

## **Creating an articulate classroom: examining pre-service teachers' experiences of talk**

Annie Therese Fisher\*

*Primary Initial Teacher Training, University College Plymouth Marjon, Plymouth, UK*

(Received 23 March 2010; final version received 24 August 2010)

This paper examines the continuing 'issue' of developing classrooms where talk is used as means of building concepts and understanding. As curriculum guidance increasingly refers to 'exploratory talk' and 'dialogic talk', it questions why practice seems resistant to change, despite the promotion of social constructivist approaches to learning in university. Research has suggested that at the heart of the matter are the 'inflexible' values and beliefs that primary postgraduate trainees bring to initial teacher training programmes and a tendency to default to observed practice. Drawing on data from the first phase of a small-scale study of one cohort of 75 trainees, the paper suggests that the difficulty some students experience in engaging in exploratory dialogue, and promoting it in the classroom, is not wholly driven by these factors. It argues that we also need to consider the tension between negative memories of classrooms characterised by 'all listening and no communication', which is the resultant legacy of low self-confidence in answering and raising questions, and the emergent understanding that there might be a better way to give children a voice. Students suffering from such cognitive dissonance are unlikely to develop sufficient confidence to create articulate classrooms.

**Keywords:** dialogue; reflection-on-experience; dialogic talk; initial teacher training

### **Introduction**

A little over 30 years ago, Barnes (1976) wrote his seminal text *From Communication to Curriculum*, speculating on the nature of talk for learning and looking particularly at patterns of communication between teachers and children in English classrooms. In this work, he argues that it is not sufficient to define teaching and learning in terms of a teacher transmitting knowledge to pupils; teaching and learning, he states, should also encompass structuring opportunities for the learner to take a greater part in forming their own knowledge. His research indicated, however, that in whole-class teaching, teachers often struck an uneasy balance between promoting learning and maintaining control. In the preface to his work, he speaks of the need to promote 'interactive' teaching and learning, rather than a culture where teachers use their voice to 'control and shape the thoughts of children'.

Similarly, Cazden, John, and Hymes' (1972) work in America concluded that patterns of language had the power to affect, positively or negatively, the quality of children's educational opportunities. Barnes' (1976) call for a (new) pedagogy of interactive teaching, informed by the writings of Bruner on shared negotiation of meaning, is echoed by Galton, Simon, and Croll (1980) who, in their study of the primary classroom, continued to report

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\*Email: afisher@marjon.ac.uk

little probing, questioning, exploratory thinking or guiding of individual children. Where teachers were engaging in this type of teaching, they were more likely to be working (or *interacting*) with the whole class. By the 1980s, although Edwards and Mercer (1987) found evidence of negotiation of shared meaning in discussion, it remained under the tight control of the teacher.

Since Barnes' (1976) call for a more considered approach to dialogue focusing on the development of reflexivity, asserting that speech enables us to control thought, there have been a number of moves to raise the status of talk, for example the National Oracy Project (1989–1992) (Norman 1992) and the inclusion of speaking and listening as an attainment target of equal weight with reading and writing in the National Curriculum Orders for English (Department of Education and Science 1988). Despite this, the work of Mercer (1995), Galton et al. (1999) and Alexander (2001, 2005, 2008) continues to report overwhelmingly monologic patterns of classroom discourse, focused on knowledge transmission.

Current research suggests that to maximise active participation in discussion and to develop learners' intersubjective understanding, there needs to be a significant shift in classroom practice. Alexander (2005, 2008) and Smith and Higgins (2006), for example, suggest that the locus of attention should be placed not on the questions that teachers ask but more on the way in which they react to pupils' responses. Experience suggests that primary postgraduate trainee teachers are very willing to engage in paired discussion during taught sessions. They are, however, reluctant to feed back to the larger group, and insightful, reflective discussion is regularly reduced to a set of brief generalisations. As a professional tutor, it is also clear that the same students find it just as difficult to promote and manage discussion in their placement classrooms. In asking why classroom talk seems resistant to policy and curriculum initiatives, perhaps the questions which need to be examined are how far students' own experiences align with current typologies of talk and if these experiences will allow them to move beyond a reductive engagement with interactive teaching.

## Literature review

### *Opening dialogue through interactive teaching*

Following the sustained criticism of the conduct of talk in the primary classroom (Barnes 1976; Galton, Simon, and Croll 1980; Edwards and Mercer 1987), it might have been assumed that the introduction of the National Literacy Strategy (NLS; Department for Education and Employment 1998a) and the accompanying literacy hour would begin to address the issue. This initiative was conceived by the Labour Government of the time as a major reform to drive up standards. Its central tenet of 'interactive whole-class teaching' in which teachers spend 60% of their time engaged in direct instruction was, according to Beard (1999), drawn from the literature of school improvement, particularly that of Reynolds and Farrell (1996) and Reynolds (1998), the latter defining 'interactive' as fast-paced recall questioning, followed by slower 'higher-order' questioning.

Ironically, it is suggested by a number of significant research projects (Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000; Hargreaves et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2004; Myhill 2006) that the more recent call of the NLS 1998 for 'interactive' teaching methods has been a key factor in further closing down opportunities for children to question, explore ideas or regulate their own thinking. Drawing on the findings of the Study of Primary Interactive Teaching (SPRINT) project, English, Hargreaves, and Hislam (2002) draw attention to a significant point: although all of the teachers studied were positive about the call for interactive teaching,

over one third of the sample referred only to surface features, such as engaging pupils, conveying knowledge and promoting practical involvement. Less explicit aspects, such as developing thinking and learning skills, were not mentioned by two thirds of the sample, who were also unable to make reflective links between their own practice and theoretical concepts. In behavioural terms, the teachers saw ‘interactive’ as intense question and answer. Similar findings were reported by Myhill and Brackley (2004, 269), who found that teachers failed to elicit children’s prior knowledge; in focusing on curriculum coverage rather than conceptual learning, a high proportion of the interaction comprised ‘statements or questions . . . categorised as transmission of facts or factual elicitation’.

This is, perhaps, unsurprising, since video training material provided for schools (Department for Education and Employment 1998b) at the time, and viewed by a great number of teachers, modelled literacy teaching as a series of rapid and intensive question-and-answer sessions. As English, Hargreaves, and Hislam (2002, 9) suggest, the NLS’s (Department for Education and Employment 1998b, 8) drive for ‘teaching that is well paced with a sense of urgency’ and ‘interactive teaching’ has created a pedagogical dilemma for teachers who have to attempt to reconcile styles in which both ‘broad pupil participation’ and ‘sustained in-depth one-to-one interaction’ are required. According to Haworth (2001, 13), in this tightly controlled and directed training programme, ‘oracy slips off the page’; the teacher controls the talk; learners remain in the shadows; and there is little sign of Barnes’ (1988) many-voiced and empowering critical inquiry.

### ***Following a recitation script***

The consequences of this confusion can also be detected in a wide range of research (for example, Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000; Moyles et al. 2002; Hargreaves et al. 2003; Alexander 2005; Myhill 2006). Each of these studies found that, rather than the ‘interactive teaching’ they had anticipated, there was continued adherence to the directive initiation–response–feedback (IRF) recitation script first recorded by Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) and later applied to classroom discourse by Tharp and Gallimore (1988). These exchanges regularly follow a three-part structure which features the following: initiation, usually a teacher question; response, in which the pupil ventures an answer; follow-up, in which the teacher provides a (usually evaluative) feedback such as ‘Well done!’ These repetitive rote initiation–response moves often comprise ambiguous quasi-questions and participation rather than engagement, the initiating move rarely drawing upon preceding utterances. This closes down opportunities for cognitive growth rather than opening up opportunities for children to actively construct meaning through transformation of what they already know and understand. It is a format, typical of discourse analysed in the UK and North America (Mehan 1979; Dillon 1994; Edwards and Westgate 1994; Hardman and Williamson 1998; Alexander 2005), which often achieves the aim of increasing pace but a loss of elaborated, reflective answers, as pupils are often channelled towards convergent answers based on factual information through what Mroz, Smith, and Hardman (2000, 382) term ‘interrogation’. Their study found that starter questions, similar to Edwards and Mercer’s (1987) ‘cued elicitation’, are often used to provide strong clues as to how questions are to be answered and how they will be evaluated. Mroz, Smith, and Hardman (2000) also found that the discourse style remained the same, regardless of the age of the children and the size of the group. Indeed, Skidmore, Perez-Parent, and Arnfield (2003), in their study of teacher–pupil dialogue in guided groups, found that talk was closely controlled by the teacher, who asked few authentic questions and developed discourse patterns which closely resemble Bakhtin’s ‘pedagogical dialogue’: here the ignorant are instructed in the ‘truth’.

According to Haworth (1999), this pattern is also true of groups working independently: pupils mirror the discourse style with which they are familiar – that of the teacher – with an authoritarian speaker closing down dialogue and discussion whilst pupils bid for turns to speak.

As Myhill (2006) suggests, the Bullock Report (Department of Education and Science 1975, 141), which provided a blueprint for language teaching in England, was hugely influential. At its heart lay a construct of the teacher as orchestrator of talk in lessons; this was seen as ‘a verbal encounter through which a teacher draws information from the class, elaborates and generalises it, and produces a synthesis’. This appears to have remained a constant in practice over the last 40 years despite the introduction of the NLS and the Primary National Strategy (Department for Education and Skills 2006). It may be that the pedagogy of discourse in the literacy hour has become reductionist through a misguided interpretation of the nature of interaction and its relationship to higher-order thinking and questioning. It may also be speculated that the change in focus to more teacher-directed questioning might have led to a culture of learned helplessness rather than one of cognitive challenge. Although Alexander (2005) posits that teacher–pupil interactions with the most cognitive benefit are characterised by shared routines, he questions the pedagogical underpinning of ‘whole-class interactive teaching’, as proposed by the NLS 1998, since it appears to reinforce a culturally stereotypical model of competitive bidding for attention in a series of fast-paced but short, undeveloped, responses to questions. This reductive model may well have formed the experience of talk that most student teachers draw upon. It might be argued that a resurgence of interest in speaking and listening which has led to the Talk for Writing materials (Department for Children, Schools and Families [DCSF] 2008a) and Every Child a Talker (ECaT) programme (DCSF 2008b) will provide guidance in giving pupils a more authentic voice in the primary classroom. The focus of the former, however, is not on talk as a learning process per se but as a means of improving written outcomes, whilst ECaT, in the wake of the Bercow Report (Bercow 2008) on children with communication difficulties, focuses primarily on early language and vocabulary development.

### ***Typologies of talk***

There are currently a number of typologies which offer a framework for developing the kind of talk which drives cognition, advances thinking and results in successful learning.

In 2005, in a keynote speech to the International Association for Cognitive Education and Psychology (IACEP), Robin Alexander talked of an ‘emerging pedagogy’ of the spoken word in the primary (and elementary) classroom. Firstly, he suggests that the act of teaching is shaped by our ideas, values and histories. Secondly, that talk mediates the space between teacher and learner and that language structures thinking and shapes higher mental processes. Thirdly, that the key role of the teacher is to create opportunities to engage in interactive mediation. Fourthly, that currently it is teachers, rather than learners, who are ‘in charge’ of talk, and this is mostly conducted through a recitation script with pseudo-open questions. Finally, he proposes that children, crucially, are not taught how to develop their questioning powers. This ‘issue’ of failure to recognise the value of talk as a powerful medium for developing cognition is, as Alexander acknowledges, not new; however, he suggests that following the principles of dialogic teaching might create an ‘emerging pedagogy’ of talk in which children are empowered to develop ‘a diverse learning talk repertoire’ (2005, 14).

The term ‘dialogic’ to describe talk has only relatively recently appeared within the primary curriculum. Teachers are now exhorted to teach Year 6 children to ‘Use principles

of dialogic talk to explore ideas, topics or issues' (Department for Education and Skills 2006, 40) in literacy lessons. Despite academics (Nystrand 1997; Wells 1999; Skidmore 2000, 2006; Alexander 2001, 2005) using a range of terms, for example dialogic teaching, dialogic enquiry, dialogic pedagogy and dialogic instruction, there appear to be generic principles underpinning the concept: for example the posing of genuine questions and transferring more of the responsibility for learning to the learner. Alexander's (2008) definition of dialogic talk is that it should be collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful.

This appears to have much commonality with Mercer, Wegerif, and Dawes' (1999) evaluative and hierarchical framework of disputational, cumulative and exploratory talk; here, moving from talk characterised by disagreement (Disputational), through the acquisition of 'common knowledge' (Cumulative), pupils move to Exploratory talk. Mercer and Littleton (2007, 59) characterise this as the state where 'knowledge is made more publically accountable and reasoning is more visible in the talk'; in order to scaffold and embed exploratory talk, they stress the centrality of developing the role of the teacher, the classroom ethos and opportunities for children to build on each other's ideas. In arguing that ground rules are necessary to enable learners to engage, Mercer and Hodgkinson (2008) clarify the difference between exploratory talk, which requires an understanding that ideas will not be ridiculed or aggressively contradicted, and 'presentational talk', which tests understanding and focuses on correct answers. Although both forms of talk have a particular function, exploratory talk is seen as embodying the characteristics of accountability, clarity, constructive criticism and receptiveness.

Lefstein (2010) suggests that both exploratory talk and dialogic teaching are underpinned by a pedagogy built upon a process of harmoniously constructing shared understanding. Dialogue, he posits, can profitably begin in difference and, through critical argument, reach 'competing understandings and further inquiry' (Lefstein 2010). To Alexander's typology, he adds two further descriptors: *critical*, where participants explore points of contention, and *meaningful*, in which the participants consider their 'horizons of meaning' in relation to others' and thus develop new (rather than shared) understandings. According to Lefstein (2010) we have an idealised view of dialogue in the classroom, seeing it as an impossible goal; he argues that dialogue is, by its nature, contentious and messy and that to develop productive dialogue we need to work with the constraints of the classroom, rather than wishing them away. It seems apparent that, whilst guidance is available for practitioners, a (potentially challenging) theoretical framework is insufficient to scaffold a radical change in practice.

### ***Epistemological concerns***

Students clearly bring with them a number of beliefs about teaching and learning, and it has been suggested (Brownlee 2001, 2003) that epistemological development should be taken into account in the design of initial teacher training (ITT) courses. As Schommer (1994) contends, there is a strong relationship between learning and epistemology (the learner's view of the nature of knowledge), and this inevitably impacts upon both cognitive and metacognitive function within the classroom and the conception of self as a teacher. Putnam and Burko (2000) similarly urge that trainee teachers need to consider how they themselves learn before they can consider how to teach others. At an early stage of epistemological development, both Moon (2004) and Brownlee (2003) suggest that student teachers will themselves tend towards silence, indicating that they believe knowledge to be absolute and transmitted via authority. In this stage of received knowing, learning takes place through

passively receiving knowledge, and in turn, this deference to external authority can lead to unquestioning teaching.

Schommer (1994), however, saw epistemological beliefs as multidimensional and relatively independent, with the learner concurrently holding sophisticated and naive beliefs in a type of 'frequency distribution' ranging from dualistic (composed of absolute truths) through relativistic (able to reflect on their own thinking rather than focusing on acquiring knowledge) to an understanding that knowledge is constructed.

If students are striving after a form of knowledge, which they believe to be 'out there', rather than mutually constructed, and subject to change, they may well undervalue dialogue as a cognitive stepping-stone and fail to use it in practice. This may, however, be merely part of the explanation, and we need to look more deeply at the reasons for these beliefs.

### ***Pre-existing beliefs and experience***

A large body of research (Hollingsworth 1989; Kagan 1992; Stuart and Thurlow 2000; Milner 2005; Massengill-Shaw, Barry, and Mahlios 2008) suggests that for teacher educators, a depressing and concerning issue is the 'inflexible' nature of students' pre-existing beliefs. 'Inflexibility', however, is an ambiguous concept covering a spectrum from an entire cohort moving towards the stated aims of the course to small individual changes in beliefs. There are those who challenge this notion of inflexibility (for example Roberts 1998; Cabaroglu and Roberts 2000; Stephens, Tonnesen, and Kyriacou 2004) in studies which focus more specifically on the growth of student identity-as-teacher and development of belief systems. According to Muijs and Reynolds (2002) these dynamic mental structures are more likely to change through practical experience; a shift in understanding is therefore more likely to occur through 'linking theory to practice and connecting practice to theory' (Milner 2005, 769). Much work in this area (see, for example, Bransford, Brown, and Cocking 1999; Massengill-Shaw, Barry, and Mahlios 2008) emphasizes the importance of ensuring constructivist learning experiences for student teachers, scaffolded through active encouragement and explicit modelling. What should also be considered, particularly in relation to classroom dialogue, is a possible conflict between what prior experience has shown to be the case and what students' belief systems indicate might be a better way to do things. Here, it is not adherence to observed practice that proves resistant to the constructivist learning environment in university, but confusion and anxiety. This has its roots in their vivid memories of learning to get by or bidding for attention (Alexander 2005) and a sense of injustice because their voice was not valued.

### ***Aim and methodology***

In the light of the theoretical positions outlined above, this paper reports on the first stage of a small-scale investigation conducted with an entire cohort ( $N = 75$ ) of primary postgraduate ITT (pre-service) students aged between 21 and 50 years in 2009. The aim of the study was threefold: firstly, to ascertain what, if anything, students remembered about their own classroom experiences of dialogue; secondly, to establish if any respondents spontaneously linked prior experience to their current attitudes; and thirdly to enable identification of a small group of students who might, at a later stage of the course, go on to take part in a collaborative research project on dialogic talk within their practice classroom.

It has been debated for some time that narrative is central to the way we comprehend and explain personal experience (Schostak 2006); the methodology adopted in this project draws upon this concept by using two approaches to data conceptualisation and representation.

Firstly, it may be viewed as a ‘patchwork text’ (Winter, Buch, and Sobiechowska 1999) where a story is built by assembling connected pieces into a coherent whole. Secondly, as a ‘bricolage’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2003) in which narrative, metaphor and anecdote allow the reader to create an impressionistic picture of the experiences of the participants. Although there is a tradition of criticism of the non-scientific nature of the collection of narrative, anecdotal and ‘impressionistic’ data (Barnard, Morland, and Nagy 1999, 67–8), such approaches can be instrumental in aiding the researcher to gain an insight into the way in which people organize their experiences. It also reflects the way in which the wider ‘environment’ (social and physical) has shaped their needs, desires and motivations. Bold and Chambers (2009, 15) refer to this approach as ‘unpeeling the layers of the onion’.

In order to begin to ‘unpeel the onion’, in the first taught English session at the start of the course, participants were asked to begin (anonymously) to complete a personal ‘Literacy Biography’; this comprised three short, reflective pieces of writing in which they recalled memories of reading, writing and speaking and listening during their own primary education. For the speaking and listening task, students were asked to read a short quotation from a children’s novel (see the Appendix) and then to comment on their own experience of talk during their primary education. Five very broad prompts about dialogue were provided:

- (1) opportunities for debate and collaborative discussion;
- (2) who led the discussion;
- (3) questioning;
- (4) opportunities to question and challenge peers and the teacher; and
- (5) putting up your hand.

The prompts were deliberately open-ended, rather than phrased as questions, to encourage as wide a range of responses as possible. The research instrument is presented as the Appendix.

Although all were made aware that theirs would form part of a wider personal literacy history, no discussion took place at this point about its wider purpose: developing an understanding of the way in which our own experiences have the capacity to shape the kind of learners and teachers we become. For the purpose of the study, it was important that students were not prompted to comment on any possible lasting implications of their own experience. Although a narrative/anecdotal process of data collection often involves interviews, this approach was rejected as too intrusive for participants at the beginning of their course. Follow-up interviews took place later in the year with five case study students who went on to participate in collaborative classroom research; this paper, however, provides an overview of the first phase of the project.

### **Talking about talk with primary postgraduate students: analysis of results**

A manual content analysis was conducted on the text, breaking it down into manageable categories on a variety of levels: phrase, sentence and theme. This process is regarded as a particularly rich and meaningful technique for qualitative analysis (Krippendorff 2004), as it allows the researcher to become more deeply immersed in the data. Responses were initially coded according to the five general prompts listed above; they were then recoded into the main themes suggested by responses and then into concepts. Key concepts which emerged included: a lack of recall of any aspects of talk; the teacher’s management or domination of discussion; positive and negative experiences of talk; opportunities for collaborative learning and debate; questioning as the remit of the teacher; predominance of teacher input

followed by individual or silent work; and the relationship between talk and behaviour management.

Analysis of the results showed that 14 of the 75 students could remember little, or nothing, about talk at school and had nothing further to add. Of the remaining 61 students, a wealth of data was returned showing fresh, and often painful, memories of the experience of engaging in classroom discussion – or of remaining silent. The following section presents an overview of the responses.

### ***Opportunities for debate and collaborative discussion with peers***

For most students, the classroom was remembered as a silent place; 44 stated specifically that they were given no opportunities to discuss work with peers, writing that the teacher did the talking and that the children did the listening. In these classrooms, it was clear who was ‘in charge’ of the talk (Barnes 1976; Alexander 2005). Rather than engaging in the co-construction of knowledge (Mercer 2000), silent work and ‘getting on’ were praised, with the playground seen as the place for talking. ‘There were lots of commands for silence and “Shh! Fingers on lips”’, commented one respondent, and another said, ‘I spent most of my foundation stage sitting silently with my fingers on my lips; talking seemed to be wrong.’ This notion of talk being ‘wrong’ was a recurrent theme. ‘Talk,’ commented one student tersely, ‘was usually followed by a telling off.’ Opportunities to engage in any sort of discussion were linked with perceptions of what constituted, in the teachers’ eyes, good behaviour.

Some experience of collaborative discussion was recalled by seven students, although this was always associated with one particular teacher, rather than being part of a whole-school ethos. Significantly, one wrote of the change in learning experience when she moved to Singapore, recalling, in some detail, discussions, role-play and collaborative work. A qualified response was offered by another student who remembered ‘a wonderful teacher who encouraged us to talk and give our opinions, *if he was interested in the subject*’ (my emphasis). An insightful reflection from another questioned how far the fact that she always worked with the ‘top table’ meant she only spoke to children with similar ability and background. As Lefstein (2010) comments, in critical discussion, we need opportunities to alter our horizons of meanings through discussion with others. For most students, there seems to have been little opportunity to do so.

One particularly interesting comment was this: ‘[A]lthough we were put into debating teams, we were told what viewpoint to take. It wasn’t based on personal opinion.’ Overall, classrooms do not seem to have been characterised by genuine debate or collaborative discussion. Where peer talk did take place, it was social, rather than exploratory (Mercer, Wegerif, and Dawes 1999), and was viewed as a ‘treat’. Teacher–pupil talk was viewed as communicative and instructional, rather than cognitive.

### ***Ownership of discussion***

Despite the deliberate use of the word ‘led’ in the prompt, over half the students wrote passionately, and at length, about the nature of the power relationship in teacher-dominated talk. Several mentioned being ‘talked at’, about ‘knowledge being delivered’ and ‘being required to sit and listen’, and one respondent commented that reading aloud was the nearest her class got to being allowed to speak. The majority of comments, it must be said, did not refer to discussion, which implies more than one voice, but support the work of Mercer (1995), Galton et al. (1999) and Alexander (2001, 2005, 2008) on the prevalence of monologic knowledge transmission. ‘It was all teacher-led in a transmission way’ and

'the teacher stood at the front and imparted knowledge' reflected the experience of over 30 respondents, summed up by one as 'all listening, no communicating!' As Myhill and Brackley (2004) remind us, teacher discourse can both exclude children's own prior knowledge and be used as a means of establishing a particular power dynamic between teacher and learner.

Of the 12 students who wrote about their positive experiences of engaging in discussion, 11 again associated this with one particular teacher. 'I consider myself lucky,' commented one. '[M]y excellent Y1 and Y6 teachers encouraged us to discuss anything that interested us.' One commented, '[T]here were opportunities to do show-and-tell and read out good work': an interesting perspective on the subject of who actually managed and led the experience. Again, the students' own classrooms were generally recalled as places for listening, not dynamic environments where collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful dialogue (dialogic talk) was promoted.

### ***Questioning***

The reflections on questioning indicated that this was overwhelmingly in the teacher's remit, unless it related to a request for clarification. Raising questions was, however, seen as a risky business by 10 respondents; this was an indicator that 'you hadn't listened'. One student reflected on the waste of learning time associated with this:

The teacher talked, then you were given work to complete in silence. When you put your hand up, you had to wait till the teacher got round to you. This meant waiting around for a long time doing nothing.

Fourteen students linked questioning to a strategy for class control; a typical comment, 'the teacher liked to get someone who was talking, rather than listening, to answer' summed up this perception. The call for pupils' responses to be the fulcrum of the learning exchange (Alexander 2005, 2008; Smith and Higgins 2006) is interesting; four students specifically raised this issue, stating, for example, '[W]e weren't really involved in the learning process', and another said, '[A]lthough she asked questions, she explained herself rather than asking for answers. It was about getting her point across.' One student felt that the teacher moving on, rather than expanding, after a correct answer had been given to a closed question created 'a divide' between the more and the less able.

A small number (three) had positive memories of being questioned, and this related to a wish to demonstrate that they knew the answer. Less than half made somewhat neutral comments about questioning being the remit of the teacher, without qualifying this further. Over half the respondents, however, made reference to 'one correct answer', the expectation of being able to provide it and the 'nervousness' of waiting for the evaluative comment. A narrow view of prior knowledge (Myhill and Brackley 2004), 'interrogation' (Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000), 'presentational talk' (Mercer and Hodgkinson 2008) and an IRF structure appear to have shaped classroom interaction, and for most, being questioned (or asking questions) was remembered as a frightening and lonely experience designed to catch them out.

### ***Opportunities to question and challenge peers and the teacher***

Almost half the students felt they had had no real voice in the classroom and that their opinions did not count. 'The teacher's view was final' and 'it was a case of being given facts, which we had to accept' represent most comments. Two students remembered the feeling that their teachers were 'annoyed' or even 'enraged' because they wanted to question and

discuss further, and a further two used the emotive term ‘ridiculed’. One student recalled clearly a particular incident:

I remember vividly questioning the teacher’s input on the water cycle based on something my dad had told me about rain at sea when he was in the navy. My teacher shot me down in flames and there was no praise or encouragement for independent thought.

This type of dismissal may relate to teachers’ tendency to view prior knowledge as relating to school-based activity (Myhill and Brackley 2004), rather than something that may be acquired beyond the classroom and the school setting. In this way ‘school knowledge’ becomes the valid currency at the risk of being non-transferable to real-world situations (Eisner 1996). The experience of shock at a teacher’s response to being questioned, by either the student themselves or a friend, was significant for five respondents who learned from this to remain silent. Only one respondent made a positive comment, stating that although her infant teacher had ‘seemed ancient’, she encouraged the children to ask questions. No participants mentioned questioning peers or being questioned by them; this seems to reinforce their scant experience of collaborative discussion.

### ***Putting up one’s hand***

The issue of raising one’s hand elicited more responses than any other prompt, often featuring in comments throughout the writing, with 21 students using expressions such as ‘fearful’, ‘anxious’ and ‘awkward’. One particularly telling statement was this: ‘[M]y earliest memory is being told to put my hand down, “not you!”’ The consensus appeared to relate to a fear of giving the wrong answer, in some cases because this might simply lead to ridicule, but for some students ‘this was not a discussion about learning as a process ... why answers might be wrong and how the right answer might be discussed’. As with questioning, the putting up of hands was also associated in five respondents’ minds with a strategy to punish children who were not listening. Of the four who had positive feelings about raising their hands, two mentioned the importance of their teacher’s encouragement, and the remaining two attributed it to the fact that they were ‘bright’.

If exploratory or dialogic talk requires an ethos of confidence to be developed, it seems significant that only four students stated that they were confident to volunteer answers. Twenty wrote at length about the issues related to raising their hands that still affected them as adults. Examples of this ranged from being given derogatory nicknames by the teacher, to being told they were ‘less able’ or ‘a nothing’ and being ridiculed. One student wrote:

You were not allowed to talk unless you were ‘picked on’, and that’s what it felt like. Humiliated and singled out. If you got it wrong, you were ‘stupid’, [and] thus no-one [*sic*] wanted to contribute. I still feel very self-conscious when I raise my hand today.

Although it cannot be claimed that 75 students are representative of the general population of postgraduates on a postgraduate certification in education (PGCE) course, these respondents do represent experience from at least 75 different primary schools across the country. With an age range from 21 to 50, they also reflect the changing teaching methods of the last 45 years. Clearly it must be questioned whether, contrary to my expectations, the research instrument prompted negative recall and whether time and distance from the experience had influenced this. It appears significant, however, that so many wrote with feeling, and referred to specific instances which had stayed with them, and related this to their current attitudes. None would have experienced the literacy hour themselves as pupils, and if, as research claims, the Primary National Strategy 2006 further closed down opportunities for talk, it might have been expected that they would recall less structured, more

dialogic classrooms. In asking why research indicates that teachers continue to dominate classroom talk through rapid questioning (Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000; Smith et al. 2004; Myhill 2006) and fail to understand the significance of probing answers rather than simply asking questions (Alexander 2001, 2005, 2008; Smith and Higgins 2006), perhaps we have to ask first what needs to be done to ascertain, and address, the *experiences*, rather than the beliefs, that the next generation of teachers bring with them to the profession. Despite the foregrounding of speaking and listening in planning guidance for literacy provided by the Primary National Strategy since 2006, it is debatable how far the embedded practice will change; simply calling for a revision of pedagogy, one based more firmly on talk for learning, has had little success in the past.

## Conclusion

### *Cognitive dissonance*

The pre-existing beliefs and values of student teachers clearly have a central role in developing teacher identity, and the strength of the discourse – home/school versus university/theory – is highly significant for the developing professional. Moore (2004, 41) refers to this in his discussion of the tensions of the ‘endless move between dominant discourses’ as trainees find themselves required to defend approaches to teaching recommended by the university in the social context of home or school, where teachers may be considered to be ‘born’ rather than created and silent classrooms may be seen as ‘real’ learning environments. Such tensions can inevitably lead to confusion and anxiety with student teachers caught between two competing, socially constructed, views: as Kress (1989, 10) explains, ‘the social will have been turned into the natural’ when the discourse offers such a persuasive view of the subject that it is virtually impossible to conceive of a different view. How hard it is, then, for a student to champion an approach to teaching that the host school may vigorously reject and which is overwhelmingly contradicted by personal experience.

Brookfield (1998) discusses the transformative potential of students’ willingness to challenge their assumptions through negotiating professional identities within dialogic spaces. According to Moore (2004), such spaces exist in the area between: pre-existing beliefs; received advice and observed teaching of others; personal circumstances and practice-based learning; and local and national government policies. In England, the move from competence to Standards in 1998, with the introduction by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) of a mandated national curriculum for ITT and national qualified teacher status (QTS) Standards, has arguably damaged the critical interplay between practice and reflection, opened a gap between academic and professional achievement and created tension between the concepts of teacher *educators* and teacher *trainers*. Similarly, the inspection culture, common to schools and university departments of ITT, can lead to a reductive notion of coverage rather than critical engagement. Despite this, teacher educators, teachers and students are endeavouring to engage with pedagogy which transcends passive acceptance of policy. As Sidgwick, Mahony, and Hextall (1993) state, the ability to evaluate, research and experiment should be regarded not as an extra but as the bedrock of good teaching. A teacher education worthy of the name requires tutors to hold, and articulate, their views on the nature of effective pedagogy; indeed Wells and Claxton (2002) refer hopefully to the changes in ITT preparation in universities around the world where trainees are introduced to constructivism and sociocultural theories of learning. Unfortunately, he also acknowledges that many of the schools in which these trainees go on to teach will not support such enquiry.

A rather pessimistic view expressed by much of the literature suggests that student teachers are unlikely to change their pre-existing beliefs, having internalised through a cultural apprenticeship of observation the values, beliefs and practices of their teachers. Moore and Ash's (2002) Reflective Practice Project, for example, found that postgraduate trainees are just as likely to be influenced by memories of their own teachers, or media representation, as by any attempt to challenge or change this during their course (see also Hollingsworth 1989; Britzman 1991). Mezirow (1991) refers to 'meaning schemes' which 'protect' individuals by acting as a mechanism through which any new material is accommodated into their existing, and unchanging, philosophy. The reflective writing examined in this paper, however, suggests not that student teachers *undervalue* dialogue, or that they hold to pre-existing models of transmission teaching, but that they have little experience in seeing it used as anything other than a means of uncovering 'the truth' or a means of classroom control. Reluctance to engage in speculation, critical thinking or reflective dialogue themselves in the context of a large group may therefore not simply be a reflection of the shortness of the course or an indication that they necessarily wish to be 'told'; it may rather be that many are dealing with a legacy of being made to feel inadequate through a regime of closed questioning, where correct answers were the only currency, and the process of thinking was undervalued. They may well still view those who *do* contribute to discussion as 'more able' or simply self-opinionated. It seems unsurprising that research continues to report a resistance to change in the conduct of talk for learning and a lack of exploratory and dialogic talk, since reductive IRF questioning has continued for the last 10 years under the guise of 'interactive teaching' (Mroz, Smith, and Hardman 2000; Hargreaves et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2004; Myhill 2006). When student teachers bring with them to university painful memories of classroom talk as the province of the teacher, questioning as a means of control and little experience of collaborative discussion, they do not have a repertoire of talk to draw upon. If this is *allied to* the shortness of the postgraduate course (an academic year), the use of whole cohort lectures as a means of disseminating information on professional issues and a tendency to default to observed practice in placement classrooms and to focus 'reflection' on that practice (Love 2009), then we are in danger of simply replicating existing patterns of communication.

As Hargreaves (1998) argues, teaching is an emotional business, and student teachers willing to experience the emotional 'pain' of transformation might be more willing to relinquish some level of control of classroom dialogue to their pupils and move away from a recitation script towards 'interthinking' (Mercer 1995); this posits that using talk to think collectively, to engage with others' ideas through oral language, leads to greater understanding. If we wish to create articulate classrooms where dialogue is recognised as a means of cognition, developing understanding and learning (Nystrand 1997; Wells 1999; Mercer 2000; Lefstein 2010), then further research might profitably focus upon student teachers' experiences of talk and associated levels of confidence (and how to address these). Mercer and Littleton's (2007) concept of 'reaching' exploratory talk through developing the role of the teacher, the classroom ethos and opportunities for children to build on each other's ideas has much commonality with dialogic talk. Alexander's (2008) definition of dialogic talk is that it should be collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful. This 'package', he suggests, is not easy to manage; however, if we manage first to create an ethos where talk is collective, reciprocal and supportive, teachers (including student teachers) might then be able to develop the final two principles.

It is clear that this project has, perhaps, raised more questions than it has answered; it is hoped, however, that through the use of interviews and collaborative classroom research,

the second stage of the project will offer further insight into trainee teachers' management of dialogue.

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## Appendix. Research instrument

### *English biography 3: speaking and listening*

This task requires you to think about the way that talk was used in your own primary education. Do you remember your classroom as a place of debate and collaborative discussion? Things you might write about could include the following: who mainly led the talk; asking questions; opportunities to question and challenge; putting your hand up.

- (1) Read the following extract from a children's book.
- (2) Write a short reflection about your memories of the way talk was used in your primary school.

Reuben wasn't like Mrs. Mayberry. He wasn't like a normal teacher who just told you things and then gave you tests. He asked us things instead of telling. He was always asking, 'How does that feel? What do you imagine when you do that?'

Every day, Reuben started by asking us if we had any new ideas or thoughts. It made me feel that my ideas were important. It made me want to keep thinking things up. (Murray 2002)

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**Fonte: Language and Education, v. 25, n. 1, p. 33–47, 2011. [Base de Dados]. Disponível em:  
<<http://web.ebscohost.com>>. Acesso em: 17 fev. 2011.**

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