Introduction onwards in pedagogic practices ensuring that

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INTRODUCTION " It is through language, especially spoken language, that teachers teach and children learn". (Alexander, 2006, p. 5). Talk forlearning is one of, if not the most, the important part of children's learning; this makes sense as it is part of their " everyday life" (Alexander, 2008, p. 2). If pupilsin the classroom do not get a chance to use talk they can lose out on thebenefits of it (Grugeon et al. 2012).

Historically talk and questioning from pupilswas discouraged in the classroom and practitioners favoured the moretraditional didactic methods. Thankfully there has been a shift from the 1980'sonwards in pedagogic practices ensuring that dialogue takes place in theclassroom between educators and students and between the pupils themselves. Thisin part has been thanks to the Vygotskian view that " the child's cognitivedevelopment also requires it to engage, though the medium of spoken language, with adults, other children and the wider culture". (Alexander. 2008, p.

1) Collaborativelearning is now seen as a powerful tool, and as Alexander suggests " if we wantchildren to learn – as well as learn to talk – then what they say probablymatters more than what teachers say" (2004, p. 6) Vygotsky (1962) believed achild's language ability determines the development of thoughts, in this waythe greater a child's linguistic talent, the better their aptitude is likely tobe to learn efficiently and also to understand through talk. Vygotsky, asocial-constructivist, believed that it was necessary to allow children to beactive learners. Talking is fundamental to their development, and necessary toclarify what they have learnt. " By giving ourstudents practice in talking with others, we give them frames for

thinking on theirown" (Vygotsky: 1978). It is crucialfor them to have good role models; this is defined as the ' Zone of Proximal Development'(Pound, 2006). Vygotsky viewed teaching and learning as social activities thattake place between social actors in socially constructed situations, such asthe classroom. Vygotsky's theories have pushed collaborative learning to theforefront of primary school teaching methods, and there is much evidence thatimplies a strong positive correlation between collaboration and pupil learning(Slavin: 1980; Roseth etal: 2008, Nichols: 1996.

) Vygotsky's theory has also been supported byClark (1998), who believes that talk between pupils is a key mechanism fordeveloping children's learning and speech is not just a device for the transferof information from one person to another. Collaborative work, according to VanBoxtel, provides interactions between pupils that involve elaborateexplanations and as a result and are instrumental for improving pupil learning. Bruner (1966) was also an advocate of the social nature of learning, believingthat if children learn in a social setting they would be provided with theright structure and stimulus to facilitate their learning. This essay focuses on how working collaborativelyimpacts student learning in the primary classroom. Mypedagogical understanding of student learning should be construed in the lightof trying to improving the conceptual understanding of my pupils i.

e. a masteryapproach. I believe that it is of critical importancethat teachersshould look at every opportunity to use dialogic talk in the classroom, andmove away from didactic teaching methods towards a more student-centredapproach. In order to explore children's level of engagement

with group talk, Iwill look at the use of dialogic and exploratory learning to enhance talk forlearning. I willdiscuss the development of collaborative learning and the theoreticalapproaches and perspectives that underpin it, and how these have influenced mypractice, then critically assess the advantages and disadvantages of thisapproach to learning.

In this essay collaborative learning describes where " studentswork together to accomplish shared goals and maximise their own and otherspotential". (Johnson et al. 1994). This should not be confused withcooperation, which is according to Jansenn is " the division of labour amongstgroup member.

" (Jansenn et al: 2010). I will also evaluate how cooperative learning in the primary schoolclassroom can be used; (i) to optimise pupil learning; and (ii) as a means ofassessment (i. e. listening to their talk to check for understanding). Thisin turn will provide the basis for my planning and delivery of a series ofmaths lessons, using group work as a focus to improve the learning of mypupils. I will then discuss and report my findings focussing on the impact ofthese on my emerging practice. Before finally, drawing my own conclusions aboutthe effectiveness of collaborative learning in the primary classroom and inlight of this, consider the implications for my future practice and my owndeveloping philosophy of teaching and learning.

I argue that when used in the right way cooperative learning in theprimary classroom between children is a powerful tool that enables children togain a deeper conceptual understanding of the subjects being taught.
SCHOOL AND CLASS CONTEXT School and Class ContextBefore considering

howtheories have influenced my practice in the Literature Review section of thisessay, it is prudent to give the reader some information about the setting andcontext of my placement school. My placement school hereafter referred to as" PS", to ensure anonymity (BERA. 2011), is located a deprived South Londonborough. It is one of the biggest primary schools in the UK with over 900pupils.

The borough is one that has suffered highly in terms of welfare cuts, and according to a campaign from End Child Poverty 37% of children in theborough are living in poverty. I teach a year 2 class with28 pupils, and have no teaching assistant; 48% of my class are eligible forPupil Premium Grant which is well above the national average of 13. 46%. I also have36% of the class who are learning English as an additional language, and 32%have diagnosed special educational needs. Research tells us that children whoare from poor backgrounds generally finish school with substantially lowerlevels of educational attainment than their wealthier peers.

The AvonLongitudinal Study of Parents and Children suggests that the gap in attainmentbetween children from the richest and poorest backgrounds gorws particularlyfast during their primary school years. It also evidences that only around ¾ ofchildren from the poorest 1/5 of families reached the expected level at KS2, compared to 97% of children from the richest 1/5. Unfortunately my PS's mostrecent SAT's results continued this trend with only 40% of pupils reaching theexpected standard in maths, writing and reading by the end of KS2. Alsoworryingly no pupil achieved the higher standard. Many pupils struggle withtheir language and literacy skills, and the school is only

to aware of howfundamental a solid grasp of these skills are to allow them to access thecurriculum and make good progress.

Poor literacy at primary school is stronglyassociated with later low achievement, and again has been highlighted by Cassenet al as a specific risk factor for those children from disadvantagedbackgrounds. My PS has put in place a literacy programme called Success for All(SFA), which was designed by Slavin and Madden in the 1980's. Research from theEdcuation Endowment Foundation has alluded to the scheme having a positive effecton children's learning, as has research by the John Hopkins University.

Bormanet al. have also noted that it has " positive effects on reading outcomes". The scheme has influenced myphilosophy of teaching and learning as it puts collaborative learningtechniques at the forefront of its content. I have taken these cooperativelearning strategies and embedded them in my teaching of maths, and strive to developmy pupils' conceptual understanding as much as possible which in turn allowsthem to actively build new knowledge from experience and prior knowledge.   LITERATURE REVIEWOver the last 50 years there hasbeen much written on talk for learning in the classroom. In this section of myessay I will look at various theorists' ideas behind dialogic and exploratorylearning, along with a constructivist view of active learning within a primaryschool setting. Many schools have traditionally held an instructionist ortransmissionist model, whereby the teachers " transmits" information to the pupils.

However, Alexander points out that " talk in learning is not a one-way linearcommunication but a reciprocal process in which ideas are bounced back andforth and on that basis take children's thinking forward" (Alexander 2004 p. 48). Despite schools moving away from the transmissionist model, Alexanderstill believes that constructive talk in the classroom is still underused(Alexander, 2008, p. 92) This view is emphasised by Myhill who states that " as aculture we value reading and writing more highly than oral competence and ourassessment system is still predominately in the written mode." (Myhill, 2005. p.

1) In the primary school class, dialogue is promoted as a means of; (i) improving teaching and learning (Nystrand, Gamoran, Kachur andPrendergast 1997); (ii) helpingintercultural understanding (Delpit 1988); (iii) progressing pupil voice anddemocratic values (Fielding 2004); and (iv) cultivating argumentation andthinking (Osborne, Erduran and Simon 2004). In 2003 an English policy endorsed teaching through dialogue, anda new concept of dialogic talk was introduced into the curriculum:" Teaching through dialogueenables teachers and pupils to share and build on ideas in sustained talk. Whenteaching through dialogue, teachers encourage children to listen to each other, share ideas and consider alternatives; build on their own and others' ideas to developcoherent thinking; express their view fully and help each other to reach commonunderstandings.

Teaching through dialogue can take place when a teacher talkswith an individual pupil, or two pupils are talking together, or when the wholeclass is joining in discussion." (DfES/QCA 2003 p. 35)However, both the

executivecommissioned Rose Review (2008) and the independent Cambridge Primary Review(Alexander, 2008) found that in the main subjects, Maths and English, spokencommunication has been pushed to one side in favour of written work. It isworth noting that the Rose Review was criticised for its insufficient researchbase, but both together provide a compelling argument that the lack of talk inthe classroom has had a detrimental effect on the children's learning. Thesituation has not been helped by the fact that the Primary National Strategywhich was also introduced in 2003 does not specifically allude to using talk, and as a consequence primary teachers have been given scant advice on how touse talk effectively for learning. It is worthwhile noting that notall kinds of talk are beneficial (Barnes, 2008).

For example some pupils whoare unable to organise their work depend on teachers for instructions and thusprefer a didactic teaching style. Leftsein (2010) has argued that dialogue inthe classroom is not a feasible goal. I believe that primary school childrenrequire opportunities in their lessons to talk through their thoughts in orderto develop understanding. Research by John Smith (2010), alludes to the factthat in many observed lesson classroom talk is generally by the teacher withlittle or no opportunity for student participation. Alexander (2012)categorises that exchanges between pupils and teachers often fall into apattern described as " Initation Response Feeback" (IRF). IRF exchanges will belooked at in more detail later in this essay. They have their value but asAlexander (2012) points out " they must from part of a more diverse range ofinteraction". Myhill (et al.

2005) categorisedtalk into dialogic learning and exploratory learning. Alexander (2008) in aconcerted effort to make dialogue more equal in the classroom and thus improvethe nature of teacher pupil interactions, and among pupils themselves, developed a pedagogical approach to teaching known as ' dialogic teaching" Dialogic teaching is based on five principles, each of which helps to encourageclassroom talk and promotes communication and the language skills of children. These five principles were coined by Alexander (2008) and restated in Mercerand Hodgkinson (2008, p. 103) as: (i) collective; (ii) reciprocal; (iii) cumulative;(iv) supportive; and (v) purposeful. " Talk is considered to be more dialogicthe more it represents the students' points of view and the discussion includestheir and teachers' ideas" (Mercer, Dawes and Kleine Staarman, 2009, p. 354). These principles provide aframework for teachers to help us to develop authentic and purposeful learningactivities in our lessons.

If lessons are planned according to the 5 principlesthe pupils in class will use talk as a thinking device which will enhance theirlearning and help them to develop a higher level of understanding.. Principles1 – 3 necessitate teachers and pupils sharing ideas, learning in a groupsetting which in turn should facilitate the pupils to build on the ideas oftheir peers as well as their own. Key to dialogic teaching is the ideas thatstudents need to feel that they are in a supportive environment, they must feelsafe to express their opinions and not fear being judged if they make amistake. Lastly to ensure successful dialogic teaching, we must as educatorsplan lessons with a particular purpose and outcome in mind. This necessitateshaving a clear long term

plan in mind with reference to specific learningobjectives and outcomes. Research from Education EndowmentFoundation (2017), suggests that dialogic teaching can help primary students tomake greater progress and boost their results in the core subjects. Theresearch was conducted in 78 primary school in England, each containing ahigher than average proportion of disadvantaged pupils, with over 2500 year 6pupils.

The lessons in true dialogic format encouraged the pupils to debate, discuss, reason and argue with each other. The independent evaluation of thescheme found that those pupils who took part in the study made an average oftwo months' more progress in English and science than a similar group of pupilswho did not take part. Those from the poorest backgrounds also made two months'more progress in maths. These findings indicate that dialogic teaching seems toimprove the students' " overall thinking and learning skills, rather then justtheir subject knowledge" (EEF). Alexander's concept of dialogicteaching is not strictly a new one, the Thinking Together programme influencedby Vygotsky's theory was developed in the 1990's.

Its aim was to enableteachers to create an environment where purposeful discussion could take place, and that students could be active listeners through participation. Monaghan hascommented that the programme was a success as it " showed that pupils workedeffectively together to solve problems verbally." (Monaghan, 2005). Dialogicteaching also has a very important role to play in relation to oracy andmetacognition. Evans and Jones (2007) argue that " dialogic learning enableschildren to develop language, thinking and reasoning simultaneously". Wilkinson defined oracy as "

theability to express oneself coherently and to communicate freely with others byword of mouth". (Wilkinson 1965). He noted that the development of oracy wouldlead to increased skill in writing and reading as users of the language becameincreasingly more proficient.

It has also been stated by Fisher that " it isthrough our capacity to verbalise that thinking, awareness and understandingdevelop" (2008, p. 106). Thinking out loud in a group setting helps children tostrengthen their conceptual understanding of concepts and increase the chanceof meaningful learning. It helps them express their ideas more clearly orchallenge existing ones.

These verbalisations can then allow a teacher or otherpupil to scaffold their thoughts and produce a higher quality of work than ifthey were unaided (Bruner 2006). Research however seems to indicate that dialogic teaching is notbeing widely used in primary schools. Smith et al.

(2004 cited in Alexander, 2008), cited that in the primary classroom they observed when children answereda question their answers only lasted an average of 5 seconds, and seventypercent of the time they were limited to 3 words. This indicates that in theschools they observed, primary classroom talk was presentational; meaning thatthe " talk" was limited to pupils verbalising a restrictive expected answer. Barnes(2008) constructivist approach puts talk into two categories: (i) exploratory talk; through which a child arranges their own thoughts, butcollaboratively takes others ideas into account to greater their conceptualunderstanding, and (ii) presentational

talk. By asking open ended questionsteachers encourages exploratory talk, and this has the benefit of allowing thepupils to think through the answer with peers. Sullivan et al. (1992) howeverbelieved that in maths lessons open ended questions had no advantage. Idisagree with Sullivan, although I can see why he believed it to be the case asmaths answers are usually thought of as bring right or wrong.

I will discuss Idisagree with Sullivan when I look at a series of maths lessons I have taughtin which I used open-ended questions to good effect. Jones and Hodson (2008) confirm that Presentational talk, also knownas " Initiation, Response, Feedback" (IRF), is the most prevalent in classrooms. This is in part due to teachers asking closed questions. The problem with IRFis that children are not developing a conceptual and deeper understanding ofthe material they are being presented with. There are however some advantagesto IRF as noted by Rajala et al. (2012) who conducted a study in Finland intopresentational talk and found that it sparked conversations between children inclass who were in groups, and also had the benefit of giving a fair chance forall pupils to answer questions. IRF can be useful tool for a teacher as itprovides an immediate way of assessing the pupils and giving feedback andresponses straight away.

However it is noted by Barnes (2008) that teacherswill struggle to fully assess a child when solely relying on short answersgiven. Fisher (2008) therefore believes, as do I, that presentational teachingshould be used sparingly. Piaget (1952), understood the relevance and importance for childrento engage with exploratory talk. Piaget believed the pupils'

knowledge andunderstanding is a process, it cannot be simply transmitted to learners; itarises from interactions between the subject and the knowledge.

As such, theseinteractions should be directly modelled through activities which includeexploratory talk. Children are therefore active agents in the construction oftheir knowledge. Collaborative learning provides children with opportunities toengage in exploratory talk, as it enables pupils to share their ideas in a safegroup setting and self-discover. When working collaboratively, Piaget believedthat children should be grouped together so that similar ability children werein the same group. The reasoning behind this was to ensure that they were notintimidated by a more knowledgeable other in the group and would be free todiscuss their ideas with those of a similar ability.