put on my mask quick, but my friend was too late, the gas had already got into him
7. All: *Yeah*
8. Robert: And you could say that because you know it takes four weeks to actually kill them?
9. Rhian: Yes, you could say it was the *hardest* four weeks ever of my life
10. Maisie: I had to *watch* my friend *suffer* and die and I couldn't do *anything*
11. Rhian: I had to watch my friend rot from the inside to the out
12. Havi: *urgh [...]*
13. Robert: And like *you* would you would have to be the *one* dealing with it, *watching* this guy *rot* and *die* and like *pleading* for your help but not doing *anything* and that would be horrible *guilt*
14. Robert: Yes not being *able* to do anything about it
15. Maisie: And you can't even shoot them, you could say, I couldn't even end his life there because then I would have been shot
16. Robert: You could say like no matter how many *times* he asked me to kill him, You couldn't *imagine* how many times he asked to die
17. All: Hhhmmm (*expression of shock*)

Pupils construct their narrative in a sophisticated and highly collaborative way, each extending and embellishing earlier points, using descriptive detail or other linguistic effects. Thus, Robert suggests witnessing a death from mustard gas and Maisie extends this, by adding a scientific

register 'a full description of the process of the mustard gas'. This indicates subtle understanding of the emotional effect of using precise, medical language to describe a friend's death. Robert later develops this point, using detail to emphasise the length of suffering - 'four weeks'. Rhian next introduces the power of using the personal and the mundane, combined with direct address, to evoke pity, slipping into role to model the language of the letter: 'Oh...my friend, you remember him...from high school?' And Maisie consolidates this, humanising this invented character further by naming him: 'Jim?'

All pupils echo Owen's (1994) language and the central theme of the impotent, guilty spectator, which they cleverly transfer to the nurse, culminating in Robert's summary: '*you* would have to be the *one* dealing with it, *watching* this guy *rot* and *die* and *pleading* for your help, but not doing anything', 'horrible guilt'. This clearly evokes Owen's lines: 'If [...] you too could pace/Behind the wagon that we flung him in,/and watch the white eyes writhing'. The persuasive techniques the pupils have imitated from the poem and other texts draw on an understanding of grammar, semantics, phonology and pragmatics. For example, they include passionate second-person address; emotive lexis, including their original word 'rot' to present a graphic image of physical decay; use of the continuous present form (dealing, watching, pleading, doing) to create dramatic immediacy; and the development of a haunting rhythm, using repetition and the power of three, emphasised by the rhythm and prosodic features of their talk.

However, what is most significant is the collaborative and synthetic nature of the talk and anecdote: pupils creatively apply all the linguistic techniques and contextual knowledge of the war, gained from analysing a range of other texts. Thus, they weave a rich web of emotive words, echoing and adding to those of their peers: 'rotted from the inside to the out' 'hardest four weeks ever of my life', 'I had to watch', 'suffer', 'die', 'I couldn't do anything'. Indeed, although Havi does not add any ideas in the fast-paced extract above, he does, unconsciously contribute to the production of the text, assuming the role of audience and giving formative feedback, with his shocked reaction: '*urgh*'. This illustrates an important aspect of group talk, namely, that pupils can learn through listening to, and actively engaging with others' ideas, even if they do not all contribute in exactly equal proportions. For students, especially with EAL, who struggle to use formal discourses in writing, this exercise provides an excellent means of rehearsing them in speech, with scaffolding from peers (Datta, 2000). The full transcript also illustrates the process of

pupils jointly constructing meaning and synthesising ideas gradually, across the two, fifteen-minute group discussions. Thus, pupils' final choice of anecdote - impotently watching a friend die - combines their factual knowledge of war, expressed earlier in the talk, with their emotional understanding of its impact on soldiers and nurses, drawn from the literature studied.

## Chapter 8: Discussion

### 8.1 Teacher and pupil identities and relationships

The data show that pupils can develop their ability to use exploratory talk in groups, becoming more able to reason collaboratively, to challenge, defend and reach consensus on ideas, and to be more confident, by a pedagogy that explicitly inducts and guides them in using this discourse. This includes allowing the space in class for regular collaborative talk, providing discourse models for students to imitate and practise, setting cognitively challenging, structured tasks requiring interdependence, and, crucially, encouraging pupils to engage in meta-analysis of their talk.

However, the transformation in students' discourse is related to a more significant transformation occurring in their identities as pupils, which is paralleled by, and contingent upon, a similar shift in the range of teacher identities being performed. This is a key finding: the study suggests that pupil talk develops as a result of wider changes in the classroom, notably in teacher/pupil and pupil/pupil relationships, and in the ways that teachers and pupils act, perceive and continuously position themselves. Such changes occurred with both high- and low-attaining boys and girls, and with pupils of differing socio-economic status. Interviewed pupils from all groups were able to articulate these changes, always framing these in ways that exceeded developments in the skills of 'exploratory talk'. However, significantly, it was the lower-attaining pupils, especially boys, who conceived of the change in the most profound terms, as this final interview with Peter's class suggests:

#### Transcript 8.1.1. Chris, Tanya, Rose, Beth and Interviewer (Int.)

1. Chris: Well I think that it was Tanya who said that we've grown up a lot through group talk. Was it you who said that? *(looks at her questioningly)* and so we find it easier now [*Pupils next say they did not take talking in groups seriously at the start of the project, even initially, provocatively swearing into the tape recorders, but they changed their attitude and talk over time. They explain their reasons:*]
2. Tanya: You have experience from other people (.) because some people in the groups like act much more maturely so you get it from them how to act and talk.
3. Rose: In Year 7 we got treated a lot younger, but now we're more confident and in this group we've got treated more maturely and we've grown up
4. Int.: Has it improved your talking skills?



5. Rose: Yes, like more formal now and upfront
6. Int.: Can you develop that?
7. Rose: In Year 7 we'd just say 'Oh, yes, that was great'
8. Beth: Yes, we'd just say one thing
9. Rose: But now we can say, like introduce it
10. Chris: Go into *depth*
11. Rose: (*fast-paced, excited*) Yes, and go *right* into it, say how you feel, what you know and what you're struggling with, but in Year 7 you would just say one thing [...]
12. Beth: Yes, if you compared the first one (*points to the earliest on the list of group-talk tasks, across the project*) to the second (*later group talk*) someone might say 'oh it's great', whatever we're watching or reading, but in the second one they'd say, 'it's great *because* blah, blah, blah'
13. Rose: Yes, we can give our reasons now (*all nodding in agreement*) [...] you're expressing your opinions *against* and *around* the group.

Significantly, these students conceptualised what had happened to their talk during the project in terms of 'growing up' and learning from other 'mature' students performing different identities to theirs 'how to act and talk', that is, how to become the kind of person who uses or 'does' exploratory talk. Rose's choice of prepositions in the last line also, intriguingly, encapsulates dialogism, as being both responsive to the words of others and yet preserving the creative, heteroglossic clash of voices (Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973; Bakhtin, 1981). Students, thus, showed a sophisticated understanding of discourse, not as a set of linguistic tools, but as social practice, which was reinforced by Simon's comment (Anna's class): 'I think you get better just by doing stuff, you can't really watch like a video about how to be good at group talk, the only way you do get better is talking and *doing*'. Students have internalised the idea that forms of exploratory talk, like all discourses, are, in Gee's words (2008, p. 3), 'ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing, that are accepted as instantiations of particular identities'.

Before developing these ideas theoretically, several other related points need to be drawn from the transcript above. The first is that students linked their change in identity not only to the influence of their peers, but to their relationship with the teacher. Thus Rose uses the passive voice to show a partly causal relationship between pupils' former 'treatment' by teachers, their 'immature' identity and implied lack of confidence. She contrasts this with their current student identities: 'but now we're more confident and in *this* group we've got treated more maturely and

we've grown up' (line 3, emphasis added). Secondly, the way that the students describe changes in their talk is also highly significant. It is 'more formal', 'upfront', allows pupils to 'go into depth', 'give reasons' and elaborate on ideas: to 'go *right* into it, say how you *feel*, what you *know* and what you're *struggling* with' (line 11, emphasis added). For these pupils, 'formality' is not a superficial adherence to Standard English, but is associated with being empowered to articulate their knowledge and understanding fully. Indeed, the juxtaposition of 'formal' and 'upfront' evokes behaviour and identity, as much as language: of someone with the confidence and authority to assert their opinions in depth.

The final point to note is that Rose, in the italicised words (line 11 above), draws explicit links between the articulation of knowledge, of emotions and of difficulties with learning - 'what you're struggling with'. 'Training' in exploratory talk has been perceived by critics (Lambirth, 2006) as behaviourist, reinforcing deficit views of the language of disadvantaged groups. It purportedly attempts to impose an alien, 'authoritative' register no more effective than those such pupils already possess, but likely to silence them, damage their self-esteem and alienate them from school discourses. Interviews with pupils of low socioeconomic status and attainment in this study tell a different story. For Rose, practising 'inhabiting' this discourse in Bourdieu's (1977) sense, has enabled her to adopt a different identity, to relate learning to personal experience and to express what she does not understand. It has also enabled Rose, who did not like contributing to 'pressured' whole-class talk, in which 'everyone's just looking at you' to move from silence at the margins of the class to speech at the centre.

The movement from virtual silence or non-participation in public, whole-class talk to speaking confidently in the group context was made by the vast majority of Peter's 'low-attaining' class. It was, therefore, intriguing to note that over half expressed a 'preference' for whole-class talk at the start of the project, in questionnaires. Final interviews revealed the reason for this seeming contradiction: class talk enabled students to remain silent, opting out of a stressful activity, as Kate shows:

*I preferred big class um discussions when we first started because in bigger discussions you were h- you were with your friends and you could just sit in the corner and talk to your friends and you didn't really have to put your ideas forward (.) but in small groups you had to put your ideas forward and you didn't really know people, you weren't as confident, you were shy but [...] now (fast pace, excited tone) I prefer small groups*

*because I know people more and I am more confident and I put my ideas forward and I disagree and agree with people.*

Kate makes a fascinating distinction here between two types of talk in the classroom and two ways of positioning herself. In whole-class discussion, she is marginalised 'in a corner' and the kind of 'talk to your friends' that she engages with is casual and, she later agrees, often off-task. In terms developed by Said (1978), and refined by Butler (1990) and Davies (2006) in relation to gender, Kate has internalised the construction of herself as 'other/inferior' and as unable to contribute to the class, actively perpetuating this exclusion by her position on the margins. Kate contrasts this with the more formal, sophisticated talk expected in the small-group context, which she calls, significantly, 'put[ting] *your* ideas forward' (emphasis added) and which she links with empowerment and growing self-confidence. Kate's use of 'your' here suggests that, for her, as for Rose above, group talk is not about uttering abstract ideas, but is connected with being able to articulate personal views. But what is most significant is the way that Kate describes the change in her attitude towards group talk in terms of a change in her identity and position in the classroom. This shift is signalled by the switch from 'you' to the assertive and constantly repeated use of 'I', accompanied by a fast pace, triumphant tone and excitedly repeated conjunctions, listing all that Kate can now do. Kate, like Rose, has moved from silence at the margins to construct herself as the sort of person that 'knows people more' and has the confidence not just to speak, but to challenge others' opinions.

The more dominant boys in Peter's class, for example, Chris above, made a similar shift in the identities they enacted in class. They started the intervention by performing a version of 'hegemonic masculinity', including typical features noted by other studies (see Mac an Ghaill, 1994; Paetcher, 1998; Epstein, 1999; Renold 2004). These included, to varying degrees, refusing to collaborate with peers, shouting over others, making aggressive, combative comments and attempting to subvert the discourse model (class 'rules'), by swearing into the tape recorders, distracting other groups, or wandering away from their group. Indeed, this identity defines itself against 'feminised' behaviours, including collaborating with others, appearing to value learning and working hard: significantly, very few of the boys claimed to value group talk at the start of the project, echoing findings by Boaler (1997) in Mathematics and Leonard et al (2005) in literacy lessons in primary school on attitudes to collaborative work by 'low-attaining' boys of low socioeconomic status.

However, by the end of the project, the boys in Peter's and Susan's classes described their different identity as 'growing up' and attributed it to watching how others, specifically girls in their groups, 'acted' and 'talked'. They said that this new 'mature' identity included being able to collaborate; listening to others; feeling more confident, being able to explore ideas in depth; being more independent of the teacher; and surprising themselves, by finding that they were good at certain roles, for example, the Chair. This confirms work by Paetcher (1998), Renold (2004) and Frosch et al (2002, p. 262), on the pressure experienced by boys, especially from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to conform to 'narrowly constructed masculinities,' emphasising individualism and competitiveness, and the imperative for schools to offer them a wider range of positions and discourses: 'many boys wish for something different, broad enough to allow for greater intimacy with, and tolerance of, others.'

The students' reflections on their talk above also imply a sociocultural and 'situated' model of learning, in which pupils are inducted into the discourses of the community of English specialists (critical readers/writers; exploratory speakers), enabling them to become 'legitimate peripheral participants' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p. 29; Lave, 1996). Such induction is undertaken by both teacher and peers, who arrive at school already differentially apprenticed in this practice (Heath, 1981) and can therefore provide crucial models and scaffolding for mutual development in the discourse (Rogoff, 1990). Lave and Wenger (1991, pp. 35-6) usefully describe guidance into new social practices as being about 'ways of belonging': 'Peripheral participation is about being located in the social world. Changing locations and perspectives are part of actors' learning trajectories, developing identities and forms of membership'. Pupils can only acquire another discourse, by inhabiting the identity associated with this, that is, by becoming the sort of person that uses this kind of talk for collaborative reasoning.

Critics of 'training' in exploratory talk tend to assume a concept of identity as fixed, being achieved prior to language and outside of the social. The opposite, poststructuralist view accepts that our identity is constructed by our culture and its various discourses, as well as by ourselves (see Davies and Harré, 2001). This, of course, problematises, the Bakhtinian notion, championed by many English teachers (see Britton, 1992) of classroom interactions enabling pupils to 'find'

their voice. It makes more sense to see the English classroom as a place where students are able to engage with new ways of speaking and being (multiple voices), provided that the primary discourses they bring with them are also explicitly valued. The high level of pupils' analysis of their talk in this study suggests that the classroom should also be a place where students are required to 'go meta'. That is, they should practise reflexive talk about talk, raising to a level of critical awareness the power of dialogue to enact a range of meanings, identities and relationships between participants. Davies (1997), Gee (2008) and Gee and Lankshear (1995, p. 17) see this meta-awareness as a crucial part of critical literacy, enabling students to identify the 'inherent limits to critique and transformation within any and all Discourses'. The latter describe the 'enchantment' of language and its power to ensnare the speaker/listener if such critical distance is not developed.

The idea that developing exploratory talk implies paying greater attention to the range of identities that teachers, as well as pupils, perform in the classroom, can be linked to extensive work on identity and formative assessment by Torrance and Pryor (1998, 2001) and Pryor and Crossouard (2005, 2010). Pryor and Crossouard (2005, p. 6) argue that effective formative assessment, which is based on rich, dialogic talk, is a 'site where both teacher and student identities are constructed and performed' because it requires teachers to move between four distinct identities: of teacher, assessor, subject expert and learner. Students are, therefore, also required to adopt different subject positions in response to these shifting teacher roles and accompanying fluctuations in the power relationship, which are, of course, mediated by language. Using a poststructuralist framework, Pryor and Crossouard (2005, p. 7) argue that, inevitably in formative assessment, the teacher, as 'narrator' 'teaches different definitions of themselves [...] and develops different relations with the students' through these. They also contend that teachers must make these discursive shifts in identity position explicit, drawing on Bernstein's (1996) theorisation that students' failure to understand pedagogic discourse (its recognition and realisation rules) contributes to poor school performance. Teachers must, to borrow a Bakhtinian phrase, put their language, discursive practices and different identities in quotation marks, enabling pupils to develop a 'critical awareness both of the discourses of the educational setting, and also of the wider social construction of these discourses' (Pryor and Crossouard, 2005, p. 7). Crucially, this will also support students in 'the renegotiation of power relations' (ibid, p. 8-9) that moving between such fluid identity positions entails.

Drawing on the above framework, it was clear that Anna and Peter were highly conscious both of their teacher identity, its fluctuations and their changing relationships with pupils; and of the ways in which these were mediated by language. In Anna's case, she noted changes occurring both within and outside of the research context. Thus Anna spoke of becoming more 'tentative' in her language across classes that were not part of the research. (This was also noted by Torrance and Pryor, 2001, with teachers developing formative assessment through dialogic talk.) More significantly, Anna described this gradual process in terms of epiphanies - of almost catching herself out in whole-class talk, by noticing, mid-sentence, that her language and behaviour had changed, becoming 'less authoritative', more open-ended and 'uncertain' in a given lesson. Anna was clearly engaging with fairly constant meta-analysis of, and critical reflection on, her entire discourse and identity, recognising that exploratory talk comprised more than simply 'training' pupils in a set of skills, as early experimental studies of co-operative and collaborative talk implied (see, for example, Slavin, 1995).

The progressive change in Anna's style of discourse modelling neatly encapsulates this shift in Anna's performance of her identity. Across the intervention, Anna moved towards a genuinely dialogic and more equal form of discourse in many parts of each lesson, notably in introducing and monitoring group talk, but also often in whole-class talk. This was not an easy shift to make, as Anna indicated when she described herself as feeling almost 'guilty' and 'redundant' when she realised that pupils were talking independently and her role was simply to monitor (See, too, Ellen's similar feelings at the end of Appendix 3). However, this role was interspersed by other times when Anna assumed a more obviously authoritative identity, for example, in preparing students for a test, by outlining the assessment criteria and expectations of pupils' writing.

Peter also adopted different identities according to the requirements of context and, interestingly, both teachers in their first interview explored the problems with this. Anna said that once teachers had been 'explicit' about expectations, had scaffolded the talk and task, they needed to give the pupils 'space' and to 'stand back from [...] being in control'. Peter agreed, but they both then articulated the difficulty for pupils of adjusting their view of the teacher, which would, inevitably, change across lessons:

- Peter: that whole thing about them appreciating that they can learn as much from (.) others as they can from you as a teacher [...] I think that's a difficult concept for some of them to (.) understand because you are the teacher*
- Anna: especially as you might expect that role to be reinstated in another lesson when you're doing something else*

## 8.2 Pupils' meta-awareness and identity

Students in the post-group talk reflections and in interview show an acute meta-understanding of the quality of their talk, their social interaction and of aspects of collaborative talk that help them to learn (for example, precisely phrased questions). As the previous chapter has illustrated, students are also prepared to be frank with each other about individual, as well as group, weaknesses. All interviewed pupils at the end of this study referred to the emotional security and confidence they felt in this context, as opposed to whole-class talk, challenging earlier findings by, for example, Galton and Williamson (1992) that group work can threaten pupils' psychological safety. The fact that pupils displayed metacognitive awareness of particular strategies performed by other pupils that supported their learning reinforces Webb and Mastergeorge's (2003; 2009) findings: students must practise these precise 'helping', 'asking' and 'explaining' strategies, in order for peer scaffolding to be effective in group talk.

Pupils' meta-awareness was not simply shown in the official spaces in which the teacher asked groups to reflect on their talk, but appeared spontaneously throughout the project. This suggested that pupils were developing their metadiscoursal skills and that they were learning to value the process of reflecting collectively on the development of their overall identities. The most interesting example of this is in the final interview cited above (pp. 134-5) with a group of Peter's 'low-attaining' pupils that included Chris, a dominant, competitive pupil, whom other pupils had cited as tending to spoil whole-class talk, by shouting over others. As the group entered the interview room, they were clearly continuing an animated discussion about the project started in the corridor. While I was struggling to set up my audio equipment, Chris ran up and said, triumphantly: 'Miss, you know, we grew up through group talk' and the others joined in, developing ideas about their greater, collective 'maturity' now. I had not asked any questions and was clearly a bit distracted by the non-functioning technology.

This critical moment needs to be analysed (see Transcript 8.1.1, pp. 134-5). What was most striking was the group's excited awareness of having reached a fresh understanding of the entire project, which none of us had articulated before, and of passionately wanting to communicate this. The group had been using exploratory talk independently in the corridor to tease out what, exactly, had happened during the project and why. What they concluded was that their talk had developed mainly as a result of changes in their overall attitudes and values, that is, in their identities. They had arrived at a profound understanding of talk as 'discourse'.

However, a second point needs emphasising: the group interview itself, in which I said relatively little, demonstrated pupils enacting the very identities that they, themselves, recognised as being so significant. Thus, Chris, while initially acting as spokesperson, generously attributed originality of thought to Tanya ('I think that it was Tanya who said that we've grown up a lot through group talk') and continued to develop her ideas, which were then taken up by other group members. This challenged the identity that Chris had often assumed in whole-class talk of calling out, and 'playing to the crowd', behaviours that other pupils specifically identified as preventing their contributions. Clearly, the responsive, collaborative nature of group talk meant that Chris no longer felt the need to display the competitive behaviour triggered by the whole-class forum. Chris was, arguably, freed here from the model of hegemonic masculinity that he had, until now, internalised from a range of contexts, including school. This freedom is partly achieved by Chris's ability to reflect explicitly on his changing identity and on the behaviours and language associated with this: that is, on his ability to 'go meta'.

Interestingly, higher-attaining boys in Anna's class did not recognise the same, gendered issues in their reflections on their own group talk, since dominance was often an aspect of some girls' behaviour. However, one more dominant boy, Simon, echoed the above argument about class talk across the curriculum being highly competitive, provoking such behaviour in boys, whereas group talk would mitigate this tendency (cited earlier, p. 118).

Significantly, it was pupils in Susan's class, who were of a wider range of abilities than Anna's and included boys from lower socio-economic groups, who identified gender as significant to group talk and who demonstrably benefited from regular critical reflection. In the first interview



(and whole-class questionnaire), nearly all the boys said they valued class, rather than group talk, revealing an individualistic attitude to work:

*Luke: I like working on my own most of the time.*

*Int: Do you, why is that?*

*Luke: I don't really know, I just like to know that **I've** done that, instead of like **those people** have done that.*

Before the project, both sexes thought that the girls were more likely to co-operate in groups, to stay on task and to do more 'work', although one boy clarified this, suggesting that they had experienced particularly unequal forms of gendered group talk, until now (Swann, 1992): 'it does depend because in groups the boys will do more talking but then the girls would do more writing' (Callum). Asked to explain the differences in contributions to group talk, both sexes attributed this to attitude, with girls saying that the boys were 'being lazy', leaving them to do the work. The boys said:

*Tim: Because girls are more eager to do things [...] when you get set up on a group task they're the ones that always want to do it properly [...] boys, we get it done but we don't (1)*

*Joe: Not straight away*

Indeed, boys interviewed claimed to be less conscientious in their attitude to all subjects, except 'PE and more active things' and less willing to co-operate in groups:

*Girls are more like work proud [...] they're like proud of what they've done [...] if the teacher says, OK, who wants to read theirs out? then the girls in your group will be like putting their hands up and we don't really want to read ours out, so I just think they're more work-proud (Tim)*

However, at the end of the project, boys (and girls) interviewed spoke of the value of group talk and, as with Peter's class above, they associated it with more positive attitudes to work, greater autonomy and with productive learning:

### Transcript 8.2.1

- Tim: People care more about their work because like before we started doing group work, if Mrs Ross had left the room for [...] ten minutes, I think our whole class would have messed around and totally gone off task, but now I think there would only be a couple of people who haven't really benefited and would go off task. [... *Tim is asked to elaborate.*]
- Tim: Because like we can see that we do it on our own and people get like proud of the talk, of their piece of work when they work really hard.
- Int.: Is it the group talk that has helped to instil this sense of pride and motivation?
- Tim: Yes because people see that people have done that *great* piece of work, *just* the four of them and *not* the teacher

Tim has, here, identified an essential shift in attitude that appears to have taken place in this class, from 'performance' to 'mastery' goals (Ames, 1992). This was confirmed by Helen, who said:

*At first we just thought oh well, she [the teacher] said this, and if we do this [the group talk], we can be finished and done, whereas now we're thinking 'well, we're actually running out of time because we've got a lot to say about it because we're more interested in it'.*

Intriguingly, this class also said that these shifts in attitude and behaviour caused by practising group talk were noticeable in other phases of the lesson: that is, their entire identity as learners appeared to have developed:

*I think Tim's point showed really well the other day because we were reading Billie Elliot and Miss walked out of the class for about three or four minutes and the whole class just remained in silence reading the book but if that had been about three or four months ago, everybody would have just started messing around. (Jay)*

Cheryl disputed this and said that it was only in the 'group talk' phases of the lesson that pupils would continue to be mature, independent and on task in the absence of the teacher. This, in itself, is interesting, as it implies that some pupils are placing a different value on these parts of the lesson, being motivated by collective responsibility not by extrinsic factors and, maybe, moving towards a 'mastery' goals orientation.

Susan's class were more volatile in their performance of group talk than both other classes, based on transcript and observational evidence. Therefore, although it is true to say that, at the start, and during the first half of the project, the boys were more dominant, individualistic and off-task in group talk, some girls also found it hard to concentrate or extend their talk for any length of time. Indeed, these girls did not, noticeably, play the part that the boys claimed they 'typically' would in this context: of working hard and sustaining the talk. Several girls reinforced the boys' points about liking competition in lessons and disliking group talk in early interviews, and appeared to enact some of the behaviours associated with hegemonic masculinity during group talk (see Jackson, 2006 on 'laddettes'). Therefore, the gains in collaboration, focus, and ability to sustain developed exploratory talk are highly notable for these particular girls, some of whom came from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as the boys. This suggests the need for further research relating identity, attitudes to learning and ability to develop collaborative behaviours through talk with girls from this background.

Significantly, boys and girls in Susan's class developed a high level of critical reflection and meta-discoursal understanding, both after the group-talk sessions and in final interview. Thus, they reinforced Peter's pupils' ideas about peers developing their engagement and independence in learning:

*Other people in my group helped me to keep on task as well because like if you're not concentrating or something, instead of the teacher telling you off, now I think more people were saying to you like 'Oh, well, **we're** doing this so **you** need to give an opinion (Luke).*

Susan's pupils also showed a sophisticated understanding of the nature and complexity of exploratory talk. Asked if they had learnt anything over the project, Tim spontaneously replied:

*Answering questions with questions because like before if somebody had said something, I would just have given a blunt answer [...] but now I'd say 'but what about? Or maybe this'*

He later reflected that being able to develop complex ideas in talk also made the discussion harder to manage:

*Because people answer questions with questions then that leads onto something else and that will lead on to something else and sometimes that can take you off task, but once you get like used to it, you can keep on task.*

Cheryl also reinforced the idea that pupils were able to see greater complexity in texts, as a result of exploring these collaboratively:

*I think we sort of look into it more now and that's why we stay on task because rather than just looking at it and thinking 'oh yes, that's a poem, that's obviously this', we look into it and we think, 'Oh, could that word mean something else?' So we kind of like look into the words a bit more so it makes you stay on task more because you have more things to talk about.*

### 8.3 Dialogic talk and empowerment

I have noted above the extent to which pupils in all the classes associated collaborative, exploratory talk with developing different identities. For lower-attaining and pupils of lower socio-economic status, this meant assuming a more confident persona, both feeling, and crucially, developing the ability to articulate and defend personal opinions, by practising the discourse in a community of more and less skilled practitioners, including the teacher. For the 'dominant' boys (and some girls) in this category, the movement was towards valuing and inhabiting a more co-operative and collaborative identity and style of learning. For Anna's higher-attaining pupils, regardless of gender, there was a similar trajectory, with pupils moving in opposite directions, in terms of 'independence and self-awareness', as she explains:

*I've definitely seen progress across the whole class [...] the kids who previously were more dominant have become really self-aware and aware of their impact on other people when they are in a group-talk situation so I think that's been positive for them and on the other end of the scale, the quiet and under-confident children [...] feel that they can contribute and feel that they are expected to contribute*

Anna is, therefore, describing a model of talk in which all participants learn that they have rights, but also responsibilities (the group expectation either to be quieter or to speak up). She also explicitly links the meta-discoursal discussions to the idea of equity and empowerment for the more marginalised, unconfident group members:

*having the metacognitive discussions afterwards has given them and I'm thinking of like Jim and Martin and people like that, the opportunity to actually say, 'Well I didn't speak very much during that activity but the reason I didn't say very much was because I felt that **you** were dominating' and they get to have their say because obviously some children find it really hard to think that quickly in the group discussion but that they are able to have an opinion and express why [afterwards], that is really good for their confidence.*

This is a profound insight into the potential of 'dialogic talk' for the classroom. While such talk can never be totally equal, since all discourse is saturated with power, it can enable all pupils to enter this arena confidently and to 'have their say', as they have the meta-awareness and linguistic skills to identify how, precisely, such power is mediated through language, both in the classroom and, by extension, throughout society. Intriguingly, Anna commented that the 'loud, dominant pupils' had learnt, by contrast, that listening and remaining silent at times were key elements to effective collaborative talk:

*I don't think [able pupils] would have thought about the negative impact of talking because [...] they've actually said that [...] if you're doing the talking in a group, you're the good one [...] you're getting it right and now they sort of look at it in a more complex way, that sometimes you need to be quiet.*

This point was reinforced by some very honest self-reflections by Anna's pupils. Two of the most dominant girls, asked which skills they had improved in the project, said 'not dominating the group' and 'not being in charge – taking a back seat'. Simon added:

*I think I've become a bit less stubborn because I wouldn't like hear anybody else's point of view and I'd kind of change everyone's mind or sulk and now I can change my views and kind of see how they look at it [...] I still dominate quite a lot apparently (sighing and looking disappointed)*

Two other girls said the main results of the project were: 'People have become less stubborn' (Julie) and 'I think you understand other people's point of view more when they give reasons because you might not be able to understand what they're like getting at'. (Geraldine)

Given that, according to Bakhtin (1981) and Lacan (1977), we achieve consciousness and identity through our continuous interactions with the 'other', it is essential that pupils are given the opportunity to see the model of dialogic talk proposed above as a liberating site for mutual self-definition, not for being defined.

#### **8.4 Exploring the 'side-passages': tentative talk about text**

Transcripts suggested that the richest exploratory talk was often stimulated by textual analysis (literary, non-fiction and media: see pp. 62-3, 65, 73-6, 79-80, 104-5, 107, 126-7, 132-3 and Appendix 3). Among the reasons for this are that the pupils were asked to synthesise knowledge and understanding from other texts and to apply this to the text under study, in addition to exploring each other's readings of it. That is, they were asked to practise intertextuality and critical literacy. A pedestrian, but important point is that this process means that pupils have rich knowledge to draw on in their discussion. A further point, related to developing reading skills, is that this process requires pupils to practise higher-order thinking and talk, in the form of 'elaborative inference' (Oakhill et al, 2003): they must apply knowledge from outside of, and within, the text in order to infer meaning. But perhaps the more profound point is that group talk about text neatly encapsulates, and makes explicit to pupils, the reading process itself, which is premised on intertextuality: it is only by exploring and valuing a range of voices/texts and contexts, spoken and written, that readers can begin to arrive at an understanding of what the text 'means'. Therefore, underpinning these tasks was an explicit valuing of this plurality by teachers and pupils, as interviews with both confirmed: one of Anna's repeated refrains was for pupils 'to think of multiple answers' to texts since she was not the 'authority'; pupils echoed this idea. Therefore making the transition from authoritative teacher to 'learner', responding to pupils' ideas, was much easier for English teachers in text-based tasks, than in any other. Arguably, all English teachers have had to grapple with these ideas on an intellectual level since 2000, when literary theory was fully embedded in GCSE and A Level assessment criteria (see AQA, n.d.).

Interestingly, this type of talk tends to contain a significant proportion of tentative language and to be saturated with quotation from, or echoes of, the text. It interweaves four pupil voices with an additional 'voice/s' of the text/s, although quotations may not be voiced aloud, for example, when students silently re-read parts of the text during the group talk. Nystrand et al (1997) describe the

text almost becoming an additional speaker and this was well illustrated in the transcripts by pupils and, some of the teachers, for example, Anna, sometimes addressing the text, using the second person: 'Now, what do you mean?'

This form of analytical talk about texts looks rather different from other, cross-curricular varieties of exploratory talk cited in the literature (Mercer, 2000; Mercer and Littleton, 2007; Boaler, 2008). For example, it lacks the clear 'challenges' ('No, I disagree because...') often regarded as typifying such talk (Mercer, 2000). This results in talk with some of the characteristics of the less complex 'cumulative' collaborative talk (Barnes and Todd, 1995), as pupils are often building on each other's responses to the text. Indeed, pupils reflecting on this talk, often criticised it for its apparent lack of alternative viewpoints or obvious 'reasons', and so 'failure' to adhere to their ground-rules.

However, the prevalence of this kind of talk in the transcripts and its open-ended and speculative nature necessitates defining it as a specific form of exploratory talk occurring in English lessons: 'tentative talk about text'. Features of this talk, in addition to those cited above, are tentative language (modal verbs: 'could', 'might', 'may'; adverbs, such as, 'maybe' and 'perhaps'); inferential and evaluative statements/questions ('line 3 means...' or 'is effective because...'); and speculative language (I wonder if...). The latter feature, combined with its typically slow pace, led to the talk having the quality of pupils 'thinking aloud', a description used by Susan, when evaluating some of her pupils' transcripts. Another typical feature is that quotations or textual evidence often take the place of reasons, so a higher-order question, such as, 'why do you think that?' could elicit a quotation as a response, often with key words emphasised by tone or volume, with or without explanatory analysis.

What is striking about these examples is that their tentative nature generates an atmosphere of creative uncertainty: the talk becomes a space in which plural readings of, and inferences about, a text are offered by different pupils, often building on, and deepening each other's points, rather than challenging them, and culminating in a collaborative attempt to evaluate and synthesise these ideas. As Anna's pupils explain:

- Simon: Because you look at it [the text] and you find the obvious reason but then when you talk about it in depth you find more, not obvious reasons, like kind of side passages*
- May: Everyone has like a different opinion and you see different things that you wouldn't have seen before*

This type of talk appears to exemplify Bakhtin's (1981) 'heteroglossia' and enables pupils to be both 'critical' and 'creative' in their talk. Two tensions noted in the literature review appear to be partly resolved by this tentative talk about text. Firstly, students are practising moving beyond the stage of 'borrowing' the voices of others to developing their own voice, exploiting the potential of tentative forms of language to express a wide range of creative responses. Secondly, this talk is both personal and yet also critical, since different voices inevitably represent alternative reading positions, triggering a more detached and plural view of texts. That is, the talk enables pupils to start to make the transition from the model of reading implied by reception theory (Iser, 1978) or 'reader-response' (Rosenblatt, 1978) to more critical readings of texts (McDonald, 2004, Gee, 2008). Pupils repeatedly spoke of the process of group talk altering and deepening their views of texts, whether written, visual or multi-modal:

*because you realise that there's more to the actual whatever they're showing you, like a picture or something, there's more to it and you can explain yourself more if you look at it really carefully and then you hear other people's ideas and then you can put them together with your ideas or you can change your ideas to a completely different one because maybe both of them together have changed your idea (Rhian)*

*I think you look at it [the text] at a different angle if you talk about it because you see other people's points of view and you can explore it more (May)*

This leads to two conclusions: firstly, that the nature of exploratory talk required by a curriculum subject such as English, particularly in relation to the critical reading of texts, may be different in quality to that demanded by other subjects. Therefore, it follows that students need to be inducted into practising exploratory talk within this specific context, rather than being introduced to a generic set of interactive, linguistic and cognitive skills in the form of some 'thinking skills' programmes. They need to learn how to inhabit or 'do' the discourse of critical analysis, that is, to practise critical literacy. Secondly, instead of teachers seeing reading-analysis skills as in some way separate from group-talk skills, they need to see them as interdependent: group talk is the vehicle for deepening reading comprehension, by enabling pupils to combine criticality with



creative, personal responses. That is, it enables teachers to reconcile what can be perceived as opposing views of the function of English: either as developing the personal voice and 'self' or critical literacy (see MacLure, 1994; Marshall, 2000).

The study also provides some evidence that this symbiotic relationship between critical reading and group talk enabled pupils not only to develop their oral, critical reading skills as a group, but also to internalise these, individually, demonstrating them in a range of contexts, including writing. This mirrors Mercer's (2004) findings that individual, as well as collective, reasoning is enhanced by group talk and Galton et al's SPRinG findings (2009) that it improves pupils' writing. All four teachers noted this development, as Anna articulated:

*[Pupils] have definitely developed their skills of analysis [...] in the talk but I've also noticed that they are thinking [...] in that deconstructive way [...] constantly asking, why has the writer used that word? What's the effect of that? so it's definitely internalised those questions*

Of a formal, written assessment, based on the World War I unit, Anna said that the class had not only 'all improved on their previous [National Curriculum] level' but that their writing was

*much more diverse and rich [...] which I think is because they were discussing lots of different angles so it opened up their mind to what they could include in this quite directed piece of writing.*

Collaborative talk had, therefore, enabled students to develop a particular way of reading texts that is synonymous with 'critical literacy' (see Gee, 2008). It could be theorised that the students were practising the dynamic process of reading described by Iser (reception theory, 1974, 1978), with its roots in hermeneutics, and by Rosenblatt (1978) in 'reader response'. That is, students as active readers were individually and collaboratively using inference, filling in gaps and 'concretising' the literary work, constantly revising their personal and collective interpretation to shape the text's meaning into a consistent whole.

However, I would theorise the students' collaborative reading as also moving beyond this, incorporating a critical engagement with the many contexts, values and assumptions of the text's

production, reception and interpretation, aspects that are missing from the work of Iser (1978) and Rosenblatt (1978). This 'critical literacy' draws heavily on Freire's (1970) notion of emancipatory literacy, involving an ability to uncover the ideological basis of texts and of different readings, including those of the pupils themselves:

Reading the world always precedes reading the word, and reading the word implies continually reading the world (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 35).

Developing critical literacy can only be achieved by asking students to see texts in relation to their historical, social and political contexts, and, of course, in relation to other texts, that is, to practise Bakhtinian intertextuality. Far from encouraging unified readings of texts, critical literacy triggers disrupted readings, which do not seek to fill in or resolve gaps, tensions and contradictions, but to expose these, in order to challenge the hegemonic or 'commonsensical' versions of reality constructed by the texts. It is this aspect that makes critical literacy a more sophisticated and complex form of reading than that implied by reception theory (Iser, 1978) and 'reader response' (Rosenblatt, 1978).

## Chapter 9: Conclusion

A key aim of participatory action research is to generate both practical social action and knowledge. This project achieved both.

### 9.1 Action

Action research seeks for participants to be empowered, developing their criticality to enable them to effect change independently. It is significant that all four teachers have subsequently developed the oral curriculum in their schools. Peter and Anna have introduced a compulsory unit on collaborative talk into the English Year 7 and 8 curriculum at Seaview School, using our model, with rich forms of self-assessment. Both teachers felt nervous about convincing colleagues of the value of formalising collaborative talk, but feedback has been 'very positive', with some teachers spontaneously extending the practice to GCSE classes. Ellen is currently leading an initiative to enable teachers across the curriculum to assess pupils' collaborative, and other, forms of talk, using the new APP speaking and listening framework (DCSF, 2010b). Susan has also consistently disseminated the model and underpinning ideas to her Department; she has become increasingly interested in the relationship between research and practice and has started a doctorate.

### 9.2 Knowledge

My first claim to knowledge in this small-scale study is that an apprenticeship model inducting pupils in how to use exploratory, dialogic talk in English lessons, using ground-rules, regular practice, teacher and pupil modelling of discourse strategies and reflection on talk, can be effective in enabling pupils to develop this discourse and associated higher-cognitive processes, especially in relation to reading texts.

My second claim to knowledge is that the transformation in students' discourse depends on a more significant transformation in their identities, which is contingent on a similar shift in the range of teacher identities being performed. Practising collaborative, exploratory talk makes available a wider range of identities, especially for unconfident, low-achieving and/or pupils of low

socio-economic status, which enables them to gain a 'voice' in school, precluded by the discourses and identities generally adopted. That is, it enables pupils to move from silence at the margins to speech at the centre. Teachers need to appreciate the extent to which discourse exceeds language structures and is related to both the relationships and teacher/pupil identities generated in the classroom. However, in reconceptualising such identities, teachers need to accept apparent contradictions in their role and be prepared to move along a continuum in lessons, from 'assessor' to 'teacher/modeller' and 'learner' (Pryor and Crossouard, 2005), varying their discourse and level of scaffolding accordingly and, crucially, being explicit about these shifts.

This finding is important as it deconstructs a binary apparent in the literature between collaborative talk that effects only social/attitudinal changes and more technical forms targeting pupil achievement and reasoning (see Kulik and Kulik, 1992). In order to do both, teachers must resolve the recognised tension in sociocultural pedagogy between scaffolding linguistic structures and ways of thinking, and giving pupils the space to experiment with these on their own. This is not an easy resolution. It demands combining valuing pupils' current voices and identities with recognising the ethical imperative to extend their repertoire.

The study has, therefore, significantly developed innovative work in this field by, for example, Barnes and Todd (1995), Britton (1992) and Dixon (1975), which sought to empower pupils by developing their 'personal voice'. The thesis has reconceptualised this notion, by giving students access to multiple discourses or 'voices', which is critical to enabling them equal opportunity to learn, both in English and across the curriculum (see Gee, 2003). Bakhtin (1986, p. 80) neatly reinforces this argument: 'The better our command of genres, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them [...] the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan.' Students should experience what it looks, sounds and, most importantly, feels like to engage in collaborative, reasoned talk, and be motivated to inhabit this potentially alien role. The study suggests that, while pupils from a range of backgrounds succeeded in this, it was students, in particular boys, of lower socioeconomic status, who experienced the greatest change in attitude to this different identity.

Teachers must also eschew a crude 'toolkit' approach to discourse, assuming, for example, that if they introduce a 'model' for group talk or refine their higher-order questioning skills, this will automatically trigger higher-cognitive or exploratory talk in pupils (see Swann's 1992, pp. 79-80, critique of the original NC for its simplistic view of communication as 'an additive model of competence', and also MacLure, 1994). Establishing dialogic talk in the group-phase of a lesson requires teachers to reflect on how they talk, act and perceive the students in all phases. In particular, they need to find opportunities, in whole-class and group talk, when teachers as 'learners' and students can be conversational equals, genuinely interested in exploring ideas together and embodying 'dialogism' for other students – a rich blend of talking, behaving and valuing of the other's voice.

My third claim to knowledge is that there is a clear relationship between developing dialogic, exploratory talk and developing critical literacy, the most sophisticated form of reading comprehension – two key aspects of English teaching (see NC, QCA, 2007). This link could be more fully exploited by teachers. Analysing texts collaboratively in English produces a particularly speculative and creative form of exploratory talk that I have termed 'tentative talk about texts', in which meaning is constantly debated. This form of talk is heightened if pupils are asked to practise Bakhtinian intertextuality, drawing links between contextual written/multi-modal texts, in addition to the spoken 'texts' or interpretations that they are in the process of producing. Such talk literally enacts the ways in which meanings about texts are constructed. Pupils are encouraged to combine a personal response with a more critical, distanced approach, drawing on other evidence and contexts from within and outside of the texts, including, crucially, the voices of their peers. This requires pupils to use a particularly nuanced, tentative form of discourse themselves. Pupils' understanding of how language constructs meaning is furthered heightened by metadiscoursal reflection. Developing such 'tentative', speculative modes of language is related to open-ended, creative thinking, another strand of English, and implies valuing other points of view. This is the basis of democracy, as well as of dialogism. (See Appendix 3).

This study clearly reinforces essential work on the international rights of the child, premised on collaborative talk (Sebba and Robinson, 2010) and confirms the value of 'student voice' (Fielding, 2001, 2004; Hargreaves, 2004). However, without a structured approach to collaborative talk and time to practise it, only pupils with the confidence and secondary discourses acquired outside

school are likely to 'represent' their peers, thus reinforcing inequity. This also accords with Gee's (2003, p. 38) equity-based argument about pupils' 'right' to be given equivalent 'opportunities to learn' a specific 'social language', by engaging 'dialogically with people who know that language [...] in a given semiotic domain' – in this case, the community of English practitioners in the process of reading and writing texts.

As noted in the Methodology chapter, if I were repeating this study, I would seek a way of capturing more videoed talk to gain the richest data, without jeopardising the essential naturalistic context. I would also want pupils and teachers to be able to assess formatively transcripts of their talk throughout the project, to support their reflection and ensure that their voices were fully represented in this report. A follow-up study might focus on girls from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, to refine the contexts which would fully develop their discourse and confidence to contribute more equally to all talk in English lessons.

As a teacher educator in English, I need to ensure that the following key strands inspire future work with teachers and pupils. Firstly, students' high level of engagement with developing their talk was intrinsic and unrelated to external assessment. Pupils generated their own ground-rules, with teacher guidance, and strove to live up to them, surrounded by their colourful, aide-memoire posters. While they emulated skilful individuals, the emphasis was on evaluating and celebrating group achievements, discussing meaningful criteria, holistically: a community of English specialists, developing their collective abilities in talk and reading. This was an exciting example of the original concept of formative assessment, with students, not teachers, generating Sadler's (1998, p. 184) 'quality of feedback', characterised by 'its catalytic and coaching value [and...] ability to inspire confidence and hope' (see also Black and Wiliam, 1998; Torrance and Pryor, 1998; Marshall, 2004). It contrasts sharply with current assessment practice in English, in which students must 'level' or grade themselves individually, in each of up to seven, atomised criteria in reading, writing and speaking and listening, using dry grid-sheets (DCFS, 2010a).

Secondly, classrooms had 'gone meta' and were full of rich talk about talk. Students acquired a metalanguage for talk, but the starting-point, as with the ground-rules, was personal response (see Barnes et al, 1969), freeing them to observe the very behaviours, attitudes and values that

make up 'discourse'. This was epitomised by Tim's (Priors School) observations about Ellen's group: their sustained, respectful talk and the fact that 'they say "it might mean this" and "could it be this?"'. Peers in another school had given him a profound understanding of the function of modality and its association with speculative thought, the provisionality of truth and the imperative to consider alternative views. He is unlikely to have grasped this from an atomised 'starter' activity on modal verbs (as recommended in SNS, DfEE, 2001a). Effective peer scaffolding, then, operates on different levels, modelling helpful ways of acting and thinking, represented by precise ways of talking and, crucially, founded on the group's collective desire to understand more about a topic or text, that is, on 'mastery', not 'performance', goal orientation (Ames, 1992, p. 262; Dweck, 1986; Webb and Mastergeorge, 2003; Boaler, 2008).

Lastly, the four teachers embodied the values and the skills essential for dialogism: in their different ways, they modelled with pupils and held up for public display, examples of effective collaborative talk. They thus mirrored the formal, typically whole-class, discourse skills of the French and Russian teachers in Alexander's (2000) international study. However, they exceeded these, by reflecting on and changing the way they acted, spoke and, crucially, remained silent, throughout the lesson, genuinely enabling pupils to develop their 'voice'.

And 'voice', as the students came to realise, is woven from other voices and transcends language:

*Chris: I think it was Tanya who said that we've grown up a lot through group talk. Was it you who said that? (looks at her questioningly).*

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## Appendix 1: Transcription conventions for Conversation Analysis

These are adapted from Ten Have (1999, Appendix A, pp. 213-4), whose complete definitions are quoted below, although I have used a reduced number of symbols to enable the reader to focus on pertinent features of exploratory talk in extended transcriptions. Instead, I have used italicised descriptions in parentheses to describe some *relevant* prosodic features, especially tone and pace of utterance, in addition to paralinguistic features. I have also used capitals both at the start of utterances and after a stopping fall in tone, in the middle of an utterance. This is simply for ease of reading: the combined punctuation mark and capital letter is not denoting a grammatical unit, but the pattern of intonation.

### Sequencing

- [        *A single left bracket* indicates the point of overlap onset
- ]        *A single right bracket* indicates the point at which an utterance or utterance-part terminates, in relation to another.

### Timed intervals

- (0.0)    *Numbers in parentheses* indicate elapsed time in silence by tenth of seconds, so (1.0) is a pause of one second
- (.)       *A dot in parentheses* indicates a tiny 'gap' within or between utterances

### Characteristics of speech production

- word*    *Italicising* indicates some form of stress, via pitch and/or amplitude
- ::        Colons indicate prolongation of the immediately prior sound. Multiple colons indicate a more prolonged sound
- A dash indicates a cut-off
- ? . ,     Punctuation marks are used to indicate characteristics of speech production, especially intonation; they are not referring to grammatical units.
- .        *A period [full-stop]* indicates a stopping fall in tone
- ,        *A comma* indicates a continuing intonation, as when reading items from a list
- ?        *A question mark* indicates a rising intonation
- WORD    *Upper case* indicates especially loud sounds relative to the surrounding talk.

### Transcriber's doubts and comments

- ( )       *Empty parentheses* indicate the transcribers' inability to hear what was said.
- (word)    *Parenthesised words* are especially dubious hearings or speaker identification
- (word)    *Italicised and parenthesised words* contain transcribers' descriptions of paralinguistic features and relevant prosodic features (my addition)

**Appendix 2: Observed lessons and group-talk transcripts of audiotapes (3 per lesson; videotapes indicated)**

Lesson sequence	<b>Anna's class: Seaview School, broad top set</b>	<b>Peter's class: Seaview School, lower set</b>	<b>Ellen's class: Blakely School, top set</b>	<b>Susan Priors School, mixed-ability</b>
1	18/10/2007 Homelessness	15/10/2007 Modern Technology	9/10/2007 <i>Stone Cold</i> & homelessness	12/11/2007 <i>Mortal Engines</i> : Views of London (1 <sup>st</sup> obs delayed: teacher illness)
2	12/11/2007 <i>Stone Cold</i>	14/11/2007 Phobias	4/12/2007 Nature versus Nurture?	13/12/2007 Analysing speech registers
3	6/12/2010 Stereotypes	28/11/2007 <i>The Tulip Touch</i>	18/12/2007 'The Lady of Shalot'	17/1/2008 (video) <i>Mortal Engines</i> : characterisation
4	28/1/2008 Analysing World War posters	12/12/2007 Charity Advertisements	5/2/2008 (with video) <i>The Ancient Mariner</i>	24/1/2008 Analysing travel writing
5	7/2/2008 World War II texts: persuasive writing	17/12/2007 (with video) Controversial statements	4/3/2007 Advertising	7/2/2008 (not taped) <i>Mortal Engines</i> Creating political parties
6	6/3/2008 (with video) <i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>	25/1/2008 Introduction to Shakespeare	4/3/2008 Controversial topics	6/3/2008 Stereotypes

7	5/6/2010 'The Mirror' Sylvia Plath	3/2/2007 <i>Much Ado about Nothing</i>	23/4/2008 Analysing leaflets/advertisements	13/3/2008 What is poetry?
8	9/5/2010 <i>Uncle Ivor's Welsh Dresser</i>	12/3/2008 <i>Stone Cold</i> & homelessness	2/5/2008 Analysing advertisements written by pupils	15/5/2008 Analysis of paired poems
9	16/5/2010 Analysing Advertisements	28/4/2008 Ingredients of effective comedy	19/5/2008 Analysing Gothic writing & creative writing	(Susan's illness & an Ofsted inspection in Feb. account for the fewer number of observed, taped lessons)
10	20/5/2008 Bullying	6/5/2008 Critical analysis of <i>Summer Heights High</i>		
11		19/5/2008 Evaluation of Priors School		
<b>Total</b>	10 x 3 = 30	11 x 3 = 33	9 x 3 = 27	7 x 3 = 24 = <b>114 in total</b>

**Table of transcribed full interviews or review meetings with teachers**

Date	Anna	Peter	Ellen	Susan	Review meetings
First interview	1/10/2007	1/10/2007	9/10/2007	15/10/2007	25/1/2007 (notes only)
Final	13/6/2008	12/6/2008	19/5/2008	17/6/2008	2/5/2008 (taped)
<b>Total: 9 transcriptions</b>					



**Table of transcribed interviews with pupils**

Classes	Seaview School, Anna's class: 7 pupils	Seaview School, Peter's class: 6; 11	Blakely School, Ellen's class: 6 pupils	Priors School, Susan's class:
First interview	1/10/2007: 6 pupils	1/10/2007: 6 pupils (tape did not record; notes only)	9/10/2007: 6 pupils	12/11/2007: 7 pupils
Final interview	13/6/2008: 7 pupils	12/6/2008: 11 pupils in 2 groups	17/6/2008: 6 pupils	17/6/2008: 7 pupils
<b>Total: 7 transcriptions</b>				

Teacher questionnaires: These were designed spontaneously by teachers, using different formats, to elicit views from all pupils on collaborative talk at the start and end of the project. As they were not part of our original design and were only completed by three of the four classes (excluding Ellen's), they have been used to provide a 'snapshot' only of pupils' views, supplementing the core, taped interviews of a representative group of pupils per class. **Total number of taped, transcribed, full interviews: 16** (There are additional, 5-10 minute informal, teacher reflections, post-lesson, peppered throughout the transcripts of the lessons, when the teacher had time to do this. See example below with Ellen).

### **Appendix 3: Exemplar of method of data analysis per lesson: group-talk transcript, informal teacher interview and pupil written reflections.**

Blakely School, Ellen's class: 23/4/2008, 11.15-12.15.

The transcripts below illustrate the method of data analysis and the way in which informal teacher reflections, post-lesson, were used to supplement more formal interviews at the start and end of the project (in addition to other naturally occurring forms of data, such as, here, the pupils' *written* reflections). This provided spaces for teachers and me, as observer, to discuss our sometimes differing perspectives on the pupils' talk: these dialogues have been, therefore, a crucial means of developing the data analysis, adding layers of meaning over time (Edwards and Westgate, 1994; Mercer, 2008), which could be reflected on at the end of the project, with the full data set. The group-talk transcript below also contains critical incidents, which are useful in illustrating how we arrived at key finding For example, it contains 'tentative talk about text' and shows pupils explicitly discussing the concept of 'tentativeness'. It also shows metadiscoursal reflection pupils, spoken and written, sometimes spontaneously arising, as at the end of the transcript, which happened in all four classes towards the end of the project. Finally, limitations on word-length in this thesis mean that I have not been able to include much of the data on Ellen's students, Ellen's approach and reflections, so I have attempted to restore their voices here.

#### **Observation and audio taping of Ann, Emma, Tom and Ed. in two group tasks.**

**Content and learning objectives:** To develop skills in analysing persuasive texts, including pupils' own; to provide formative feedback to enable pupils to develop their persuasive writing; and to develop exploratory talk. **Pupil Tasks: two group talk tasks:** group/peer-assessment of students' charity leaflets; group analysis of an Oxfam advertisement; and two brief written reflections on the quality of their exploratory talk

Descriptive observation & transcript: low-inference	Commentary/Analysis: high-inference, written from field-notes
<p><b>Whole-class: Teacher (T.) introduction</b></p> <p><i>T. asks pupils to look back at their leaflets, written for homework (on attractions of their town or school) to remind themselves of characteristic features of persuasive texts. She then elicits these, recording them on a spider diagram. All pupils listening; a range answering.</i></p> <p><i>(T. explains the first task – students in groups of four, to peer-assess each other's leaflets, evaluating their effectiveness for their audience. Students are to identify targets for each other to improve their leaflet. T. gives guidelines on structuring task.</i></p> <p><i>Teacher asks pupils to spend 5-7 minutes reading each other's leaflets in silence, before talking about these in a group: 'I think it would be easier if you</i></p>	<p>T. uses an encouraging, enthusiastic tone and speaks personally and self-deprecatingly at times, creating a dialogic atmosphere: 'Yes, I don't know about you, but I sometimes find if I have a very long, dense text I find it hard to summon up the energy to read it <i>all (laughs)</i>.' Quite fast-paced, broadly IRE, although sometimes replies 'yes', not evaluating. Although potentially recall, T asks probing follow-ups to explore effects of each feature in context, requiring analysis ('Why use it?' 'Yes, but more precisely, why?' 'Can you give an e.g.?''). T. sometimes extends a pupil's answer, rephrasing or recasting in more precise language: 'Why is it good to divide the text into sections?' (<i>convoluted, though accurate pupil answer</i>) 'Excellent, it helps you navigate your way through the text.'</p> <p>T. models elaborated language &amp; follow-up questioning, requiring pupils to use reasons &amp; evidence. This could have been made explicit (Hurry and Parker, 2007), although significantly this is the first 'rule' of group talk elicited by Amy below. Pupils engaged by task, based on their own writing, and seem keen to contribute ideas. Ambitious, higher-cognitive AfL group task, well scaffolded, with clear guidelines about how to organise group analysis, especially as some pupils have not finished their homework, and with checklist to prompt talk.</p> <p>Useful to give individual thinking time to enable all to contribute afterwards and for talk to be of a higher level. T. thereby elevates talk, suggesting that it needs to be properly prepared for, in the silent reading phase.</p>

*actually read the texts before you talked in your groups because you can't read and talk at the same time, so let's have, say five to ten minutes of reading time'.) (14 mins)*

*Pupils read quietly for 5 minutes*

*(Teacher reads aloud and hands out a checklist of possible aspects: content, structure, lay-out, etc to cover. Asks students not to focus on lay-out too much. Ends with:)*

T: It's your job, as *critics*, to come up with aspects that are good and aspects that could be improved and let's aim for about two aspects that have been done well and two aspects that need to be improved on, OK? Does anyone want to ask a question?

Tim: When we write like our stuff do we *not* write it or do we just *memorise* it?

T: You don't *have* to write anything down. You *could* make notes at the bottom of their work if the person doesn't mind you doing this, but remember it's *their* work so they may not want you to do this. Discuss this with them.

*(T. elicits group talk ground-rules.)*

T: In terms of talking in *groups*, what do you need to remember? *(Tries to*

Students all absorbed in reading, except a handful explaining why their homework is missing.

Checklist: clear, incisive set of points.

Teacher elevates the status of students, from readers to 'critics', also elevating the status of the class to a group of writers, whose work should be subject to similar scrutiny as that of published authors. Ellen avoids the more typical teacher phrase 'Does everyone understand?' and regularly asks for questions in whole-class talk, validating pupil questioning.

Thoughtful point from Tim: hard for pupils to remember 4 points, per leaflet, without writing. Teacher lays emphasis on talk as process & valuable, not on *written* outcomes here, but concedes notes may be helpful. Students accept this flexibility, though no explicit ref to group *needing to agree* on writing targets.

Typical feature of Ellen's lessons is explicit reference to respect for others & need to negotiate successful relationships with peers.

use IWB to call up a slide from an earlier lesson on talk, to speed this part of lesson, but technology fails. T. apologises and improvises with whiteboard and pen) *Four things* really [...]

Amy : Ask questions like, *why* do you think that?

T: (Writes on board) Excellent, ask questions, *Why* do you think that?

Could you *explain* a bit more? *How*, exactly, could they *improve* their work?

Joe: Don't be *mean*, but kind of *look* for something to say (.) Don't look for a problem, but like look for some *things* (to criticise: inaudible)

T: *Be sensitive* yes, that's a valid point I was going to actually say something about roles

Emily: Yes, whether someone is a questioner or a Devil's Advocate [...]

T: Excellent, yes. *If* the conversation isn't really going somewhere and the conversation is a being a bit quiet, why *might* it be good to just take on the role of the Devil's Advocate? What would you be doing?

Sarah: (inaudible)

T: What about that word devil?

Beth: It's when you disagree with someone (inaudible)

T: Yes, try and stir things up a bit. *Be sensitive*. I don't want anyone being rude, but get the debate going a bit, say something a bit controversial. *OK* (*looks at board*) so that's roles, questions, listen, obviously, to each other (*writes this*), let everyone speak, anything else? (21 mins)

T. thrown by non-functioning IWB but recalls rules spontaneously instead, though some cueing here, as asks for '*Four things*' only & shows she has predetermined answers in her head: 'I was going to say roles..'

T. only catches half of Joe's meaning here? He seemed to be talking about the need for criticality, not excessive praise, advising peers not to be afraid of criticising work. This is a perceptive point, relating to earlier targets with this group, which had been, 'be more controversial' (See Susan's class critique of this class's video – target set: to disagree more.) T distracted by IWB not working & keen to speed up and start talking in groups, so perhaps mishears this and then introduces roles herself, not waiting to elicit these.

T. emphasises importance of flexibility of speakers, according to context, using 'if' and 'might' to suggest pupils need to respond spontaneously to the *process* of talk and to inhabit roles, naturally, when the need arises. Pupils later respond well to this level of autonomy and choice (see later part of transcript).

T twice reminds pupils to be 'sensitive' to other pupils' talk & adds the 'rule' 'listen to each other' and 'let others speak', though no pupil has brought these up. This triangulates with Ellen's belief in review meetings & interviews that the most important aspect of rich group talk, beyond practice/rules is achieving respectful relationships and sensitivity to others' feelings. See strand in Ellen's transcripts on tentative language (below).

**Group task 1 – peer-assessment of charity leaflets -10 minutes**

*(Pupils speak animatedly for ten minutes without teacher intervention and give useful criticism of each other's leaflets, although lay-out did predominate, leading to less sophisticated analysis than was apparent in the second group talk, quoted below.)*

**Whole-class: T. instructs students to reflect on the quality of their talk in writing at the back of their books:**

T.: Now I'd like you to write down *one* aspect of your conversation that worked and you can have a look on the board at the four things we've been discussing if you want, and *one* aspect of your group that wasn't quite working as well as it should have done *(Two-minute silence as pupils write)*

T.: If you want to add something that you *enjoyed* as well, add that down too because *I think* that that's quite important, really isn't it? *(laughs ironically)* You might like to think about, how does it compare with having to *write* an analysis? For example does it help with your thinking skills?

*(Pupils still writing silently. See below for pupils' transcribed notes.)*

Significantly, although T. explicitly said to students not to focus too exclusively on lay-out, this is the aspect that is covered most extensively in the talk. Some of the most interesting aspects of language are hurried over, but the talk is still exploratory and shows pupils using inference, analysis and evaluation of texts.

Ellen does not return to the substantive issue – the persuasive leaflets – but validates exploratory talk, by immediately moving to an evaluation of its quality. Suggests she trusts pupils to have discussed this well, so that it does not need to be repeated in whole-class forum.

Ellen has experimented with a range of ways of prompting metadiscoursal reflection over the project, spoken and written, group and individual. By using the back of pupils' books for reflection, she enabled pupils to reflect on how their talk was progressing over time, as well as raising the status of talk.

Ellen's instructions on reflections (repeated conditional clauses and use of modals - 'might', etc) are quite open-ended for this stage of the project and are typical of her discourse with this top-ability class, offering possible ideas but not closing down original contributions.

T.: In terms of what you're writing now in your books on group talk, think about what you might like to *work* on when you go back into your groups. Is it about your *own* performance that would help the conversation flow or the group as a *whole*?

**Whole-class: Teacher sets up the second group task: to analyse an Oxfam advertisement**

(She reads the text aloud, with all silently reading their copies and then explains that this is a 'complex' advertisement and so she is giving pupils a more 'advanced' checklist of aspects to consider, which includes purpose, audience, key techniques, text structure, lay-out, language and emotive words. This extract follows.)

T.: So to help guide your discussion, work through the points, please. If necessary, someone take on a role, like Chairman or Devil's Advocate, ask questions, listen to each other and don't forget this one about *tentative language* (Pointing to the IWB) What is tentative language?

Lucy: It's like if you say 'I'm not sure if this is correct but...'

T: Very good

James: Um (.) I'm not sure whether this is *useful* but (smiling, ironic tone)

Carrie: May I suggest (also smiling, with other pupils)

T: Yes, it's just thinking about your language, so instead of kind *barging* in there and saying *I think* this, *I must* be right, just being *sensitive* to the fact that other

Identity issues here, in terms of valuing students' 'voice' and concern for intrinsic motivation, both key strands of Ellen's talk: she often asks whether pupils have enjoyed an activity and whether *they* thought it elicited rich talk, showing a value for pupil attitudes and perceptions, and lending their voice authority. Earlier in project, in the establishing phase, Ellen encouraged group reflection, but is now encouraging a range of reflections, individual and group.

Lesson and group-talk tasks are skilfully structured, moving from simpler leaflets (students' own) to a sophisticated, dense Oxfam advertisement, enabling students to develop their analytical and exploratory talk skills across the two tasks. Good e.g. the need to provide a challenging text, requiring high-level inference, using talk to scaffold understanding (Wolf et al, 2005), a point that pupils themselves reinforce at end of this transcript.

Ellen has resolved the IT problem and points to the IWB slide she wanted to show earlier, of the full class ground-rules.

Tentative language: key strand of Ellen's class. Early on in project, some pupils spontaneously used a particularly tentative, speculative form of language in groups, which Ellen drew pupils attention to, making it explicit, defining its features and thus, providing pupils with a metalanguage for subsequent use. It became one of the pupils' ground-rules, unlike the other classes. The original usage came from the pupils themselves in 'The Lady of Shallot' lesson of 18/12/2007 and was notable in most groups. The shared humour evident in this passage relates to a running joke

people may not agree with you. Any questions? (*pauses*) No, off you go, lots of talking, lots of discussion, don't hold back

**Group task 2: analysing an Oxfam advertisement: 15 mins** (extracts from this transcript: pupils on task, engaging in exploratory talk for whole time)

(*Pupils start talking in groups at once*)

Ann: OK

Tom: OK so (*looks at Ann*) do you want to be the er, chairperson reading this time?

Ann: Yes, that's fine

Emma: OK, let's just go (*fast-paced, excited*)

with the class: exaggerated tentativeness can sound pompous or insincere. (This highlights the importance of an observer being seeped in the context of this class to understand the history of this usage and shared understanding, see Mehan, 1979). Ellen's rationale (in interviews) for highlighting this feature with her class regularly was, firstly that there was a group of very able, but over-confident boys, who tended to dominate peers (hence her significant metaphor '*barging* in there and saying *I think this, I must be right*') and who needed to appreciate its value and the link between language, behaviour and identity; secondly, that it was essential for analysing texts and encouraging plural readings. Notably, the group tasks on poetry, in which Ellen encouraged pupils to infer and draw links between visual images of the texts and poetic language, were particularly effective at eliciting this form.

Significantly, there were rich examples of this in the group talk on *The Ancient Mariner* (Feb 5, 2008), which was videoed and sent to Susan's class to critique and it is this particular feature, along with pupils' elaborated, independent talk and obvious respect for each other's views, that so impressed Susan's class.

Group talk well established so pupils start talking immediately, taking responsibility, by allocating roles & showing that they are used to rotating these.

Friendly, respectful atmosphere with Emma injecting urgency, keen not to waste time.



<p>Ann: What is the purpose of this text?</p> <p>Tom: [To tell people] about Oxfam and the crisis in Ethiopia [ and to donate]</p> <p>Emma: [Well, well] [to <i>persuade</i>] them to kind of</p> <p>Ann: I think it's <i>telling</i> them</p> <p>Emma: <i>Donate</i> to, to <i>see</i> what's actually going on in Ethiopia</p> <p>Ed: It's to <i>persuade</i> people to donate something</p> <p>Ann: It's telling you</p> <p>Emma: Yeah because I think there are - you have to <i>know</i> what's going on [around you] some people, you know, some people probably don't even <i>know</i> about this kind of situation</p> <p>Ann: [In the world]</p> <p>Ed: [It's trying] to, it's trying to persuade</p> <p>Tom: [It's like ] <i>informing</i> you about the <i>crisis</i> in Ethiopia, I usually call it Uthopia (<i>laughs</i>) but that's another country I think</p> <p>Ed: All that though (<i>points at text</i>) all the <i>writing</i> is just to persuade you to do this - to give them money or to go on the website</p> <p>[...]</p> <p>Emma: I think it does it quite well actually (<i>students pore over text</i>)</p> <p>Ann: Yeah, I think it does</p> <p>Tom: And it tells you about Oxfam's like a really good charity and it <i>will do</i> what it says</p>	<p>All pupils excited and keen to talk: much overlapping speech here, but few interruptions, e.g. Emma waits for a grammatically complete unit from Tom before trying to make her comment.</p> <p>Emma uses emphasis to clarify the language being used and group start negotiating meaning skilfully here, debating semantic difference between 'informing' and 'persuading'. Ann insists, using repetition that the text is primarily informative 'telling you' and using 'I think' to distinguish her opinion from the others, though she does not give reasons. The other three pupils move towards greater explicitness, elaboration and clarity in their choice of words to convince Ann that there is an important relationship between informative and persuasive modes, summed up by Emma: 'You have to <i>know</i> what's going on' and noting audience 'some people don't even <i>know</i> about this kind of situation'. Tom summarises the group's new collective understanding with his precise use of language, '<i>informing</i> you about the <i>crisis</i> in Ethiopia', adding to pupils' understanding, by noting context – a 'crisis', not a permanent situation. Ed develops this point, by noting the length of the text needed to persuade an audience unfamiliar with the context.</p> <p>Pupils evaluate the text, engaging in a more complex analysis than in first talk. The two group talks and pupil reflection in between, have enabled pupils to raise the analytical level of their talk, focusing here on content, language and structure, e.g. noting that the lack of emotive, manipulative language, combined with 'explanations',</p>
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Ann: It's not too kind of like *give, give*, it's not kind of give, give, they've really kind of explained *why* they want this money, what they're *doing* with it, yeah, yeah, it's really kind of, it's not like *bang*, you've got to do this kind of thing

Emma: What they're giving it to, *how* they're doing it and it's informative [...]

Emma: Good rhetorical question – 'What is Oxfam doing?' And a few others (*pointing to the text*)

Ann: Yes

Tom: And also it says we need YOUR help to save lives (*points to word; heavy emphasis*)

Ann: [Yes]

Emma: [Yes]

Tom: I think *that's* quite powerful [because of the picture]

Ann: [That's really kind of yes]

Emma: I think that the picture's quite powerful as well, like a really *poor* mother, a baby,

Tom: Yeah

Ann: Yeah, the picture's definitely, *definitely* really powerful because you can, if I saw that, if you saw *them* smiling (*points at picture*) you're not really, you don't feel the same way, it really creates an emotion kind of like, ahhhh (*poignant sigh*) you really feel sorry for them [...]

lends Oxfam credibility. Ann and Emma's comments also start to engage with the structure of the text, noting the progress of the argument ('why they want...what they're doing...how they're doing it...'); these are more sophisticated elements of persuasive writing, which pupils at KS3 often fail to discuss, focusing only, as in the first talk, on more superficial aspects of form and lay-out (headings, size/style of font).

'*That's*' refers to the use of second-person address above, combined with the picture. Tom is making a subtle point about the effect of the combined image and language on the reader's emotions. The other pupils develop this, making the techniques more explicit (a 'poor' mother and baby, not 'smiling'), culminating with Ann's sigh and articulation of the sympathy these evoke: 'you feel really sorry for them.'

<p><i>(Pupils next discuss the significance of the line '£25 could feed a family of six for a month', with Ed noting that this is 'less than a pound a day' )</i></p> <p>Tom: Compared to people in Africa we eat a lot</p> <p>Emma: I mean, isn't it like something ridiculous like in the West we eat so much like you'd need three more worlds to feed the whole world like we eat</p> <p>Ann: Yeah</p> <p>Emma: Something ridiculous like that, it's only because they're starving in Africa and stuff that we <i>can</i> eat the way we do</p> <p>Ann: Yeah, mad</p> <p><i>[...] (After another long section of talk, in which the group discusses emotive language which evokes guilt in the reader, spending much time on phrases such as 'children who are the most vulnerable', the group finishes, a little earlier than the other groups.)</i></p> <p>Tom: OK, what's next? <i>(laughs)</i></p> <p>Emma: I quite like group talking</p> <p>Ann: Yeah (.)</p> <p>Tom: I like it better than on your own [...]</p> <p>Ann: Because when you're on your own you don't really know what to write</p> <p>Emma: Yeah [...] <i>(Ed and Tom nodding)</i></p> <p>Ann: There's more to say because other things come up and you can add to it, it's not like <i>copying</i> if you're talking but if you're writing down, then you're kind of copying</p>	<p>Pupils continue to pool their external knowledge, in order to apply this to the text and draw out its full meaning, practising collaborative inference, a key reading strategy (see Cain et al, 2001). Pupils' understanding deepens throughout their talk, culminating in an appreciation of the way the text prompts them to compare the two 'worlds' and to recognise the West's responsibility and therefore the need to donate, which is summed up by Emma.</p> <p>Significantly, Emma is suggesting a relationship between poverty in Africa and excessive consumption in the West, a sophisticated point, which Ellen in interview below, doubted students in Year 8 would be able to grasp.</p> <p>The pupils' behaviour here contrasts greatly with that at the start of the year, when they saw group talk as a competitive race to finish first. Here, they do not triumphantly call the teacher over, but start spontaneously reflecting on collaborative talk. This shows a shifting attitude towards English (learning, not performance-orientation goals, Ames, 1992); greater independence; and evidence that critical reflection is becoming internalised. What is fascinating, too, is to note the way that the pupils' talk pre-empts and echoes the teacher's final comment. Students are engaging in Bakhtinian ideas about the value of dialogue, which cements understanding ('any true understanding is dialogic in nature', Voloshinov/Bakhtin, 1973, p. 102; Emma: 'when you're talking, you're like, 'yes, I really <i>understood</i> that'). They also see meaning in dialogue as lying on the borderline between people,</p>
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Emma: Yeah but like when you're talking you're like, 'yes, I really *understood* that'

Ann: Yeah, yeah (.) sometimes I'm like, if someone writes something and you really *do* agree with that but you just feel if I write that I'm *copying*

Emma: Yes

*(T. ends group discussions and asks students to reflect again, considering whether there was any improvement or 'if there was anything awkward or difficult about your discussion'. Silence for three minutes as pupils write.)*

T.: OK the *reason* we've just been doing that is that if I ask you now to write me an essay or a series of questions answering how that text is persuasive and that is something that you're going to have to be able to do [...] if I asked you to do that without having *any* sort of conversation about it first, I think you would have felt found that quite difficult, you would have felt quite lonely quite on your own and unsure about whether what you were writing was *correct* or not and the reason behind having conversations is that it allows you to plan out and explore ideas (.) and it allows you to *pinch* each other's ideas *(laughs ironically)* which hopefully will develop your thinking.

constantly being 'added' to, and therefore 'belonging' to all, a collective, intellectual resource ('it's not *copying* if you're talking'). Students contrast this with writing, which they see as isolating, potentially generating anxiety ('on your own, you don't really know what to write') and being bound up with individualistic attitudes towards intellectual property ('you feel if I write that, I'm *copying*').

These layers of reflection, using writing, as well as speech, are a particular feature of Ellen's lessons and are skilfully pitched for these particular pupils, who respond well to this challenge.

Ellen makes her reasoning explicit, modelling the kind of reasoning that she is constantly requiring from pupils in their talk and making clear the link between collaborative talk and writing (see Hurry and Parker, 2007), an area that she has been particularly interested in across the project. Ellen also reinforces situated learning, showing the relationship between learning and identity with words such as 'lonely' and 'unsure', to indicate her awareness of all that is at stake in pupils being able to learn. In her last point, Ellen gives an incisive rationale for dialogic talk in the English classroom, echoing the pupils' words: it enables a community of learners with varying expertise in English to 'plan out and explore ideas', as well as 'pinch[ing]' each other's to 'develop their thinking'.

**Pupils' written reflective comments from their first, AfL group discussion, April 23, 2008** (Transcribed, at speed, from pupils' books, with permission, but with standardised spelling and lay-out):

<b>Ann</b> <b>Good points</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We were very good at listening and taking roles.</li> <li>• Everyone got to say their opinion</li> </ul>		<b>Bad points</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maybe we didn't go into enough detail and need to help the conversation develop</li> <li>• We really agreed with everyone else's opinion. Need to disagree more.</li> </ul>
<b>Emma</b> We spoke clearly and listened carefully to each other's opinions. We weren't scared to tell them if there was an area that could be improved. Our statements were short, but clear. <i>[No targets included]</i>		
<b>Tom</b> <b>Good points</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deep analysis</li> <li>• All talked and took part</li> <li>• Listened to each other</li> <li>• Took on roles</li> </ul>	<b>Bad points</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We talked too slow</li> </ul>	<b>Enjoyable things</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It helped me think</li> <li>• Talking about analysis is more fun than writing about analysis</li> </ul>
<b>Ed</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• We worked well and we all asked questions and commented. Also we listened to each other well.</li> <li>• I did not get as much of a chance to speak, but otherwise we listened well.</li> </ul>		

**Extracts from an informal interview with Ellen, post-lesson, April 23, 12.15** (I: interviewer; E: Ellen)

I: Tell me how you think it went

E: Obviously relying on homework arriving for a lesson is always dodgy ground, which is what I'd done, but I kind of thought it was a safeguard that they didn't actually need to analyse four pieces in a group, they could analyse two. But the homework wasn't quite at the standard I wanted, so that was a bit of a shame. I felt in terms of how engaged they were in the subject matter, I didn't feel that convinced that they were that excited by the subject matter, although I think they were *more* excited by analysing the proper advert than analysing each other's.

I: Is that the impression you got when you were going round? You didn't think they were engaged in the subject?

E: I think I was probably swayed by the groups that hadn't done work they were very pleased with so that analysis wasn't that productive because there were *so many* targets. Whereas I felt with the groups where their work was quite good, it was more productive because they had lots of things to celebrate and congratulate each other on. But without that, the talk can become a bit negative. I found, overall, that having these pointers [*the checklist of question prompts*] is definitely the way forward for an open-ended question because, you know, the open-ended question or the objective was to know what the features of persuasive writing are and identify them. And the next bit was to understand, therefore, how to implement them in their own work and do a second draft. We didn't quite get onto that. And I felt like, you know, we probably achieved that.

I: In terms of the questions, I thought it was interesting that you did two different sets so that they had one group task with easier questions on their work and then the second set with more difficult questions. Can you just explain your rationale?

E: Well, the rationale was really that, because I'd said to them, because I wanted their homework to focus on language and not on layout, they couldn't analyse all the features of a persuasive text using the

second set of questions, I didn't think. So the first set was meant to be more focused on audience and purpose and maybe a headline or maybe some subheadings, but aside from that, not too much on layout or pictures or anything. So the idea was that the second set of questions would be slightly more advanced, but I'm also not sure if it was confusing for them having two sets, as well.

I: I didn't find that; it seemed to work well in the group I was listening to.

E: Yeah, well the idea then, because they've done a lot of work already on advertising, in terms of layout and colour, they produced the most beautiful film adverts in groups of four that were *fantastic*, that used music and clothes and colour and everything, (*excited and fast-paced*) so they've done lots on design [...] before the holidays

I: And were they talking about that?

E: Yeah they did talk about it. They did it over the weekends most of them

I: What, they got together?

E: Yeah, they *planned* them in groups during class time and then the production of the advert, like we did have one session with video cameras, but lots of them wanted to go away and do it at home and then they brought them in

I: And did that group talk work well when they were actually planning it? Did you feel that was constructive?

E: Yes, yes, in terms of talking about their product: they had to design a product and then how they'd use colour and character and to focus on a particular audience and what audience it would be. This piece for homework really needed to be on language and the idea is that the next piece they do, which will be the final piece, will be colour, audience, language, everything together.

I: You also for the first time did two group tasks and in the middle you did that metacognitive part. You asked them to think about the group rules, then you got them to reflect on it between the two group tasks and then again at the end of the lesson. Do you think that worked, in terms of the little metacognitive bit in between the two tasks?

E: Well, it's hard, isn't it, because in some ways I wasn't sure if it confused them at the end, evaluating their group talk and then evaluating the work they'd actually been doing, as it were, because it's two things that they've got to be thinking about, almost. And eventually you want the group talk to be so instinctive in them that you wouldn't have to evaluate it all the time and because I want them to see the group talk as a tool for their writing, really, with a top set like this [...] I don't want them to see the two as totally disconnected, speaking and listening, and writing, because it should be developing their thinking skills *for* writing and reading and *all* aspects. [...]

I: Do you think they *did* use the targets they set? Did they have time to discuss it? Or at an implicit level?

E: I think they were *all* writing down a target. I think they all knew, I think the rules are really ingrained in them and I think it's more, the talk is much more productive now that they know the rules. And instead of having to go through (six) rules before every group talk, by which time they've forgotten what the task is, to just now be able to say, ask questions, take on a role if necessary, listen to everyone, make sure everyone speaks and use a bit of tentative language to avoid being aggressive, that's it. And I think now when I talk they all know what all those things mean, so quite quickly they can say something that they've done well, something they need to improve on and I think it was useful to (have) another piece [*group discussion*] where they could immediately implement their target as opposed to waiting for two weeks. I think the danger is I tend to sort of flit around and don't end up sitting with one group for a long time and hearing.

I: You were *flitting*? And were you weren't intervening much? Did you feel you needed to intervene?

E: I'm not very good at intervening. I think that's a bit of a target, that's sort of my next step really, I feel, is *useful* intervention questions.

I: But you were monitoring, presumably, if you found a group that weren't on task?

E: Yes to keep them on task, but I'd probably end up just referring to the questions and I might say 'Have a look at question (3)', just to focus them again. I mean one group were talking about audience and they said, 'Oh, it's definitely for an English audience' and I thought, 'That's quite interesting', and I said 'Why?' and they said, 'Well, it's the English language' and sort of took the mick out of me almost, but then I said, 'Well, lots

of countries speak English' and one boy said 'Well, England's a very rich country' and I almost thought we could be getting onto something there, as well maybe with an older class, about the relationship between England and Africa, and colonial countries. But that's probably way too advanced, you know, if you're doing it with a Top-set Year 11, but yes, I can see that that was an appropriate time to ask a question and it *did* elicit a response about England being a very rich country and therefore being a good target audience for charity leaflets, for charities in Africa. [...]

I: When you went round did you feel that they *were* mainly on task and focussed and actually discussing what they should be?

E: Yes, except for one group there I was a bit troubled by. I felt they were a bit disinterested. [...] I mean Mathew had good homework and I felt he got quite a lot out of the lesson [...] The three that hadn't brought it, I didn't feel were very engaged but I think it was because they hadn't brought their work, really, more than anything. Leanne isn't particularly engaged anyway, I don't think [...]. I mean it's quite good because you get to see them up close and I get to see how the whole room is, I'd say every group was on *task*, pretty much

I: And what about the quality of the talk you were listening to as you went round? Did you feel they were saying *because* and using reasoning and using, you know, pointing to bits of the text, whether it was for emotive language or whatever? Did you feel they were *analysing* in that sense?

E: Yes, I felt they were picking out specific examples certainly and they were giving evidence for what they thought, I did think that. [...] another thing is that the questions link together because I suppose eventually what would be nice would be to remove the questions and have maybe one question, maybe with just six points like that, but maybe that's not even necessary [...]

E: OK, so I'm really pleased that we did the lessons where they were all the Devil's Advocate and they were all the Chairman because I think now they can hopefully use those roles as tools to develop a conversation. I feel really pleased about that. [...]

I: Tim wanted to write everything down and you said, 'Don't worry writing everything down.' Why did you say that?

E: Because I think it's a distraction: the purpose is that they're discussing things [...] and I think they get obsessed by writing everything down and getting it all *right*. The purpose of this was to think through some ideas, not to have a neat copy of a few ideas [...] my slight concern, is that with a class like that, the work on *Frankenstein*, which was so rich and advanced, they flew on, and I've got to keep up that pitch with them, I think, and I'm not sure I totally did with this project as a whole. Sometimes I struggle to find things that are advanced enough. [...]

I: Where would you go from here?

E: I'd say, overall, it's good that they take on roles naturally now; it's good to refer to four quick points before you start as opposed to going on about it which is a distraction. I thought the metacognitive part was very good (so it could feed into) a second piece [*group discussion*]. In a way, the first piece could almost be a practice version that isn't very important and the second piece is your proper discussion, like a warm up. Targets should be yeah, [*pupils*] *agreeing* on a target before they continue as a group and for *me*, my target needs to be some (more higher-order) questioning, some getting involved and, that's partly me being able to just stop looking at everyone and sit down with a group. I found that quite difficult actually in all my teaching, but also thinking of good questions that will encourage them, which don't tell them the answer, and which don't necessarily *repeat* what's on the sheet

I: So you're thinking of your intervention role as a teacher to try and stimulate higher-order thinking at that moment. Can I just ask *when* you would intervene? You said they were mainly on task

E: If no-one's talking

I: OK, so if they've ground to a halt, you'd want to intervene?

E: So far, when they've ground to a halt, I tend to say, 'Maybe, could one of you read out Question (3) or just refer back to the sheet', that's probably enough. When I need something a bit higher-order is if they're going round in circles a bit, saying, 'Yeah that does that [*meaning a language feature achieves a certain effect*], yeah, that does that' and it's all a bit, 'yeah, let's just get through this', then I think [...] I need to challenge them more than the questions I've already given them because they're clearly not really working and they need something a bit more inspiring, maybe, I don't know

I: So you would intervene if you felt they were going round in circles or if they were off task? [...]

E: Yeah, maybe it's OK not to intervene too much because I don't often intervene and then I think I should because I always remember when we did a group-talk session once there was an interview where I think a teacher had intervened and it *really* changed the course of discussion. It's something I'd quite like to be able to do [...] but I can be very like, I can be quite (teacherly) and rattle on and it is quite a strange feeling just walking around the class and it's all just *happening* but it's great, I should just get used to it (*smiles*).