An exploration of barriers and enablers in critical reading

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Abstract

The teaching of reading in English primary schools has been subject to constant reform over the last three decades. It has also been subject to increasingly onerous prescription from central government, initially in terms of content and then with regard to classroom pedagogy. The programme for reading within the 2014 *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013) heralds a significant turnaround for the long-favoured and rigidly structured teacher-led guided approach is replaced with a broad discussion-based approach.

This shift is encouraging. Schools are awarded autonomy to use discussion in ways that benefit specific cohorts and, from an academic perspective, reading in school becomes a more social activity as befits the social construction of texts. A discussion-based approach moves away from the traditional question and answer format to allow ideas to be shared, explored and developed. Importantly for texts, discussion facilitates thinking at depth as differing and multiple interpretations are considered, challenged and reasoned. This is an essential skill in a world where children have ready access to multitudes of texts that vary in terms of quality and authenticity, and whose origins may not always be clear. Above all, discussion turns reading into an active and rich learning experience.

This sudden shift in direction however, also brings with it several concerns: curriculum content remains tightly packed, and schools continue to face high-stakes compulsory national testing and regular reporting to a growing number of stakeholders. There is also a notable lack of guidance from central government with regard to how best to support reading development through this approach. This is a stark contrast to previous curriculum revisions.

I argue that whilst the absence of pedagogical guidance offers a measure of freedom to schools, experimentation can be costly. It takes time and commitment, and the emphasis on public accountability requires observable gains over the short term. Many schools seek advice from external consultants or draw from seemingly ‘tried and tested’ commercially produced schemes for support. These are often derived from the narrow foci of assessment frameworks rather than grounded in academic research, or informed by

experienced teaching professionals. Whilst such schemes may assist children to reach politically defined age-related expectations for reading, their ability to promote advanced reading skills, such as critical reading, is questionable. The government's aim of creating school-wide cultures of reading for pleasure could well inspire future generations of motivated readers. However, the skills that support depth of understanding and challenging of text authenticity need to be made explicit to children if they are to cope with the array of texts that they are likely to encounter beyond the school setting.

This study, conducted between November 2016 and August 2019, explores how one urban primary school, in an East Midlands town, has responded to the revised curriculum for reading. Its large size and ethnically diverse population are representative of challenges faced by many of today's English primary schools. The study explores how talk is currently being used within year four reading sessions using a broad grounded approach. Findings from these sessions, interviews with pupils, and meetings with the class teacher, reveal the existence of several dominant pedagogies that appear to heavily constrain the depth to which children engage with texts and thus, the development of reading skills. Many of these pedagogies are associated with performativity. Case study methodology facilitates exploration of a whole-school approach to reading. Findings from an interview with the English Lead and a range of documentation related to the reading curriculum, draw attention to the deeply ingrained nature of the culture of performativity. Together, the findings indicate that there is a strong need for further support to help schools make the most of this increase in pedagogical autonomy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.0 Background to the study

The growth of the internet and developments in multi-media have contributed to the diverse range of reading opportunities that are currently available to children. The speed at which texts are made available within the public domain means that readers are able to closely follow their own interests and keep abreast of actions and events as soon as they occur. Arguably, the incentive to read has never been greater.

For schools, the wealth of different text types and reading modes affords plentiful opportunities to foster positive reading habits and an extensive array of reading skills. Some texts also afford opportunities for pupils to engage in authentic conversations about real-world issues, with the potential to influence change in the local community or at a societal level. The variability of quality and credibility of some of these texts, and their occasionally ambiguous or questionable origins and messages, provide a strong case for children to engage in critical reading. Through reading in this way, children examine and evaluate how texts "reflect the position of the writer and aim also to position the reader…the

worldviews they represent and the social impact of those texts" (Govender, 2022:1), with a view to exposing the bias contained within them. The recent tide of misinformation around important issues such as COVID-19 (Fleming, 2020) further highlights the need for such skills. The classroom provides a safe space for pupils to explore and challenge sensitive societal issues. Furthermore, activities designed to promote children's development in critical reading can also support schools in their execution of the *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013) for reading.

This aspect of reading, which I discuss in more depth within Chapter 2 (section 2.5.4), is of importance to me as both a parent and a teacher. Since qualifying in 2009, my teaching practice has encompassed primary, secondary, and adult education settings. Although I occupied a secondary teacher role during the year in which the revised (2014) curriculum came into force, I had worked as a primary class teacher during the preceding year. One year after its introduction, I returned to this setting as a day-to-day primary 'supply' teacher'. I continue to occupy this role.

With so many options now available to readers, I found it both surprising and concerning to discover that there appears to be a growing trend of low motivation towards reading among children. Pupils in both primary and secondary

schools reacted with expressions of reluctance and dislike when instructed to read, particularly when it involved a book.

I sympathised with secondary children to a large extent, owing to the narrow range of 'set' texts that they experienced in preparation for national examinations. As an English teacher, I had limited control over text selection, and sometimes no control at all, for this often hinged on resource availability and growing class sizes.

To observe low motivation in young children however, is extremely concerning in respect of their personal enjoyment and reading skill development. It is also likely to have a negative impact on their progress in secondary education (noted by Wharton-McDonald and Swiger (2009) in relation to American schools). Conversations with pupils and teachers across a diverse range of educational and geographic settings, in my 'supply' teacher capacity, led me to suspect that the issue was far more than a gender, cultural or socio-economically based one. I needed to investigate further.

1.1 A teacher's perspective

At the outset of this study, the revised *National Curriculum* had only been in effect for a year. To see if I could begin to account for the issue with reading motivation, I began by reflecting on my own recent experiences of teaching reading in the primary phase.

1.1.1 Reading prior to the 2014 curriculum

Prior to the revised curriculum, reading was taught primarily through small group guided reading. I discuss this approach in section 2.3 (Chapter 2). The introduction of the *Primary National Strategy (PNS)* (DfES, 2006a) during my initial teacher training period meant that I received specialist training and opportunities to practise using the format in several schools, supported by experienced teachers. These experiences helped to shape my practice and by the time it came to taking on a class of my own, I felt confident with the approach.

Although I managed these sessions in the same way, I also felt the pressure of the increased accountability for pupil progress now that I was no longer a student teacher. There

was a lot to cram into the twenty-minute sessions. Owing to the busy timetable, for example, there was little time for me to listen to individuals read. By working with a different group each week, the guided sessions enabled me to hear each pupil at least once over the course of a half term. I also needed to keep current records of children's reading skill use in order to regularly share data with the school, pupils, and their parents. Focussing on particular skills during each session meant that I could pre-plan targeted questions to prompt their use. However, I frequently found myself spontaneously devising questions to support less confident children to express their ideas, to push more confident children, and to try to 'fill in the gaps' on pupils' skills records. Some texts, especially the lower banded books from commercial schemes, did not always lend themselves to this process, for there was often little content for me to work with. Invariably my attention had to be shared between the group and the rest of the class, as I was often the only adult in the room. The guided sessions were also fast paced to ensure that every member of the group had an opportunity to read aloud and participate in conversation sufficiently for me to be able to make judgements about their progress. This, together with the content of some texts, provided little scope for exploring texts together.

When I read the new curriculum documentation, published in 2013, I was hopeful that the advocation of 'discussion' would put an end to the intense question driven conversations, so that children could have an opportunity to talk about aspects of texts that interested them. With more freedom, I anticipated that pupils would find sessions more meaningful and enjoyable, and that there would be a positive impact on attitudes towards reading. Importantly, the open nature of discussion would form a strong foundation on which to develop critical reading skills.

1.1.2 Reading under the 2014 curriculum

Maintaining a classroom presence as a 'supply' teacher, since the start of the 2015/2016 academic year, has enabled me to keep abreast of developments in pedagogy, and observe how different schools responded to the revised reading curriculum. Planning tended to be provided by schools, affording a sense of continuity for pupils and opportunities through which I could develop my own teaching practice. During this time, I have been asked to use a range of different approaches to teach reading to key stage one and two pupils, which I summarise below.

- Informal discussion during the sharing of a class novel or following independent reading with an adult.
- Whole class shared reading followed by a 'quiz' concerned primarily with content retrieval.
- Independent peer-led reciprocal reading variations similar to that described by Palincsar, and Palincsar and Brown (discussed in Duke and Pearson, 2002) with children taking on different roles such as leader, questioner, clarifier. (Notably, children's questions tended to be literal rather than inferential, focussed on 'how many' and 'who').
- Small groups read, with one accompanied by the teacher. Each group reads a different book. Generic discussion questions are displayed on the board, such as how does the story hook the reader? Questions are derived from a published scheme.
- The teacher leads a small group. Independent reading is followed by a set of questions. The teacher supports the written element. Materials are from a published scheme.
- Teacher-led questioning in small groups to meet specific age-related curriculum-based objectives (responses are tracked: no evidence, beginning to provide evidence, some or strong evidence).

The above range of practices suggests that children's shared reading experiences vary widely following the removal of the guided group approach from national policy. I find it interesting that the teacher continues to lead talk in the majority of the practices, even though a broad discussion-based approach is now advocated, for this mirrors the former guided format. Diversity is to be expected since schools now have the autonomy to decide how to approach the teaching of reading within their school. However, the effectiveness of all these approaches for skill development is questionable. Teachers' concerns over this may be fuelling the growing popularity of commercially published schemes, such as Pie Corbett's Reading Spine (2015) and Jane Considine's Book Talk (2015).

1.2 Policy guidance and support

Within the 2014 revision of the *National Curriculum*, there is little guidance on what reading sessions should look like, or how to use discussion to promote children's development in reading. Ambiguity also exists in relation to the key terms and concepts around reading. In reference to 'discussion', schools are advised to teach the "conventions for

discussion" and to "elaborate and explain clearly their understanding and ideas" (DfE, 2014:4). This reflects the traditional positioning of talk as a skill (Knight, 2020) and also appears contradictory to the revised curriculum's advocation of learning through discussion. Guidance that specifically relates to talking about texts is rare, if not non-existent.

In the past, programmes such as Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif's (2003) *Thinking Together*, have aimed to improve the quality of talk across the curriculum. Programmes such as this have tended to involve collaborative enquiry. But, as Knight (2020:49) notes, "not all subjects are as inherently associated with enquiry". Texts are produced for a variety of audiences and purposes. Added to this, is the plethora of different genres, conventions, and modes through which texts may be published and subsequently read or viewed. For practical reasons, the texts used in the classroom may be reproduced in an altogether different format or mode from that originally produced. Moreover, the content of a single text may be connected to any number of different topics, setting the subject area of reading (and literacy as a whole) apart from other, more distinct, areas of the curriculum. This raises the possibility that productive text-related discussion might look different to the types of talk likely to be encountered within other curriculum subjects. Combined with

the complex nature of reading, which is largely cognitive, there is a strong case for greater support to be provided to schools. Primarily, this should be in the form of additional guidance, but might also include a range of resources to facilitate lively and engaging discussion among teachers and pupils.

This is an issue of great importance as empirically-based approaches for stimulating text-related talk tend to focus on the promotion of specific reading, thinking, and talking skills and strategies. Ultimately, they aim to transfer agency for talk to pupils. Reciprocal Reading, for example, features prediction, questioning, summary and clarification strategies with the aim of promoting text comprehension and comprehension monitoring skills (Palincsar and Brown, 1984). The onus is on understanding "major content" and "main ideas" (ibid:120), and the critical element is concerned with monitoring understanding. Collaborative Reasoning promotes thinking skills through one or more 'central questions' (of a dichotomous nature) about key issues featured with a text. Whilst peers adopt a critical stance when considering the multiple perspectives that must be present within the texts used, "mastery of the events stated in the story is not the main objective" (Waggoner, Chinn, Yi and Anderson, 1995:588). Unlike these approaches, critical

reading (defined earlier in section 1.0) promotes depth of reading and understanding, and is not bound by particular skills or strategies.

1.3 The aims of this study

I began my study with two broad aims:

- to identify the school-based factors affecting the decline I was observing in children's reading motivation, with a view to finding ways to help schools address the issue;
- through a focus on classroom talk, to identify the various reading skills that children are developing through the reading curriculum, with a view to determining how schools could be supported to develop critical reading practices. Skills are both physical (involving the manner in which reading is conducted, such as skimming the text), and cognitive in nature (as different types of information within and beyond the text are drawn from when constructing meaning and generating inferences). I discuss reading processes further in section 2.1.1.2 (Chapter 2).

In recognition of the role of talk as “the currency of learning” (APPG, 2021:14), I decided to examine the conversations taking place during routine reading sessions. I was hopeful that a study of talk from these sessions would provide both insight into children’s thoughts and feelings about texts, and the types of reading skills they were using. I also hoped to understand how children were routinely encouraged to engage with reading and with texts during these sessions.

To accommodate in-depth exploration, I decided to conduct a small-scale case study. This enabled me to observe the interactions of a single class over several sessions, through which I hoped to be able to address the following research questions:

- What might talk look like as advanced critical reading skills are developed?
- What forms might support to develop such talk take?

I began by conducting a short pilot study of year four routine reading sessions in order to explore the role of talk in developing advanced reading comprehension skills. To aid clarity, I define ‘comprehension’ as “the ability to make sense of the ideas expressed in a text” (Brooks, Hulme, Merrell,

Savage, Slavin and Snowling, 2020). ‘Advanced’ skills are those that indicate reflection on meaning beyond information explicitly stated within a text.

After finding few of the children’s own ideas in pilot study data, I modified the main phase of my study design to provide opportunities for pupils to talk freely and independently with peers. At the same time, I broadened my research questions to facilitate exploration of the potential to promote reading skill development across all session talk. Findings from analysis of talk content and structure, which I undertook directly after each session, led to further modification as it became necessary to find a way to provide greater space in which the children could talk. After conducting thematic analysis of my dataset, I subsequently broadened my research through a study of the school’s reading curriculum. Through this, I explored the rationale behind the pedagogies around reading, and gained a deeper understanding of their use during routine reading sessions.

1.4 Outline of the thesis

In the following chapter, I set out my review of literatures. Within this, I discuss two different views of

reading and how the reader is positioned through them. My discussion of the associated theoretical models and frameworks draws attention to the highly complex nature of textual comprehending, and the simplified way in which the concept is presented to schools through policy. An overview of the evolution of this policy is included. I then move my focus to the classroom to discuss the organisation of reading sessions, and teacher and pupil roles within them. I discuss different ways of talking about reading within these sessions, moving from traditional teacher-led approaches to more collaborative forms of talk, before drawing the chapter to a close with a discussion of critical reading.

My study methodology follows within Chapter 3, where I discuss my research questions, the design of my study, and the philosophical perspectives underpinning it. A brief discussion of my pilot study findings is also included, as these contributed to the main study design. I provide a procedural overview of the study and a detailed account of the different sources of data collected.

I discuss my findings across four chapters, each of which is concerned with a distinct context. An overview is provided in table 3.3. Structuring my thesis in this way facilitates detailed description and discussion for each context, and for transition from whole school policy and

pedagogy, to the routine reading sessions of a single class, and a small group of pupils within it.

Chapter 4 comprises a detailed account of the school's reading curriculum, drawing extensively from my dataset (see Chapter 3 (tables 3.2 and 3.3) for further details). I begin with a profile of the school in which I describe its geographical location and the community it serves, including the characteristics of its current cohort. I then describe the reading curriculum, its rationale, and the key pedagogies and resources that support its delivery. As I draw the chapter to a close, I focus on the pupils and their views about the reading activities that they participate in, both within and beyond the school setting.

Within Chapter 5, I focus solely on the reading sessions. I describe the interactional settings in which research activities took place and the texts used to support them. I then provide a detailed account of the individual sessions, illustrating how, and why, their format evolved as the study progressed. In addition to drawing from data captured during the sessions (including audio recordings, participant annotations, and field observations), I refer to data from planning and review meetings with the class teacher, together with that from pupil interviews. I end the chapter

with a summary of the main findings relating to these sessions.

In Chapters 6 and 7, I return to the ‘bigger picture’ and report on my findings from thematic analysis of the entire dataset. In these chapters, I describe, exemplify, and discuss several dominant themes found to influence children’s engagement with reading and related activities. Those specifically concerned with reading curriculum policy are presented in Chapter 6. I present several further practices in Chapter 7 which, despite not being directly related to reading pedagogy, were found to have considerable bearing on children’s engagement with reading activities.

I conclude my study in Chapter 8. Here, I discuss the key issues for children’s reading development and set out what needs to change to benefit pupils across both the short term, and the long term.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.0 Introduction

The multi-disciplinary nature of reading and talk necessitates an extensive review of literature. Within this chapter I therefore explore national reading policy and real-world social reading demands, the ways in which reading and comprehension are conceptualised, and the use of talk within the classroom to support children's textual comprehension development.

2.1 Views of reading

Principally, there are two contrasting views of reading through which it is considered to be an educational activity or a social activity. These affect how comprehension is perceived, the approaches used for teaching and learning, and the range of resources used to promote development within the classroom. The existence of such differing viewpoints raises questions about the ways in which individual progress is understood, which in turn raises questions about suitable methods of measurement. I begin

by exploring how reading has traditionally been viewed within educational policy.

2.1.1 Reading and comprehension for educational purposes

The first legislative act to demonstrate "a commitment to provision [of education in Britain] on a national scale" was the Education Act of 1870. However, education for five to ten-year olds only became compulsory following the passing of the 1880 Education Act (Parliament UK, 2017). It was not long after these Acts that concerns began to be expressed about declining standards. Frater (in Raban-Bisby, Brooks and Wolfendale, 1995) for example, notes that by as early as 1886 "anxiety about reading standards was being expressed" (1995:6) and comments on how, after successions of official enquiries over the years, standards of reading, writing and spoken English have been perceived to be falling.

The most recent overhaul came about during the 1970s in response to the government's perception of a growing national workplace need for strong literacy skills. This need prompted a major review of teaching and learning from early years through to secondary level, in preparation for adult life, and culminated in a report by the DfES in 1975 entitled *A*

language for life (also known as The Bullock Report). Within this report was a proposal for a view of reading that encompassed print decoding and the range of demands placed upon the reader, described in terms of 'Primary', 'Intermediate' and 'Comprehension' skills. This document together with perceived shortcomings in the teaching of literacy skills identified through official (DfES) surveys of primary education in 1978 and 1982, were significant factors in the move away from the non-discrete teaching of reading skills to the strategy-based approach adopted by the first *National Curriculum* (DfES and Welsh Office, 1989, 1990).

Regardless of content modifications throughout the various revisions of the statutory national curriculum document, reading has been, and continues to be, regarded as a 'functional' activity. Competence is achieved through the acquisition and mastery of cognitive processes (or skills) to enable individuals "to cope with the demands of living in a print society" (Hall, 1998:185). As a consequence, being "…able to read fluently, and with confidence…" (DfE, 2013:4) is perceived as the ultimate goal of primary school readers, in preparation for "real education" throughout secondary school and beyond (Alexander, 2001:131). Comprehension is therefore viewed as a goal of the reading process and is assessed formally at the end of each key stage. Written tests

require readers to respond to a series of questions designed to explore understanding at literal surface and inferential levels, and elicit personal evaluation.

Notably, these assessments carry substantial risk for the school community, for they form part of a wider performance monitoring system through which schools are measured and compared locally and nationally (through the online *School Performance Tables* (DfE, 2022), for example). These indicators of performance also facilitate comparison of education systems on a global scale (Elliot, 2001). The pressure to achieve extends from pupils, who are also aware of the pressures faced by their teachers (Robinson and Fielding, 2009), through to school leadership. It is here that accountability for individual pupil attainment and progress ultimately rests (Standards and Testing Agency, 2018). However, differences in local community characteristics (such as socio-economic status, attitudes towards learning and cultural backgrounds) result in a far from level playing field for schools who have, traditionally, been criticised by state and media for failings of the education system (Merson, 2001). This, coupled with the short-term nature of educational goals (Husbands, 2001) owing to the political drivers of educational policy and its use as a tool to gain "electoral advantage" (Alexander, 2001:144), generates

tension for schools who are faced with the task of finding a balance between short-term productivity and experiences that offer their local community long-term benefits in the performativity trade-off (discussed by Ball, 2012).

2.1.1.1 Reading conceptualised within educational policy

This goal-oriented view of reading is reflected within the conceptual 'Simple View of Reading' (SVR) (figure 2.1), which underpinned the revised framework for teaching in the *Primary National Strategy* (DfES, 2006a; referred to elsewhere as *PNS*). In order to be considered a good reader, individuals must be proficient in two dimensions of reading: word recognition and language comprehension.

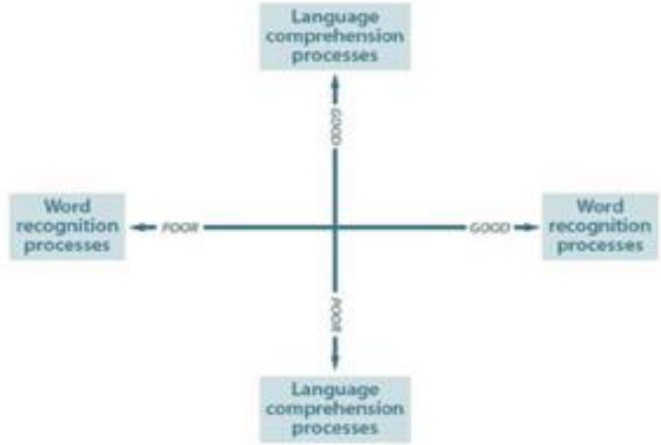


Figure 2.1: The 'Simple View of Reading' (SVR) initially proposed by Gough and Tunmer

(1986) and subsequently revised by Stuart and Stainthorpe (extracted from the Rose review, DES, 2006:53).

Lonigan, Burgess and Schatschneider (2018) are among those who support the SVR, which suggests that word recognition and language comprehension are the key components of reading comprehension, and that "any additional component process that might be identified would play a relatively minor direct role" (2018:271). However, there are many who argue that the framework is inadequate. These arguments centre upon the way that the dimensions are presented, and the many aspects of textual comprehending not addressed by the framework.

Arguing that the SVR fails to take into account changes in the way that the dimensions interact as the reader develops proficiency, Paris and Hamilton (2009:34) comment that the two dimensions are presented as being "…equally weighted variables across time, texts, and contexts." In reality however, decoding skills are "learned relatively quickly" whilst language comprehension skills "develop from infancy through adulthood" (ibid). Interestingly, the latter comment is indicative of bottom-up processing with word decoding leading to development of comprehending skills, even though Gough and Turner claim otherwise (in Hoffman,

2009). Bottom-up processing would seem to be true where the goal is achieving reading fluency (Hoffman, ibid).

In respect of various omissions, the SVR fails to take into account the reader's own knowledge and experience (discussed in Harrison, 2010) and the effect of subsequent re-readings of a text (Harrison, 2004), suggesting that decoding and comprehending are the primary goals of reading. Contextual information, as may be found within images (Kirby and Savage cited in Dombey, 2009), is also omitted and thus supports existing policy which appears to favour printed texts. Similarly, there is no reference to the different processes involved in listening to oral texts which, due to their transient nature, do not facilitate re-reading or variation of reading pace (Dombey, 2009). Such omissions appear to be a backward step from the previously advocated 'Searchlights' model of reading which acknowledged the role of context (DfEE, 2000; figure 2.2).

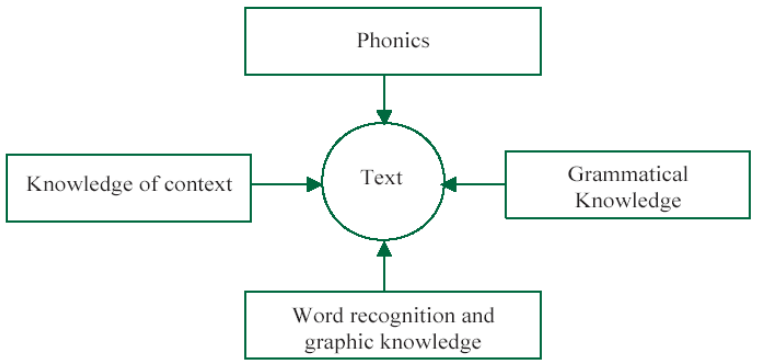


Figure 2.2: The 'Searchlights' model of reading
(extracted from DfEE, 2000:32)

To a small extent, the SVR can serve as a diagnostic tool to support the identification of reading difficulties in relation to the two dimensions (Hoffman, 2009). However, the lack of information about the actual processes of 'comprehension', or reference to underlying theory or models of reading upon which the framework is based (ibid), prevent deeper diagnosis. Information in support of the 'Searchlights' model was equally scant, which in my opinion raises questions in respect of the usefulness of these conceptual views for teaching purposes. Whilst it may be argued that theoretical models of reading are aimed at specialists rather than practitioners, I argue that teachers would benefit from a wider awareness of the processes of reading in view of the diversity now found within the primary school population (Alexander, 2010). Associated issues are discussed in the

following section, together with examples of models of reading.

2.1.1.2 Reading: processes, problems and policy

Reading requires considerable attention, memory and high-level language processing (Castles, Rastle and Nation, 2018). Bi- and multi-lingual children face additional challenges in comparison to mono-lingual children owing to complexities around the storage and accessing of lexical and conceptual information (discussed in Harley, 2008). There are further processing differences for those simultaneously learning English and another language, in contrast to those acquiring English after learning another (Harley, ibid). Policy guidance however, makes no distinction between these different groups of learners, and refers generically to pupils for whom English is an additional language (EAL). One explanation could be that whilst basic interpersonal communicative skills (or conversational skills) develop regardless of IQ or academic aptitude (Cummins, 1979), it is likely that schools will need to support children in their development of the cognitive and academic language “necessary for academic success” (DfES, 2006b). It is known

that these pupils tend to follow a different (u-shaped) path of progression in contrast to their mono-lingual peers (Harley, ibid), as it may take five years or more to catch up with the academic skills (DfES, ibid). Their progress in reading, however, is judged in line with the national age-related expectations derived from the statutory curriculum despite length of residence, rather than age on arrival, being the main influence on language development (Cummins, ibid).

If teachers are to provide adequate support for ***all*** learners, there exists strong argument for teachers to possess a deeper understanding of the theory of reading than currently offered through policy documentation. Furthermore, differences in the activation of the culturally relevant background information needed for inference generation (Burgoyne, Whiteley and Hutchinson, 2013), indicates that conceptualisations of reading ought to include contextual information.

Although advancements in eye-tracking (such as van der Schoot, Vasbinder, Horsley and van Lieshout, 2008) and brain imaging techniques (such as Keller, Carpenter and Just, 2003) have enabled exploration of how texts are physically read, exactly how an interpretation of a text is reached is less clear as it is not possible to directly observe physical meaning in order to truly validate models of reading. The general

consensus among theorists is that readers *construct* a mental representation of texts to aid interpretation (Flood, 1984; Anderson and Pearson, 1984; Keene and Zimmermann, 1997; Kintsch, 2005; Rapp and van den Broek, 2005; Pressley and Gaskins, 2006; Kendeou, McMaster and Christ, 2016; Tennent, Reedy, Hobsbaum and Gamble, 2016; and others) and that the processing of text is dynamic since mental representations are updated as the reader encounters new material (Harley, 2008), such as that encountered as the reader continues through a text, or when re-reading the whole or part of a text. Several models have been particularly influential in developing understanding of the processes involved (discussed in Schwanenflugel and Knapp, 2016; Harley, 2008) and these are summarised below:

- *The dual route model* (favoured by Coltheart, 2006; figure 2.3) within which the reader accesses words (including irregular words) with meanings contained in the reader's lexicon, and has access to grapheme-phoneme correspondence rules to be able to read nonwords. In terms of processing directionality, decoding takes place alongside processing for meaning.

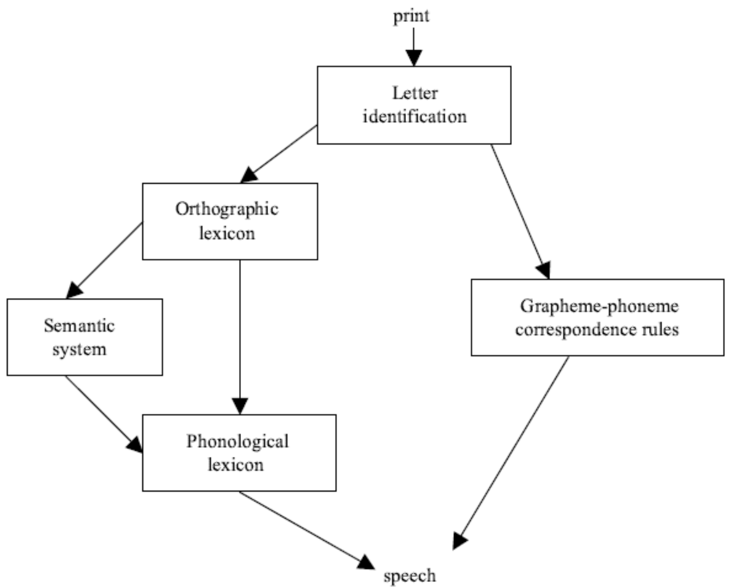


Figure 2.3: **Model of dual-route theory of reading aloud**
(extracted from Coltheart, 2006:9)

- *The connectionist model* (subscribed to by Seidenberg, 2005, figure 2.4) where processing is multi-directional as information relating to spelling, phonology, and meaning are accessed by the reader in the form of a network.

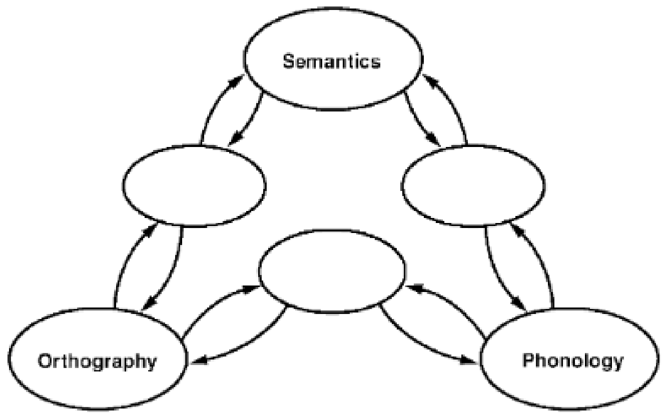


Figure 2.4: Connectionist model of reading
(introduced by Seidenberg and McClelland, 1989 and extracted from Seidenberg, 2005:239)

- *Schema theoretic views of reading* (a view supported by Rumelhart, 1984) where knowledge (about things, of things, and how things happen) and experiential memories concerned with a specific topic form a schema. Each schema contains connections to many other topic-related schemas, all of which are continuously updated as new knowledge is gained. Schemas are activated by the reader from the onset of reading as they search for an appropriate scheme to help make sense of the text. Processing is predominantly top-down; driven by concepts, with little attention to decoding (Schwanenflugel and Knapp, 2016).

- *The construction-integration (CI) model* (proposed by Kintsch, 1988) which posits that comprehension occurs through a 'construction phase'. During this phase an initial representation derived from surface text information (including wording and syntax) evolves as various text propositions are processed (such as those arising from ideas created through text-related associations accessed from memory). Activation of related propositions, and inhibition of minor or unrelated propositions, takes place within an 'integration phrase' so that ambiguities and contradictions are resolved. Processing continues as more text is read and is therefore both top-down and bottom-up in nature.

- *The direct and inferential mediation (DIME) model* which "hypothesizes that comprehension is a function of an organized set of cognitive skills, specifically background knowledge, inference capabilities, strategy use, reading vocabulary, and word reading/fluency skills" (Schwanenflugel and Knapp, 2016:186). Notably, background knowledge and vocabulary make the largest contribution to comprehension (Cromley

and Azevedo, 2007). Like the CI model above, both top-down and bottom-up processing takes place.

Importantly, although there is no single accepted model of reading, these models serve to demonstrate how the construction of meaning from texts involves highly complex and often simultaneous processing of many different types of information. Processing is also dynamic and bi-directional, with mental representations being re-constructed as new information is processed, such as when reading on, re-reading, or through reflecting on reading. Duke and Pearson (2002:206) for example, note that for good readers, "text processing occurs not only during 'reading'… also during short breaks taken during reading, even after the 'reading' itself has commenced, even after the 'reading' has ceased." This presents a strikingly contrasting depiction of reading to that presented in the SVR.

Additionally, the above models draw attention to the role of contextual information, especially in relation to the reader's prior or background knowledge (including that stored within schemas). These knowledges (which are described by Keene and Zimmerman (1997) as knowledge acquired through personal experiences, knowledge of the world and knowledge from other texts) are entirely absent from the

SVR. This omission risks an emphasis on decoding skills at the expense of meaning (Burgoyne, Kelly, Whiteley and Spooner, 2009).

2.1.1.3 Inference conceptualised

Much like the SVR and theoretical models of reading, there are also conflicting views of inference within education policy and research literatures. As a “centrally important component of comprehension” (Tennent, 2015:81) it is, perhaps, surprising that policy presents inference as a unitary construct concerned with reading beyond the literal (Williams, 2014), with processing conducted after reading has finished (Tennent, ibid). Particularly, as Kispal (2008) referred to both online (those drawn automatically during reading) and offline (those drawn strategically after reading) inference types in a literature review report commissioned by the DCSF in advance of the publication of the 2014 curriculum. It could be argued that this simplified view of inference may be forgiven in view of the difficulties in attempting to substantiate different types, since little is known about the process of inference-making and no model exists (Tennent, ibid). Tennent, for example, assembled a list of 51 inference types

but warns, like Kispal, of potential overlaps across the different types.

According to the English programme of study (DfE, 2013), children are expected to make inferences based upon the action of characters within texts. At key stage one, inference is "…on the basis of what is being said and done" (2013:11). At key stage two, pupils engage in "…inferring characters' feelings, thoughts and motives from their actions…" (2013:26). The fundamental difference in curriculum expectations is that older children (key stage two) are also expected to provide evidence from texts to justify their inferences, mirroring research findings which suggest that children of all ages are able to make inferences, with accuracy developing with age (Tennent, 2015; and discussed in Baumann, 2009).

Some researchers, such as Williams (2014:95), are concerned that such a limited view of inference may lead to an "instructional deficit". Tennent (2015) seeks to avoid this issue when suggesting that inference types be classified as those made 'during' reading and those conducted 'after' reading. Tennent also advises that 'coherence' inferences (which are conducted 'during' reading and tend to be processed automatically) and 'interrogative' inferences (which take place 'after' reading and deepen understanding

once textual coherence has been established) are most useful to classroom practice. These categories of inference are presented below in table 2.1 below.

For teachers to support development of textual comprehending, Tennent (ibid) draws attention to the need to establish coherent understanding of a text before interrogating it. This procedure receives little attention within the curriculum, despite it being necessary in order for children to begin to make evaluative judgements about texts. Tennent argues that interrogative inferences also help readers to arrive at these judgements. In my opinion, this necessitates reflection at whole text level. This view appears contrary to the focus of formal assessment (SATs), which is centred upon word, sentence, and paragraph level features. It also raises further questions about the suitability of the SATs framework (DfE, 2016) as a reliable method of measuring reading progress.

Inference type	Category	Summary descriptor / example
Anaphors	Coherence	Resolution of pronouns: e.g., The children built a sandcastle. It [the house] took a long time to build.
Bridging	Coherence	Connecting new information with previously read information (includes causal bridging where one sentence explains another): e.g., House built. Then children destroyed it. Their parents were not happy. [The parents built a 'house' but were unhappy because the children had destroyed it.]
Predictive	Coherence	Anticipating future events based on our own knowledge and experiences whilst reading a text.
Elaborative	Interrogative	Extra information gathered to enrich our mental representation of a text but which is not necessary for coherence: e.g., The parents built a house [using a hammer and nails, and possibly other tools].
Deductive	Interrogative	Drawing conclusions from clues explicitly stated within the text.
Inductive	Interrogative	Drawing logically plausible conclusions using background knowledge to supplement text-based clues as, for example, when determining a narrative's setting when it is not explicitly stated. E.g., 'It was a dark, stormy … aaaargggh!' [something has happened to a character].

Table 2.1: Inference types likely to support curriculum teaching

(adapted from Tennent, 2015)

2.1.1.4 Vocabulary and comprehension

Researchers widely agree that vocabulary and reading comprehension are closely connected (discussed in Castles *et al.*, 2018; Tennent, 2015; Baumann, 2009; Cromley and Azevedo, 2007). It may also be argued that their relationship is bi-directional for whilst a "low vocabulary constrains comprehension" (Castles *et al.*, 2018:29), being able to comprehend may allow vocabulary knowledge to be extended (Tennant, 2015).

Although the English curriculum programme makes reference to the role of vocabulary (often alongside reference to grammar), its emphasis is on word recognition (decoding) as pupils "acquire a wide vocabulary" (DfE, 2013:3). Yet, rich vocabulary knowledge requires far more than familiarity with a wide range of words in view of the polysemous nature of the English vocabulary, and use of idioms and figurative expressions within texts (Castles *et al.,* ibid). Thus, it is important for children to develop knowledge of words across a range of different contexts. This learning begins at home, prior to formal education (Tennent, ibid).

Early experiences of learning vocabulary have been found to significantly impact upon future vocabulary and comprehension development (Hart and Risley, 2003). One of

the problems for schools is the variation in pupils' out-of-school vocabulary learning experiences. Extrapolation of Hart and Risley's (ibid) data from observation of home-based interactions indicated that, by four years of age, the vocabularies of children from professional, working-class and welfare families could comprise around 45 million, 26 million, and 13 million words, respectively. This means that a child from a family in receipt of government benefits may enter school with a vocabulary that is half the size of a child from an average working-class background. Some 93% of primary school teachers and 95% of secondary school teachers in the UK attribute the word gap to "a lack of time spent reading for pleasure" (Teachit and OUP, 2018), supporting the view that independent reading can support vocabulary acquisition and word knowledge development (Baumann, 2009). In contrast, the effect on vocabulary through text read-alouds or talking about reading appears almost negligible (Baumann, ibid).

Word gap ideology positions the language of speakers from low-income families as deficient when compared to their privileged peers. This is a contested view however. Sperry, Sperry and Miller (2019b:1313) questioned the gap's existence after finding that the number of words used by Black Belt community participants in their study (which was comparable to Hart and Risley's Welfare category sample)

"was nearly as great as HR's Professional community". Following observations of other variation across their data and that of Hart and Risley's study, they concluded that "the amount of speech…cannot be predicted by SES [socio-economic status] alone" (2019a:994). Socio-linguistic and cultural variation is also highlighted by Cushing (2020) and Rogoff, Coppens, Alcalá, Aceves-Azuara, Ruvalcaba, López and Dayton (2017). This was overlooked by Hart and Risley who simply conflated language with number of words (Cushing, 2020). By focussing only on the language addressed directly to children by their primary caregivers, Hart and Risley also overlooked speech from multiple caregivers and overheard speech (Sperry, Sperry and Miller, 2019a). Other language skills such as "sophisticated use of metaphor" and "language dueling versatility" (Rogoff *et al.*, ibid), and the language and interactional features surrounding the speech (Blum, 2017) were similarly overlooked.

There appears to be no correlation between age and vocabulary acquisition as children acquire vocabulary at different rates (Biemiller (2005) cited in Tennent, 2015). Direct teaching during early intervention programmes has not been found to have long-lasting effects on future vocabulary growth (Hart and Risley, ibid). It is, perhaps, for these

reasons that vocabulary instruction (beyond that associated with grammatical terminology) is not included within official curriculum documentation, an observation also noted by Tennant (ibid). Instead, teachers are advised to use naturally arising opportunities in reading and writing activities to enhance children's vocabularies (DfE, 2013).

Interestingly, although no formal instruction is recommended within educational policy, knowledge of word meaning is one of the skills that has been prioritised within the end of key stage two 2016 statutory assessment framework (DfE, 2016). These assessments are one of the many pressures faced by schools that I discuss further in general terms within section 2.2.1 of this chapter, and in relation to the case study school within section 4.4.1 (*Pupil progress*) of Chapter 4.

2.1.2 Reading and comprehension for real-world purposes

In contrast to the educational view of reading, real texts are considered to be socially, culturally and historically situated (Robinson, 1977) since they are shaped for a specific purpose (such as inform, argue, explain and so on) and with a particular audience in mind. Contextual information is

central to understanding and comprehension is viewed as a means to achieve a specific social and intellectual purpose or goal (Luke, Dooley and Woods, 2011). Reading (and writing) is a social activity, where members of society use texts to communicate with one another. Parvin (2018) notes that the current Scottish curriculum has adopted this view of reading, which includes non-continuous texts (such as charts and graphs), continuous texts (traditional prose, for example), and various digital media (such as film, social networking) within its broad definition of 'texts'. It is, however, uncertain whether the English curriculum will follow suit.

Under this view, real-world social and cultural experiences are valued and influence the ways in which meaning is constructed. Through sharing experiences during interactions with others, individuals can extend their knowledge and develop their own understanding of texts. Peer group working provides a way to facilitate this within the classroom, and for agency to pass to the reader.

Importantly, a 'social' view of reading places equal value on the roles of both the writer and the reader, since texts are recognised as being ideologically positioned. They contain attitudes, values, and prejudices held by the writer, in addition to content specifically designed to influence the reader in some way in order to achieve a particular purpose.

Put simply, texts are biased and need to be critically evaluated by the reader during meaning making processing. In doing so, readers draw on a range of contextual information available to them both within the text (textual information) and related to the text (intertextual information). Remarkably, this notion of 'critical' reading, which requires that the reader question the accuracy and authenticity of texts, bias and prejudices, was discussed within the report, *A language for life* (DfES, 1975), yet never passed into statutory guidance. The report also commented on the importance of questioning what the writer does **not** say in their text, a point that would seem particularly pertinent to texts overtly designed to manipulate the reader. Advertisers, for example, carefully avoid words, phrases or ideas that could communicate negative connotations about their product or service.

The social dimension of texts also draws attention to the wide-ranging modes through which texts may be communicated. Although multi-modal texts (film and internet, for example) have received some acknowledgement within educational policy, photography, music and sculpture could also be perceived as modes (according to Serafini, 2012), emphasising the range of possible mode combinations in addition to the variety of text types. According to Green,

Yeager and Castanheira (2008), who explored the social construction of everyday texts, memories, past actions and past events can also be regarded as texts. These texts are subject to constant modification as the reader undergoes new experiences, and are also pivotal in comprehending other texts, for they represent the reader's pre-existing banks of knowledge. I discussed the construction of texts earlier in section 2.1.1.2 (above). Within Chapter 3, I discuss constructivism in relation to my methodology.

2.2 Contrasting views: the role of the reader

2.2.1 Education

Within educational policy the reader's (also listener's or viewer's) role is fundamentally one of decoding texts in order to interpret meaning. During the majority of primary phase learning, texts are regarded as discrete identities with little reference to intertextuality (Hartman, 1995). Deep and critically evaluative reading is associated with higher level skills where, for example, children at the end of key stage two are expected to compare two or more texts in preparation for cross-curricular subject learning at secondary phase (DfE, 2013).

Understandings achieved at surface level can be used to draw comparisons, and standardised national testing appears to perpetuate passive reading by inviting responses to pre-determined questions that are, for the most part, either right or wrong, as indicated in mark scheme documentation. Interpretations that differ from those prescribed are unlikely to acquire marks, whilst strict time conditions can also hinder individuals' reflective abilities and may affect readers' attitudes towards reading in the future. Further, the distribution of marks in relation to specific assessment foci (referred to as content domains and shown below in table 2.2), does little to encourage reflection on meaning of whole texts, for many of the descriptors are concerned with understanding at sentence or paragraph level. Only content domain reference 2f, for example, is indicative of understanding at whole text level, accounting for as little as 6% (or less) of the reading test currently administered. Similarly, domains that could promote wider reflection of texts feature vague reference to 'make comparisons', to draw 'from more than one paragraph', and identify 'key details'. These examples are also indicative of low-level inference skills. I suggest that there is a significant risk that teaching pedagogies that focus predominantly on addressing SATs content domains may actually be constraining children's

thinking about texts. They may also have a detrimental effect on future attitudes and motivations towards reading. There is also cause to question the value of these assessments in view of the lack of explicit description about the processing involved in constructing meaning from texts (Leslie and Caldwell, 2009).

Content domain reference	**Content domain descriptor**	**Percentage of marks available**
2a	Give / explain the meaning of words in context	10-20% of test
2b	Retrieve and record information / identify key details from fiction and non-fiction	16-50% of test
2c	Summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph	2-12% of test
2d	Make inferences from the text / explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text	16-50% of test
2e	Predict what might happen from details stated and implied	0-6% of test
2f	Identify / explain how information / narrative content is related and contributes to meaning as a whole	0-6% of test
2g	Identify / explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases	0-6% of test
2h	Make comparisons within the text	0-6% of test

Table 2.2: Percentage of total marks available for individual SATs reading content domains (adapted from the *2016 key*

stage 2 English reading test framework; DfE, 2016)

2.2.2 Real-world needs

When reading is regarded as a socially situated activity (as perceived, for example, by Freebody and Luke, 1990; Luke *et al.*, 2011; and Serafini, 2012) the reader's role is multi-faceted, reflecting the highly complex nature of reading (noted by Flood, 1984; Rumelhart, 1984; Harrison, 2010; and others). This is, perhaps, best illustrated in the four resources framework, originally devised by Freebody and Luke (1990) and later by Luke *et al.* (2011), and subsequently expanded for multi-modal texts (that is, those comprising of more than one mode) by Serafini (2012). Within this framework the reader draws on four sets of resources associated with different reader roles. These were later renamed by Luke and Freebody (1999:4) as a 'family of practices', to differentiate them from 'skills', reflect their dynamic and fluid nature, and emphasise "literacy as a social practice…tied up with political, cultural, and social power and capital." These 'practices' are outlined below:

- *code breaker* - encompassing knowledge of alphabet, grapho/phonemics, "...punctuation, print formatting, elements of lexicon and orthography, syntax and grammar" in oral, printed, visual and multi-modal texts (Luke *et al.*, 2011:156-7);
- *text participant/meaning maker* - drawing on individual funds of knowledge to form links between texts and other "social and textual worlds, known and new" when constructing possible meanings (Luke *et al.*, 2011:157);
- *text user* - understanding that texts are context specific, shaped by purpose and participants (writer and audience) (Freebody and Luke, 1990); and
- *text analyst* - understanding that texts are ideologically positioned from an authorial viewpoint as well as socially, culturally and historically, and are therefore biased in some manner and must be critically evaluated. In fiction, this can be related to character motivations or behaviours in relation to the narrative's historical context (Freebody and Luke, 1990).

Whilst recognising the many resources that the reader draws upon, which in turn demonstrates how the reader is actively engaged throughout reading processes, Freebody and Luke's framework also indicates that decoding (*code breaker*) involves far more than the mastery of word recognition skills documented within educational policy. Serafini (2012) identifies the different reader or viewer roles as *navigator, interpreter, designer* and *interrogator*; the latter of which involves exploring the different ways in which a text can be framed taking into consideration their production, reception, image and the text itself. Notably, this role (and that of *text analyst* in Luke *et al.'s* (2011) model) portrays the reader as being actively involved in critically evaluating the text, drawing on intertextual knowledge from historical, cultural and social contexts. Further, the sheer breadth and diversity of information being processed supports the notion of interconnected and parallel processing. This view is alluded to by Serafini (2012:151) when stating that none of the four resources "is mutually exclusive or sufficient in and of themselves to create an informed, literate citizenry", reinforcing Luke and Freebody's (1999:4) notion of inclusivity where each practice is "necessary but not sufficient for the achievement of the others."

In summary, the different perceptions of reading are reflected in the reader's role. Educational policy views their role as a (print) decoder using knowledge of the language processes associated directly with the text being read. The social view of reading acknowledges the various perspectives from which readers approach texts and the wealth of personal knowledge and experience that they bring to the reading of them. Whilst the social view draws attention to the complexities surrounding reading, education policy presents a simplistic view of reading.

2.3 The role of the teacher as depicted within educational policy

From the late 1990s, the teaching of reading in the classroom was heavily influenced by the *National Literacy Strategy* (*NLS)* (DfEE, 1998). Although this guidance was not statutory, its purpose (which "specifically aimed at improving the teaching of essential literacy skills, including reading" (HCESC, 2005:7) following the introduction of the *National Curriculum*), and its content (which closely followed the objectives set out in the *National Curriculum*), led to its widespread adoption by schools. Within this framework reading (and writing) was taught through whole-class shared

work, guided group and independent work, during each literacy session (see Appendix A for the original 'literacy hour').

Within these sessions, the teacher's role was one of modelling through shared reading, and then supporting children through a gradual release of responsibility model (shown in figure 2.5 below, together with the teaching approaches recommended within the *NLS*). This model, adapted from the Australian *First Steps* framework which contributed to the creation of the *NLS*, encouraged the transfer of reading agency from teacher to pupil, as children participated in activities that awarded a greater level of independence.

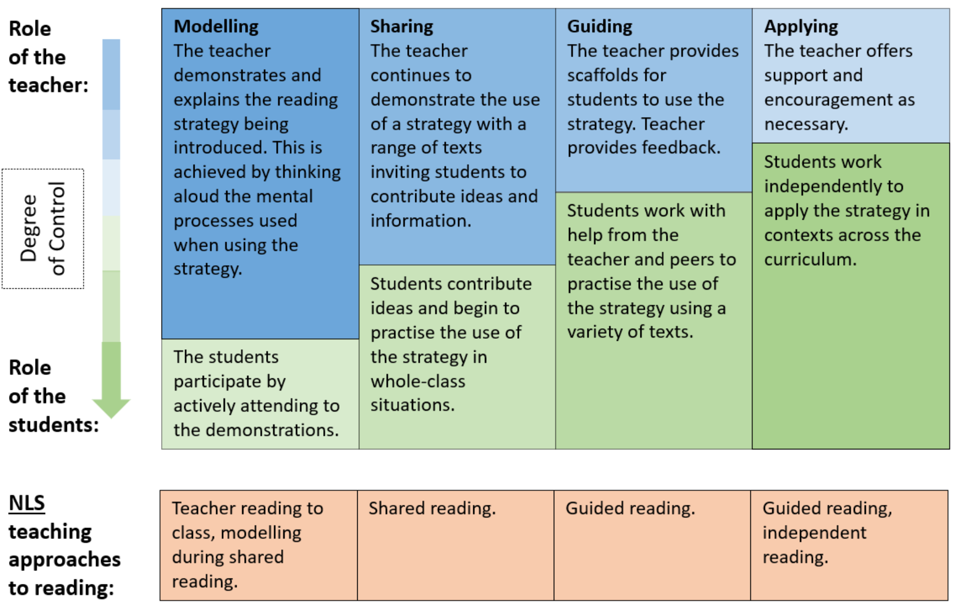


Figure 2.5: **Teaching reading strategies using a Gradual Release of Responsibility** (adapted from DfE WA, 2013:124, Figure 4.18)

This model did not include reading for pleasure in the form a 'class novel' or 'own choice' text selection, which necessitated that separate time be put aside outside of core literacy learning. Instead, the focus was on teaching reading strategies. Shared reading, for example, was concerned with modelling processes for children with a focus on word recognition, punctuation, layout, purpose and structure at key stage one. At key stage two, teaching was targeted at meeting age-related text level objectives (exemplified in Appendix B). Guided reading, the counterpart to shared reading, was much less clearly defined as a setting in which small groups of pupils working at the same level of ability sat with the teacher who:

> "… (i) introduces a text to the group; (ii) works briefly with individuals as they simultaneously read their own copy at their own individual pace; and (iii) may select one or two points for the whole group to consolidate or extend their reading experience."
>
> (DfEE, 1998:38)

The approach was not without problems, for guidance was particularly vague at key stage two where "the teaching should focus increasingly on guided silent reading with questions to direct or check up on the reading, points to note,

problems to solve, and so forth, to meet the text level objectives in the Framework" (DfEE, 1998:12). The subsequent *PNS*, which paid significant attention to early reading skills, failed to provide further enlightenment. As a result, there were inconsistencies in teacher interpretation concerning the 'guiding' of the group and use of questioning (Fisher, 2008; Phillips, 2013). In their defence, the *NLS* view of 'guiding' is limited in comparison to the various methods posited by Rogoff (1995:147) of "tacit or explicit, face-to-face or distal, involved in shared endeavours." Inconsistencies in interpretation also extended to the primary purpose of the session (Ford and Opitz, 2008) and the management of group interactions (Fisher, 2008; Hanke, 2014). Significantly, teachers also viewed ability grouping as a potential restriction to opportunities for learning, and management of the sessions proved challenging as teachers faced "multiple demands on their time and attention" (Hanke, 2014) which could have resulted in children focussing on speedy word reading, rather than comprehending texts, in order to finish quickly (as noted by King, 2001).

Numerous references to providing opportunities and skills for children to 'discuss' reading with adults and peers throughout their learning, together with the strength of government backing for guided reading in the past, would

seem to indicate that the guided group approach or, rather, an adaptation of it, could benefit reading development in the future.

2.4 Classroom organisation for text-based talk

Scant guidance from policy-makers has led to multifarious interpretations of how best to support children's reading development, as demonstrated through my own recent experiences as a 'supply' teacher working within a variety of schools across my home county (outlined in Chapter 1).

Group work can improve attainment in reading, and depth of understanding and inferential thinking, whilst also freeing up the teacher (Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick, 2009). Studies such as Blatchford, Hallam, Ireson, Kutnick and Creech (2010) however, indicate that opportunities for children to engage in independent peer group discussion are markedly fewer than those of the teacher-led variety. I discuss possible reasons for this in the next section.

2.4.1 Group work: the challenges

Additional benefits such as increased responsibility for learning, and sustained active engagement leading to increased amounts of high-level discussion, further demonstrate the value of peer group work (Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick, ibid). However, group work can lead to a number of challenges or dilemmas for teachers, particularly around participation and organisation. I discuss the main issues within this section.

Whilst children enjoy and value the support of peers (Hanke, 2014) and are often seated within groups, they are "not often working together *as* a group" (Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick, 2009:7; emphasis as original), and their interactions tend to be of a procedural nature or off-task (Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford, 2009). Conflicting views of teacher perceptions suggest that even though peer work is considered valuable (Almasi and Garas-York, 2009), some remain sceptical about the approach or do not believe children capable of effective communication with peers (Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford, 2009). Keene and Zimmermann (1997) found that children as young as seven years of age are indeed capable of communicating complex thinking to others. Although the children in their study were

interacting with a teacher, the fact that they were able to explain how activation of prior knowledge impacts on their understanding whilst reading, suggests that if given sufficient support and opportunity to engage in extended talk with peers, similar talk may occur. This would seem to suggest that re-education and, or, further support may be needed in order that group work be awarded a more prominent and widespread role within school reading curricula.

Blatchford, Galton, Kutnick and Baines (in Blatchford *et al.*, 2010) recommend a relational approach to group work in order that a supportive environment (one of trust and mutual respect) be established to aid effective group work and encourage pupil independence. In essence, pupils learn how to work cooperatively ("the act of working together", as noted in CUP, 2020) to facilitate peer collaboration ("the situation of two or more people working together to create or achieve the same thing", ibid). Mercer (2000) advocates the teaching of ground rules for talking to help children work together and use language to think collectively. Examples might include agreeing to give reasons, to question ideas, and to involve everybody. These skills, however, "are rarely taught" (Mercer, 2000:154) and as a result, talk tends to be of a 'disputational' or 'cumulative' nature (see section 2.5 (below) for discussion on types of talk), is not inclusive of the whole

group, and features little more than "brief and superficial" reference to the focus topic (ibid:153). It is also probable that some confusion exists regarding the subtle differences in meaning of cooperation and collaboration. Their usage to describe group work suggests that the terms are perceived as being interchangeable, even though cooperative working "emphasises children's interdependent skills being used towards a common goal", and collaborative working "emphasises the use of dialogue to reach understanding" (Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick, 2009:14). If this is the case, the argument for re-education and support is strengthened.

In addition to the development of skills to aid cooperation between children, Blatchford *et al.* (2010) also recommend that teachers attend to physical and interactional aspects in relation to each group activity (such as group composition, size and furniture layout) to maximise the potential for effective group interaction. Tennent *et al.* (2016) discuss how although seating children in groups of six is a convenient way of organising a large class of thirty pupils, smaller groups (pairs, threes or fours) mean that it is not so easy for some pupils to 'hide'. Similarly, there is less opportunity for others to dominate talk, as often occurs within peer interaction (noted by Mercer and Littleton, 2007; and others). Despite the inevitable impact on planning and

teaching time during the initial stages of developing children's skills to interact effectively and acquire confidence in talking about texts, those schools under particularly close scrutiny (such as those being monitored by Ofsted) face additional challenges in striking a balance with individual pupil attainment in reading.

It is unsurprising that teacher-led activities dominate classroom pedagogy since accountability for pupil progress rests largely with the teacher (as I discussed earlier in Chapter 1). However, too much teacher control may lead to the incorporation of a teacher's own ideology in sessions, or unwittingly influencing the direction of discussion through direct questioning (Swain, 2010). This is likely to become more problematic where the primary focus of guided reading sessions is believed to be a skill, strategy or process demonstration, for the opportunity to discuss comprehension is reduced (Ford and Opitz, 2008). Notably, there is no evidence to show that long-term or more intensive strategy instruction will result in greater improvement in children's comprehending (Castles *et al.*, 2018). Further, transitioning from teacher-led activities to more student-centred discussion can be challenging for teachers and pupil alike. It is common for pupils, who "are often unaccustomed to having a voice of their own" (Wolfe and Alexander, 2008:7), to revert

to routine practices such as seeking leadership or help from the teacher (Almasi and Garas-York, 2009), thus hindering the transfer of agency to them.

2.5 Ways of talking about reading

It is unsurprising that traditional ways of talking continue to dominate classroom interactions, in view of insufficient clarity of advice on how to create and maintain productive talk in small-group or pair-work conversations. This improved little with the implementation of the *PNS* and subsequent documentation (Harrison, 2004), and was likely to have been exacerbated by teachers' wariness of group work (which I noted earlier in section 2.4.1). Pupil talk about texts has, historically, been mediated through teacher-led direct questioning. Typically, this has followed 'IRE' or 'IRF' structured exchanges in which the teacher initiates the exchange with a question (I), the pupil offers a response (R), which is then followed up by the teacher by way of evaluation or feedback (E/F).

Although this approach to talk is not without merit, its suitability in respect of the development of advanced reading skills is questionable. I discuss this in the following section

before focussing on other approaches that have the potential to promote depth of thinking.

2.5.1 The tradition of teacher-led talk: 'IRE/IRF' questioning

Questioning has and continues to be pervasive within both formal and informal measures of reading comprehension (Leslie and Caldwell, 2009). There is little doubt that the 'IRE/IRF' structure can be effective for monitoring readers' knowledge and understanding, and guiding learning (Mercer quoted in Wells, 2004:167), particularly in fact-based topics (such as science) as Wells (ibid) demonstrates. When used in reading sessions however, there are strong indications that 'IRE/IRF' questioning does not actually promote children's thinking (Alexander 2013 and 2006; Almasi, 1995). Indeed, Newton (2017) suggests that there is a danger that the cognitive work is done by the teacher, for example, when directing the talk to a specific interpretation or concept.

Findings from studies of reading-related talk show that much of the questioning has been closed and required a low level of cognitive demand (Alexander, 2006). More often than not, teacher questions have been concerned with eliciting

responses of low or medium complexity, which could contain little more than one or two words, that were textually explicit (that is, focussed on information from the text or a retelling) in line with their own interpretation (Almasi, 1995). A recent study by Blything, Hardle and Cain (2019) also revealed the use of more low level than high level cognitive challenge in teacher questioning. This would suggest that little has changed in classroom practice despite the growth in research around classroom talk, and findings of greater sophistication in pupil responses when higher challenge questions are asked (also Blything *et al.*, ibid). Notably, the increase in sophistication appears unrelated to pupil age or reading ability (ibid).

Further, the language used to initiate talk has been shown to have a profound effect on the talk that follows. Pearson (1974-5:10) for example, posited that question cues affected the ways in which information is recalled and thus, children's responses to questions. He found that responses to a 'why' question began with 'so'. 'Which' questions tended to prompt a noun focussed response, and 'who' questions prompted variations on simple noun phrases with adjectival information, sometimes appearing as a complete clause. Examples provided by Pearson included "the boy", "the tall boy", "the boy who was tall" (ibid).

A particular issue with the questioning strategy seems to be the underlying assumption that higher-level questions lead to answers reflecting high-level cognition, as this does not automatically follow (Newton, 2017). Despite the lack of evidence to substantiate the assumption, a proliferation of questioning taxonomies have found their way into primary classrooms (ibid), perpetuating the emphasis on teacher-led questioning as the predominant method of promoting learning. In contrast, Chambers' (1993) 'Tell me' approach to text-related talk is driven by sharing as opposed to being question-led, although the teacher uses questioning to prompt peer-talk in the event that it halts or loses direction. Chambers strongly advises against the use of 'why' questions owing to their somewhat aggressive sound. He also notes that questions opening with this prompt tend to involve broad concepts that children are not easily able to explicate. Rather than ask a child why they liked or disliked a book, for example, he suggests that teachers initiate talk through a 'Tell me…' statement inviting them to share what it was that they liked or disliked.

Chambers' version of talk is more representative of the discursive approach advocated within the 2014 curriculum, where children are expected to demonstrate sustained active participation in collaborative conversations. Like the policy

guidance that went before however, the concept of 'discussion' lacks clarity, making it difficult for teachers to communicate what 'good discussion' might look like. This presents further challenge for teachers as it may lead to the superficial use of ground rules for talk (as suggested by Mercer and Littleton, 2007), and potentially unproductive talk. Ways of using talk productively is discussed within the next section.

2.5.2 Adopting a collaborative approach: discussion and dialogue

Wolfe and Alexander (2008:3) describe the concept of discussion as "the exchange of ideas with a view to sharing information and solving problems". Discussion is therefore a pedagogical technique akin to recitation, instruction, exposition and dialogue.

2.5.2.1 Discussing texts

Developing reading comprehension through discussion is not a new idea; literature circles for example, pre-date the *National Curriculum*. Their longevity can no doubt be

attributed to the ease with which the approach can be adapted to meet different pupil needs, and to vary the control of talk, as Daniels (2002) demonstrates through combined use of whole-class teacher-led and group-led talk, and whole-class sharing during a single session. Their effectiveness in producing the right type of talk however is less certain, particularly when considering that although teachers were willing, they may not have always "had a clear enough idea of the kind of conversations that should be taking place in small-groups…" (Harrison, 2004:129). This notion is compounded by substantial differences in the skills that children do use during group talk, and curriculum age-related expectations (noted by Maybin (2013) in 'unofficial' group talk).

Chambers' (1993) 'Tell me' approach has enjoyed continued success as features of the approach can be found in a number of reading programmes currently in use (as exemplified within this case study and discussed in Chapter 4). Unlike traditional lesson plans, talk does not follow a strict order but is driven by:

> …the need to express satisfactions, or dissatisfactions, the need to articulate new thoughts in order to hear what they sound like, the need to "bring out"

> disturbing elements provoked by the story so that we can externalize them – hold them up, so to speak, to look at them and thus gain some control over them.
>
> Chambers (1993:20)

Reader autonomy is encouraged from the outset of this approach as members of the group record and organise their initial ideas to form the content and direction of talk. The teacher's role is one of facilitator rather than instructor. They withhold their opinions, avoid steering the discussion by clarifying any confusion using children's own words, and encourage children to revisit the text through basic, general or text specific prompts designed to develop talk or highlight other information to support reflection. There are two aspects of this approach that are particularly noteworthy in relation to this study. Firstly, that teacher-led questioning is used to support children in their talk rather than to lead it. Although a framework of exemplar questions is provided for teachers, Chambers stipulates his approach "is *not* a mechanical textbook programme" and that the questions should not be shown to pupils (1993:87, emphasis as original). Further, questions should be rephrased to suit the teacher's particular situation (ibid). Secondly, the variety of text types that he recommends teachers use with this approach is extremely

limited, comprising only of picture books, poems, short stories and 'single session' books (or novels for more experienced readers). This reflects the curriculum bias in favour of texts of a fictional nature and printed texts.

2.5.2.2 Discussing texts: productive talk

Achieving the right type of talk for the development of reading skills, referred to here as productive talk, is neither simple or straight forward, nor does it always need to be managed or led by the teacher. Barnes and Todd (cited in Mercer and Littleton, 2007:25) indicate that the teacher's presence can actually hold pupils back when commenting that extended discussion is more likely to occur within peer-led talk conducted beyond the 'visible' control of the teacher.

Studies such as Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009:103) note that primary-age pupils use talk in different ways, and for a range of purposes, when working collaboratively with their peers. They list the following types of talk:

- 'off-task talk' (unrelated to task or topic);
- 'collaborative discussion' comprising:

    - ‘high level inferential talk’ (where reasoning involves inference or synthesis) and,
    - ‘high level text based talk’ (where reasoning is limited to information from the text itself);
- ‘meta-group talk’ (related to organisation and planning within the group);
- ‘sharing information’ (comprising ideas, opinions, suggestions, knowledges, but absent of exploration or reasoning);
- ‘reading out task’ (takes place prior to discussion);
- ‘procedural talk’ (task related, examples include spelling words, reading group output).

In addition to the sub-categories of ‘collaborative discussion’ that illustrate simple (text-based) and advanced (inferential) reasoning, it is interesting to note that Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (ibid) did not appear to observe any talk of a playful nature, or determined that there was too little to warrant a separate category. ‘Playful talk’ is common within the classroom and ranges from silly ‘playful talk’ to more serious ‘creative talk’ (Wegerif, 2018). Wegerif warns that this type of talk should not be overlooked as reasoning

may be conveyed through metaphor rather than explicitly. However, it is difficult to ascertain how this type of talk fits in with those proposed by Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford.

Mercer (1995), in contrast, describes three broad categories that reflect how children use talk to think together. Dependent on its purpose, talk of a 'playful' nature might be found within any category:

- *'disputational talk'* - noted by Mercer as being "characterised by disagreement and individualised decision-making", with little attempt to pool resources or offer constructive criticism (1995:104). Talk exchanges are likely to be brief in length and consist of assertions, challenges or counter-assertions. In addition, Wegerif (2013) refers to the competitive nature of this type of talk where pupils try to 'beat' each other rather than learn from each other;
- *'cumulative talk'* - pupils build "positively but uncritically" on others' contributions to construct what Mercer (ibid) refers to as a "common knowledge". Talk exchanges tend to include repetition, confirmation and elaboration. Alexander (2018) notes that this type of talk is linked to maintaining social relations, a view that

Wegerif (2013) shares when stating that group members seek to avoid disrupting the harmony of the group (such as through challenging ideas or exploring reasoning);

- *'exploratory talk'* – involves constructive critical engagement with the ideas of others. Mercer (2000) provides an elaborated description in which:

> *…*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 for joint progress. Knowledge is made publicly accountable and reasoning is visible in the talk.
>
> (Mercer, 2000:153)

Although over a decade earlier than the study of Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009), the analytic categories described by Mercer (1995, 2000) have been widely referred to in research literature and pedagogic interventions, such as the *Thinking Together* programme developed by Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif (2003). This programme provided

examples of purposeful and productive talk lessons across a range of curriculum subjects, underpinned by the concept of 'exploratory talk'. Categorisation of talk in this manner continues to be useful, for unlike Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford's categories which make explicit reference to reasoning as either present ('collaborative discussion') or not present ('sharing information'), reasoning may be present across all categories but tends to serve different purposes. For example, reasoning is likely to be highly individualised within 'disputational talk' (Mercer, 1995), concerned with defending the image of the group in the manner of closed talk within 'cumulative talk' (Wegerif, 2018), and much more open and constructive within 'exploratory talk'.

From a quality perspective, 'cumulative talk' is undoubtedly beneficial as it has a cooperative element to it which facilitates ideas sharing, however there is a tendency for it to be "relatively brief and somewhat bland" (Mercer and Howe, 2010:178). In contrast, talk of an 'exploratory' nature has great educational value since it helps pupils to develop their understanding (Barnes, 2008). In addition to benefitting from the knowledge and expertise of others, children learn to "jointly construct new explanations", develop their reasoning skills, and devise effective new strategies for working which "are better than any of them might have devised alone"

(Littleton and Mercer, 2013:98). As they reflect on and respond to feedback from peers, individuals have the opportunity to "sort out their thoughts" (Mercer and Dawes, 2008:66), and "gain new levels of understanding" (Littleton and Mercer, ibid). Little talk of this type, however, appears to take place within primary schools in England, or in Britain as a whole (Mercer and Howe, ibid), despite interventions to embed quality talk within the primary classroom. Even though the *Thinking Together* programme (Dawes *et al.,* 2003) was directly concerned with quality talk, literacy exemplars (such as lessons 12 and 13 which featured non-fiction and poetry, respectively) offered little opportunity for reading skill development since they were focussed on surface level comprehension (through recall) and personal evaluation (through likes/dislikes).

Wegerif (2013) associates 'exploratory talk' with 'dialogic talk' since individuals are engaged in the process of dialogue when actively considering and responding to the ideas of others, rather than simply identifying with others' ideas or positions and their own. Alexander (2020) echoes this view, noting a resemblance to the deliberative aspect of dialogue. He offers the following definitions:

> *Deliberation:* weighing the merits of an idea, or considering a question or problem, in the hope of reaching an agreed opinion or decision.
>
> (Alexander, 2020:153)

> *Dialogue:* the oral exchange and deliberative handling of information, ideas and opinions.
>
> (ibid:128)

In view of the lack of consensus with regard to agreed definitions, and conciseness of that presented above, Wolfe and Alexander's (2008) description of dialogue is adopted here:

> *Dialogue*: achieving common understanding through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite 'handover' of concepts and principles.
>
> (Wolfe and Alexander, 2008:3)

When referring to the curriculum requirements that pupils "articulate and justify answers, arguments and

opinions” and “consider and evaluate different viewpoints, attending to and building on the contributions of others” (DfE, 2013:17), it is apparent that dialogue, rather than discussion, is needed to support the development of children’s reading skills. It is, however, interesting to note that ‘dialogue’, of which there are only three references within the entire English programme of study, is only associated with writing composition.

2.5.3 Supporting the development of dialogic talk

Alexander, whose work has been instrumental in attempting to raise the profile of talk within the curriculum, subscribes to dialogic teaching as a way of stimulating classroom talk in ways that improve pupil engagement, thinking, learning and understanding. Having worked over two decades to refine his approach to pedagogy (Alexander, 2019), he sets out a framework (shown in table 2.3 below). He advocates a ‘repertoire’ of talk over one single method, noting the resistance to change in relation to ‘IRE/IRF’ structured exchanges (Alexander, 2018; and discussed earlier within section 2.5.1).

Justifications	Communicative – Social – Cultural – Political/civic – Psychological – Neuroscientific – Pedagogical
Principles	Collective – Reciprocal – Supportive – Cumulative – Purposeful
Repertoires	
Interactive settings	*Whole class – Group work (teacher-led) – Group work (student-led) – One-to-one (teacher–student) – One-to-one (student–student)*
Everyday talk	*Transactional – Expository – Interrogatory – Exploratory – Expressive – Evaluative*
Learning talk	*(a) Narrate – Explain – Speculate – Imagine – Explore – Analyse – Evaluate – Question – Justify – Discuss – Argue* *(b) Listen – Think about what we hear – Give others time to think – Respect others' views*
Teaching talk	*Rote – Recitation – Instruction – Exposition – Discussion – Dialogue*
Questioning	*Character – Response cue – Participation cue – Wait/thinking time – Feedback – Purpose – Structure*
Extending	*Time to think – Say more – Revoice – Rephrase/repeat – Evidence of reasoning – Challenge or counter-example – Agree/disagree – Add on – Explain what someone else means*
Indicators	

Table: 2.3 **The elements of dialogic teaching** (extracted from Alexander, 2018:4, Table 1)

The framework, which includes different organisational structures for interactions, addresses the different purposes for which talk is used within the classroom, and draws attention to ways that teachers (and pupils during peer-led exchanges) can support talk (see questioning and extending in table 2.3 above). Thinking time, which features repeatedly within the framework, is particularly important in view of the constraining effect that the traditional 'IRE/IRF' structure has been shown to have on the length and complexity of pupil responses. It is also clear from the principles underlying Alexander's framework (listed in table 2.3), that the framework builds on previous empirical work conducted by a variety of influential researchers (including Mercer and

Wegerif). In summary, teachers and pupils approach learning tasks together and through a supportive environment in which they listen, share, deliberate, and build upon their own ideas and those of others.

Alexander's (2020) revision of the dialogic teaching framework highlights deliberation, argumentation and discussion. Deliberation, now one of the six underpinning principles (see table 2.4), is woven into the culture of classroom talk through the additional repertoire of *Interactive culture* (encompassing the routines, rules and rituals (or discussion norms) that should be observed by teachers and pupils). The repertoires are expanded further through the addition of *Discussing* and *Arguing*. Discussion is "essentially synoptic" (ibid:157) and therefore embedded within the framework through all other repertoires. Links to specific elements or talk moves ('ask', 'explain', and so forth), noted by Alexander, are marked with an asterisk (*) in table 2.4 below. The additional information provided in this version of the framework, including the explicit links to moves that support discussion, will hopefully lead to more productive conversations in the future.

Justifications:	Thinking, learning, mastery, communicating, relating, acculturating, democratically engaging, teaching		
Principles:	Collective, supportive, reciprocal, deliberative, cumulative, purposeful		
Repertoires:	Interactive culture*:	Communicative, deliberative, epistemic norms	
	Interactive settings*:	Relations:	class, group (teacher-led, student-led), individual (teacher/student, student pairs)
		Grouping:	size, membership, function
		Space:	rows, cabaret, horseshoe
		Time:	lesson length, talk/text balance, talk form balance, pace
	Learning talk:	Transactional:	ask*, answer*, instruct, inform, explain, discuss
		Expository:	tell, narrate, explain, describe, expound, expand
		Interrogatory:	bid, ask, enquire, answer
		Exploratory:	suggest*, venture, speculate*, soliloquise, hypothesise*, probe*, clarify*
		Deliberative*:	reason, ask, argue, question, hypothesise, challenge, defend, justify, analyse, synthesise, persuade, decide
		Imaginative:	speculate*, visualise*, soliloquise, tell, describe*, envisage*, create
		Expressive:	narrate, speculate*, qualify*, argue*, insist, wonder, exclaim
		Evaluative:	opine, estimate*, assert*, argue*, judge, justify*
	Teaching talk:	Rote, recitation, instruction, exposition, discussion*, deliberation*, argumentation*, dialogue	
	Questioning:	Management:	manage, response cue (bidding & nomination), thinking/wait time, participation cue (rotation & extension)
		Character:	test & authentic questions
		Purpose*:	initiate (recall/review, elicit, invite), probe (probe, clarify, invite evaluation), expand (expand, sustain or develop)
		Structure:	open*, closed, leading, narrow* (brief, direct, context specific), discursive*
	Extending:	Share, expand & clarify thinking:	thinking time, say more*, are you saying?
		Listen carefully to one another:	rephrase, repeat
		Deepen reasoning:	evidence of reasoning*, challenge/counter example*
		Think with others:	agree/disagree & why*, add on, explain what someone else means
	Discussing:	*Linked to elements of other repertoires, indicated with an asterisk (*)*	
	Arguing:	Stages:	opening – argumentation - closing
		Foster & explore perspectives:	contestable questions, share responsibilities, discuss alternatives
		Clarify language & meaning:	clarify meaning*, connect ideas*, label processes, track enquiry*
		Acceptable reasons and evidence:	evaluate facts*, evaluate values
		Logical connections:	articulate reasons*, evaluate inferences

Table: 2.4 The expanded repertoires for dialogic teaching (adapted from Alexander, 2020)

Recent approaches to guided reading (such as Tennent *et al.*, 2016) support Alexander's notion of dialogic teaching and emphasise the need for genuine questions to promote depth of thinking (also recommended by Alexander, 2006). They, like Alexander, share the opinion that 'IRE/IRF' questioning is not dialogic, since these questions tend to involve recollection of facts or providing answers aligned with those predetermined by the teacher (often referred to as 'guess what the teacher is thinking'; see discussion in section 2.5.1). Tennent *et al.* (ibid) suggest that conditions likely to support talk of a dialogic nature include expectations that participant contributions will be extended, that contributors are provided with time and opportunities to formulate their thoughts, and that the follow-up builds upon contributions to move thinking forward.

Dialogic talk is not, therefore, simply about asking and answering questions, repeating or evaluating responses as occurs within 'IR/IRE/IRF' structured exchanges. The teacher's role includes modelling patterns of language through their own talk, so that children know how they are expected to participate, and encouraging children to respond directly to contributions from their peers (Tennent *et al.*, ibid).

2.5.4 Moving beyond the curriculum: critical talk

'Exploratory talk' and 'dialogue' offer a safe environment for children to explore, infer, explain and elaborate, justify, and evaluate texts from multiple reader perspectives. However, critical and reflective thinking is required for high-level comprehension (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey and Alexander cited in Maine and Hofmann, 2016).

Within the primary-phase curriculum, learning is concerned with creating readers who possess the skills necessary for "participating fully as a member of society" (DfE, 2013:3) and texts are critiqued through reasoning and evaluation, and differentiating fact from opinion. The latter is typically in relation to language and structure, and how these impact upon the reader. When texts are perceived to be socially situated and thus laden with ideology, it is important to question and challenge the motivations underlying the text's creation in order to expose the bias contained within. The need for 'critical' reading of this type, which augments that presented within *A language for life* (DfES, 1975; discussed earlier in section 2.1.1), has become more pressing with the growth in digital media and fake news (NLT, 2018). However, reading in this manner currently falls beyond the

remit of the official curriculum, possibly because it positions children as active agents as opposed to mere participators in society. The potential political ramifications extend to "…destabilizing knowledge, as much as it might be about establishing it…" as children are encouraged to think about whose interests are being served (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004:5), and how the concept of power is conveyed through texts (Hall and Piazza, 2008). For example, who should receive privileges? Who were or are the oppressed? Who has been marginalised, misrepresented or is missing? What action could be taken to create a more equitable society in future? Comber (cited in Larson and Marsh, 2015:53) describes how children are repositioned as "researchers of language" who "respect minority language practices" and "problematize texts" to learn about how others think and live.

The need for critical analysis is not limited to fake news, as all texts contain bias (Wray and Lewis, 1997). Published reading schemes for young children for example, which Sunderland (2011) notes have become more progressive in their construal of gender since the late 20th Century, continue to marginalise female characters. Sometimes certain histories, stories, lifestyles or character viewpoints are not represented (la Raé, 2006). Approaches to reading critically might also include exploring texts from different character

perspectives, such as the wolf within *The Three Little Pigs* (McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004). Local area signage affords further opportunities to determine who is being privileged, who is being banned, who is exercising power and why they are doing so (Mackey, 2004).

Children, especially primary-aged children, are more susceptible than adults to the hidden messages within texts in view of their tendency to "believe everything without questioning it", and "difficulty in distinguishing satire from actual news" (NLT, 2018:9), indicating that the adoption of a critical stance would be beneficial from an early age (Wray and Lewis, 1997). Although there is evidence to suggest that children of all ages are capable of providing critical opinion and can therefore be supported to evaluate the messages contained within texts (Fisher, 2001), there may be a number of barriers to adopting a critical perspective within the classroom. I discuss these below.

2.5.4.1 Potential barriers to critical reading

Historically, teachers (and pupils) have not been positioned to challenge the ways of thinking and being that are portrayed through classroom texts (McDonald, 2003). They may not, therefore, feel that it is their place to question

dominant beliefs (Hall and Piazza, 2008). Teachers may also not feel comfortable interrogating sensitive issues such as class, race and gender relations (Dozier, Johnston and Rogers, 2006; Luke, 2012), especially if this means raising issues that run counter to their own (or those of pupils') cultural and social expectations (Hall and Piazza, ibid). Uncertainties over how to define critical literacy (noted in NLT, 2018) also indicates that teachers may not feel confident, or may not understand how to challenge texts (Hall and Piazza, ibid). Alternatively, they may perceive that the skills delivered through the curriculum are sufficient and that no explicit teaching of critical reading is necessary (as alluded to within NLT, ibid). Pupils may experience similar discomfort in challenging their own beliefs and may therefore resist teachers' efforts to challenge the ideology within texts (Hall and Piazza, ibid).

One further barrier is that since critical reading does not explicitly form part of the reading curriculum, time needs to be set aside for discussion of this type to evolve. This may be a decision for senior leaders, rather than class teachers, owing to the perception of a possible trade-off between meeting individual pupil progress criteria and developing a critical stance (Dozier *et al.,* 2006). Of the teachers who claimed to teach critical literacy in the NLT survey (2018),

less than thirty percent conducted this 'very often', indicating that there is still much to do in raising the profile of this type of reading within schools. The NLT (ibid) also note that schools may need to be reminded that in addition to the genre of fiction, any text type (particularly those published online where there is no guarantee of quality) needs to be studied through a critical lens.

The small peer-led discussion group format is ideally placed for critical reading activities. It affords opportunities for children to engage with sensitive issues with minimal discomfort and embarrassment, in contrast to that which they may encounter within teacher-pupil interactions.

2.6 Summary

Within education the talk used to develop comprehension skills has been tightly controlled by the teacher in the form of direct questioning advocated through the *NLS/PNS* small group guided reading approach. As a result, pupils have had little agency for their learning and the background knowledges that they bring to their reading has been of little consequence, contrary to research findings. Similarly, little attention has been paid to the role of

contextual information in developing children's understanding of reading. With a focus on decoding and reading fluency, much of the talk around texts has been of limited cognitive challenge and of little educational value, despite interventions to improve the quality of talk within the primary classroom. Books, particularly fiction, have tended to dominate reading resources and texts tend to be viewed in isolation. Of particular concern is the ambiguity surrounding fundamental concepts within educational policy documentation, notably in relation to the definition of what constitutes a 'text' and the processes of 'comprehension' and 'discussion'. Similarly, terminology such as 'cooperation' and 'collaboration' are used interchangeably to describe pupils working together. Some pertinent terminology is also absent from policy documentation. 'Dialogue' for example, refers only to composition of writing, and all things 'critical' (such as 'critic' and 'criticise') have been relegated to spelling word lists.

The growth in digital media, and resultant wealth of texts, present a growing need to perceive texts as being socially situated. This necessitates exploration of the contextual and intertextual information surrounding them. Moreover, texts need to be interrogated to establish the hidden messages conveyed through them. There is also a need for children to have opportunities to be agents of their

reading to learn how to identify what is authentic and what is not, to identify the powers at work in texts, to determine where social injustice occurs and how it may be subverted, in order to prevent perpetuation in the future.

Working collaboratively mirrors the social interactions that take place beyond the classroom. Children not only enjoy working with peers (Hanke, 2014), but are also able to use talk to fulfil a range of different purposes (Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford, 2009), and effectively manage conflicting points of view (Almasi, 1995). Working in small groups also affords a safe environment in which children can share and develop ideas, and assume agency for learning, in preparation for later life.

I argue that the teacher's role is not simply about ensuring that children possess the skills to read. Rather, as Teo (2014:541) postulates, their role is about preparing children so that they possess the skills to "read the world". Learning how to read a diverse range of texts from a critical perspective enables children to do just that, and promotes depth of thinking.

In the next chapter, I discuss my research questions and the design of my study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.0 Introduction

The reasons for my study are discussed within Chapter 1, where I also draw attention to the complexities surrounding my positioning. Throughout the duration of the study, I engage in the multiple roles of a teacher, a friend, a researcher, and a parent of a child completing their main stream education. To some extent, all of these roles influence the way that I view the data and thus, the degree to which my study can be considered trustworthy (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). I discuss the concept of trustworthiness further in section 3.8 below. I also set out here the theoretical perspectives through which I interpret the data, the research questions and methodological approach underpinning the study, together with details of the participants, the data, and data collection and analysis processes. The findings from a short pilot study, which informed the planning of pupil activities within the main study, are also included within this chapter.

3.1 Research questions

My study is concerned with gaining insight into how classroom talk (pupil-teacher and pupil-pupil) may be used to develop children's reading comprehension skills. More specifically, skills that involve children in actively thinking more deeply about texts to consider meaning beyond a text's surface level. I refer to these skills as *advanced* comprehension skills and include within them connections with pre-existing knowledges and experiences, including those related to other texts and the wider world (Moll, Amanti, Neff and Gonzalez, 1992; Keene and Zimmermann, 1997), and thinking critically about texts (discussed by McLaughlin and Devoogd, 2004; Comber in Larson and Marsh, 2015; Murphy *et al.* in Maine and Hofmann, 2016). Critical thinking may, for example, be reflected in discussion around different and multiple perspectives, how different characters or groups of people or issues are represented, or how authentic a text appears to be. I discuss critical literacy within my review of literature (see section 2.5, Chapter 2).

Initially I sought to address the broad question of 'what is the role of talk in developing advanced reading comprehension skills?' My short pilot study, however, indicated that within reading sessions, opportunities for

children to communicate ideas that reflected thinking at depth tend to be constrained by pre-determined learning objectives and goals. The sharing of learning objectives with pupils, often at the outset of each lesson (evidenced through my own teaching experiences), is deeply entrenched within classroom pedagogy. I realised, therefore, that I needed to refine my subsequent line of questioning so that I could investigate the potential in all of the talk that took place. The questions that are central to this study are:

- What does the talk around texts currently look like during routine reading sessions?
- How might this talk support or hinder the development of advanced critical reading skills?

Thematic analysis of all text-talk data revealed a number of themes around classroom pedagogy and practice which also appeared to constrain talk. (I exemplify and discuss these in detail in Chapters 6 and 7.) My observation of these themes raised further questions about their dominance, particularly in relation to the school's aims for its reading curriculum. Why, for example, did teacher-led questioning tend to dominate reading sessions? Why did talk about word meaning feature so often? And, what lay behind

the interactional styles adopted within the classroom? In order to explore these themes further, I decided to undertake a study of the school's wider reading curriculum, hoping that by understanding the rationale underpinning it, I might gain deeper insight into the techniques used (in reference to what the teacher does, what the children do, and what physical materials are used) within the classroom to implement the curriculum.

3.2 Research design

I approach this qualitative, single school case study through a social constructivist lens. I discuss, below, the relevance of this philosophical perspective and its defining characteristics, together with those of case study. I begin with a conceptual overview and then discuss how I designed my study to reflect the social constructivist paradigm.

3.2.1 Constructivist perspectives: education, texts and comprehending

Over the last five decades or so, primary education has moved from traditional teacher-directed (transmission-type)

approaches towards those of a more reciprocal and learner-centred nature, drawing on constructivist theory (Gash, 2015). From this perspective, knowledge of the world is based on our individual constructions of it (Creswell and Poth, 2018), gained through our experiences within it. Renowned constructivist theorist Charmaz (2014), asserts that constructivism:

> …brings subjectivity into view and assumes that people, including researchers, construct the realities in which they participate. Constructivist inquiry starts with the experience and asks how members construct it. To the best of their ability, constructivists enter the phenomenon, gain multiple views of it, and locate it in its web of connections and constraints. Constructivists acknowledge that their interpretation of the studied phenomenon is itself a construction.
>
> Charmaz (2014:342)

In essence, constructivist theory acknowledges that people perceive things differently and that each interpretation of an event is therefore subjective. This is founded on the knowledge and life experience that each individual, including the researcher, has gained. Subsequently, the acquisition of

new knowledge and experience enables individuals to alter their perceptions of past events as they re-view them from alternative and more informed perspectives. When constructing meaning from texts, therefore, it follows that readers of the same text are likely to form varying interpretations of it, owing to the personal nature of the background knowledge accessed during processing. I discussed models of reading in the previous chapter (section 2.1.1.2, Chapter 2).

Education policy has tended to draw on the ideas of Vygotsky (1978), who posited that:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, *between* people *(interpsychological)*, and then *inside* the child *(intrapsychological)*. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals.
>
> Vygotsky (1978:57, emphasis as original)

In addition to learning through interaction with more experienced others, Vygotsky proposed that children learn

through participating in activities that are slightly beyond their level of competence. He referred to this as their "zone of proximal development" which he defined as:

> *…the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers."*
>
> Vygotsky (1978:86, italics as original)

These principles were advocated within policy as recently as the *National Literacy Strategy (NLS)* (DfEE, 1998) through the gradual release of responsibility pedagogical model. Although the strategy is now obsolete, there are indications (through my own observations) that its use remains widespread in schools despite the increase in autonomy facilitated through the 2014 curriculum.

The gradual release of responsibility model, which is discussed in section 2.3 (Chapter 2), also illustrates how peers support learning within the classroom environment (Tracey and Mandel Morrow, 2012) as "Students work with help from the teacher and peers…" during the 'guiding' phase of learning (DfE WA, 2013; see figure 2.5). In my opinion

however, this approach to the teaching of reading places significant emphasis on the skills involved, as it may be inferred that once the teacher has passed on the necessary skills for a child to read independently, their role is purely facilitatory from that point forward (as I discussed in Chapter 2). I argue that for development of textual comprehending, the teacher's role remains vital and that further support, perhaps a different type of support, is required to encourage children to actively engage with, and think at depth about texts.

The notion of knowledge construction as a collaborative endeavour is described by Charmaz (2014) as social constructivism, a perspective which:

> …assumes that people create social reality or realities through individual and collective actions. Rather than seeing the world as given, constructionists ask how it is accomplished. Thus, instead of assuming realities in an external world - including global structures and local cultures – social constructionists study what people at a particular time and place take as real, how they construct their views and actions, when different constructions arise, whose constructions become taken

> as definitive, and how the process ensues...
>
> Charmaz (2014:344)

In relation to the development of advanced reading skills, this constructivist perspective emphasises the role of questioning, which I believe to be a necessary skill in view of the ideology laden within texts (as I discussed earlier in section 2.5.4, Chapter 2). Charmaz also draws attention to the relevance of culture. This is an aspect which appears to receive little attention within educational policy. However, I believe it to be relevant to both the time and place within which texts are created and read, in addition to the cultural lens (or lenses) through which the reader views texts as a result of their upbringing.

The close relationship between reading and action, indicating that reading is far from a passive activity, may be inferred from Charmaz's (ibid) description of symbolic interactionism. This is a further perspective of social constructivism which assumes that:

> …people construct selves, society, and reality through interaction. Because this perspective focuses on dynamic relationships between meaning and actions, it addresses the active processes through

> which people create and mediate meanings. Meanings arise out of actions, and in turn influence actions. This perspective assumes that individuals are active, creative, and reflective and that social life consists of processes.
>
> Charmaz (2014:344-5)

From a social constructivist perspective, the emphasis on the relationship between meaning and action is indicative of a need for children to be encouraged to think deeply about texts and adopt a critical approach to reading. Through this type of reading, children are then able to make informed decisions about how they respond to texts. This includes, for example, consideration of the writer's (or commissioner's) motivations for text production, in addition to the authenticity of the text. Although the reader may take action in various ways, the traditional approach to primary classroom pedagogy remains one of sharing ideas and opinions. In contrast, the recent movement towards critical literacy takes a more proactive approach to reader response with the intention of affecting actual social change (see Chapter 2 for detailed discussion).

3.2.2 Social constructivism and study design

With collaborative co-construction of meaning pivotal to my social constructivist stance, I designed my study around interactions between members of a class. I specifically targeted reading sessions, as their focus on a single text over a thirty-minute duration provided the ideal opportunity for depth and richness of discussion to take place. Using a traditional pedagogical format and with the help of the class teacher, a small mixed ability group of readers became the focal point of the study. This enabled me to closely observe and audibly capture pupil interaction across the group itself, in addition to the group's interaction with the class teacher. It also enabled me to explore the various forms of co-construction taking place within the classroom.

Building on observations from my pilot study, that children experienced little time in which they could talk together (discussed in section 3.5), I decided to increase the length of peer-led talk activities. In addition, I planned to give children the freedom to determine, for themselves, the focus of their talk. I envisaged that this would provide the space in which they could share and develop their ideas around reading to support co-construction of meaning. Thus, making visible a range of reading skills which I could then explore, in

relation to critical reading, along with other aspects of the children's talk.

Findings from the first session in the main study revealed little evidence of idea sharing, making it difficult for me to identify the skills being used. I felt that it would be helpful to include an activity to support idea generation in order to encourage sharing. This had implications for the epistemological position of my study as it moved away from pure exploration. Although there was a risk that I might influence the way that children talked about texts, particularly when initiating exchanges, I was mindful that agency for activities remained entirely with them.

Drawing from traditional pedagogical approaches such as teacher modelling, with the aim of retaining a 'naturalistic' setting, I designed a teacher-led 'think-aloud' activity to demonstrate the different ways in which readers might relate to texts. I discuss this further in section 3.6. Despite this activity, the rich and lively discussion that I knew could be possible as participants shared their knowledges and experiences with each other, based on the 'social' view of reading (discussed in section 2.1.2, Chapter 2), did not take place. My findings, which are presented and discussed in Chapters 4 to 7, draw attention to the pressures that schools

face, and their impact on classroom interactions during routine reading sessions.

3.2.3 Case study

Through case study methodology, I explore the talk undertaken during reading sessions together with the reading curriculum of a single school. This approach enables me to build “a complex, holistic picture”; one which includes views expressed by the participants themselves (Creswell and Poth, 2018:326). These views are particularly important in a constructivist paradigm where individuals interpret the world differently in light of their unique experiences within it. Owing to the complexities surrounding textual comprehending (which I discussed throughout my literature review in the previous chapter) and the exploratory nature of my research questions, I adopt a wholly qualitative methodological approach to my inquiry. I draw from data obtained through a range of different methods and sources. This approach facilitates rich and detailed description of findings in order to preserve the many connections to contextual factors (including the organisation of pupils, routines and rules, and time) associated with the micro-culture that exists within schools (Alexander, 2008). My approach is summarised in

figure 3.1, where I illustrate how data collection and analysis activities evolved across the pilot and main study. The various sources of data collected (depicted in different colours in figure 3.1) are discussed extensively in section 3.6.

The micro level detail afforded through case study can be useful in studies of large-scale topics such as policy-making (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), which perhaps explains its popularity in research set within the field of education (Merriam, 1998). Of the most influential case study methodologists, Stake and Merriam adopt a constructivist epistemological perspective (Yazan, 2015) and emphasise the versatility afforded to researchers through the approach. Stake (2003:134) for example, refers to case study as "a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case". Merriam (1998:28) notes that the approach "does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis". For Stake and Merriam then, case study is not so much about the methods used to study a case, but the case itself.

Case study offers flexibility not only in terms of the initial research design, but also once the research is underway (Stake in Yazan, 2015). Data collection and analysis take place simultaneously (Stake, ibid) and recursively as new data is collected and analysed (Merriam,

ibid) in a manner characteristic of grounded methodology. This enables the researcher to "…embrace and build in unanticipated events and uncontrolled variables" (Nisbet and Watts cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011:293) or, from my own experience, to further explore patterns identified during early analysis processing to facilitate greater depth of insight and understanding. The iterative nature of data collection and analysis within this study is illustrated in figure 3.1. While the case remained the year four class, the flexibility of this methodology enabled me to broaden my study to explore the school's reading curriculum and gain a deeper understanding of the pedagogies and practices in use during the year four reading sessions. Through a broad grounded approach, findings from analysis helped to shape subsequent data collection activities. As a result, I was able to explore how variations in adult support influenced (or did not influence) children's talk. I discuss this approach later in this chapter (section 3.6).

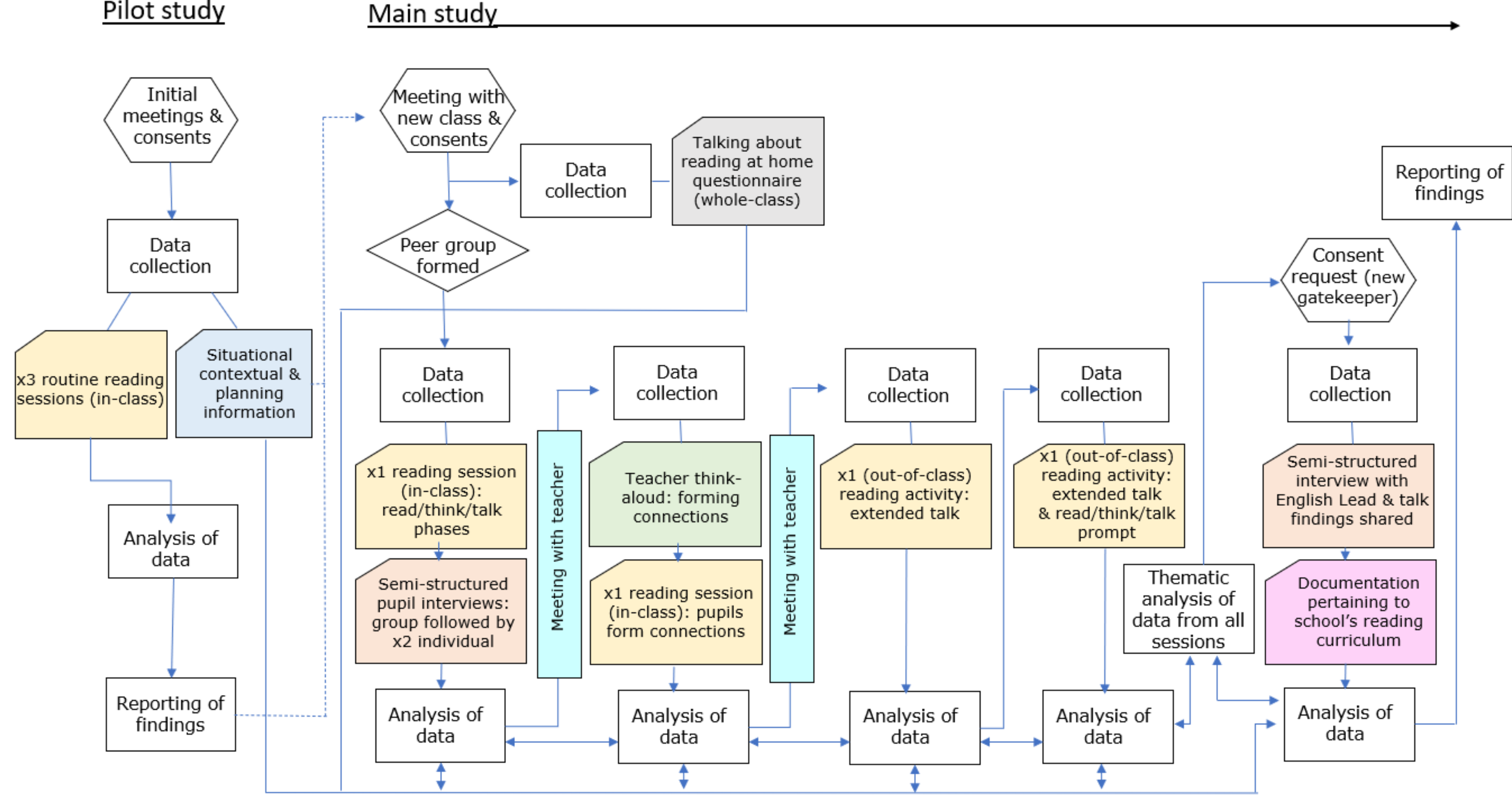


Figure 3.1: Procedural overview of study

Whilst Stake and Merriam share the view that case study is a bounded system (such as by time, place, and setting), their notion of a case differs; mainly in relation to its relevance to policy. For example, Stake (2003:135) defines a case as a "specific One" such as an individual, organisation or institution, curriculum or issue, and advises that cases are rarely about reasons or policies. Merriam (1998:27) on the other hand, defines case as "an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a single instance, phenomenon, or social unit" such as a person, program, class, school, community or specific policy. I argue that it is impossible to ignore the role of policy in studies set within mainstream education (key stages one to five) where school curriculums are tightly bound by governmental diktats and a host of other contextual factors. These range from pupil characteristics to local policies, particularly where multi-academy trusts seek to standardise practices across schools. Moreover, my study originates from changes made to statutory policy, specifically revisions made to the English programme of study within the *National Curriculum*, as I noted earlier within Chapter 1.

Merriam's definition of a case, which appears to be far more encompassing than Stake's, is adopted within this study to reflect the complex and dynamic nature of both the topic

and setting studied here. Merriam (ibid:29-30) identifies three types of case study:

- a descriptive case study (which presents a detailed account of the focus of the study, is not concerned with theory building, and may be combined with interpretive or evaluative orientations);

- an interpretive case study (where descriptive data leads to the development of conceptual categories that are used to investigate, support or challenge theory);

- and an evaluative case study (involving description, explanation and judgement).

This study is both descriptive and interpretive in its orientation. It seeks to explore what is said during routine reading sessions and how exchanges of talk are structured. It also seeks to gain insight into why participants (teacher and pupils) interact in particular ways during these sessions by exploring whole-school pedagogical practices for reading. I discuss the methods used for data collection (section 3.6) and my approach to analysis (section 3.7) below.

3.3 Participant selection

This study is set within a large urban primary school in Northamptonshire where there is diversity in terms of pupil gender, ethnicity (including English as an additional language), ability, and social-economic status. The school was selected because it reflects England's "exceptional cultural diversity" (Alexander, 2010:110), and an existing friendship with a class teacher who shares a passion for developing young readers.

It was important that the pupils in my study had mastered the skills to decode words and were able to work with peers without the need for direct adult supervision. I therefore decided to focus on key stage two. The additional pressures on teaching and learning associated with preparations for the formal SATs at the end of the primary age phase, led me to discount years five and six. Conveniently, my contact was working with a year four class throughout the period of data collection, making access to the target group fairly straight forward.

When it came to choosing groups of pupils to observe, I initially relied on direction from the class teacher for the first stage of the data collection. I discuss the pilot study in section 3.5. For the main study, the whole class were invited to

participate. Of those who consented, three girls and three boys were selected. The chief criteria, for which I again sought the class teacher's knowledge and experience, was the likelihood that participants would actively take part in each activity and that the group encompassed mixed reading abilities, mirroring the format of grouping usually used during reading sessions. The term 'mixed ability' reflects the way in which the school refers to pupils as readers, with pupils labelled as 'low', 'middle', or 'high ability' in accordance with the level denoted within formal assessment criteria. Reading proficiency is therefore marked by progression from 'low' to 'high ability'.

To preserve the anonymity of participants (BERA, 2011), especially in view of my complicated relationship with the study (Tilley and Woodthorpe, 2011) arising from my personal friendship and professional status as a teacher (discussed earlier in Chapter 1), I have used a pseudonym in place of the name of the school. As anonymity extends to information that will enable others to identify the school (Walford, 2005), I have also taken the precaution of omitting direct reference to the town in which the school resides, even though the study does not contain any sensitive information about the school, or content that may be deemed detrimental to it. To anonymise individual participant data, I applied an

indexing system during transcription wherein pupil names have been replaced with 'P1', 'P2', 'P3' and so forth. The code, 'T', represents the teacher. Appendix C contains a full list of transcription coding conventions.

3.4 Conducting the research

Ethical clearance for the research design was obtained from the university prior to data collection. Of the issues considered, one of my primary ethical concerns was in ensuring that I obtained voluntary informed consent from participants as set out in the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) guidelines:

> "Researchers must take the steps necessary to ensure that all participants in the research understand the process in which they are to be engaged, including why their participation is necessary, how it will be used and how and to whom it will be reported…"
>
> BERA (2011:5, item 11)

Originally, I anticipated that I would only need to gain consent from the headteacher as the primary gatekeeper, the

class teacher with whom I would be working (and any other participating staff), and the parents or carers of pupil participants. However, BERA's reference to Article 12 of the United National Convention on the Rights of the Child required that I also consider the children's own right to consent to participate in the study:

> "Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child."
>
> United Nations (1989:5, article 12)

Lansdown (2001) provides detailed discussion of the above Article and what it means for children and the adults that they come into contact with (family, school and the local community, for example). And whilst the Article does not give children the power to override the rights of parents, it does empower children to have a say in matters affecting them regardless of their age. As it could be difficult for particularly young children to express their views, BERA (2011:6, item 16) advise that "Children should therefore be facilitated to give fully informed consent."

For my study, this presented several issues. Firstly, its duration over two academic years meant that even though the class teacher remained constant, the pupil cohort would change at the start of the second year. Secondly, children would be participating in different types of activities during data collection (detailed in table 3.2). To address the issue of voluntary informed consent as thoroughly as possible, whilst taking care to avoid applying pressure to participate, I met with all participants in person prior to commencement of the study, and returned at the beginning of the following academic year to address the second pupil cohort. During this visit I explained the purpose of my study, why I had selected the school, what their role as participants entailed, and my methods of capturing data. I included a demonstration of my recording equipment. I also shared copies of all participant information and consent documentation (Appendix D, E, and F) with the primary gatekeeper (the headteacher) to offer reassurance that issues such as participant rights, safeguarding, confidentiality and anonymity, and data storage had also been attended to.

The above documents were also shared with the class teacher, whose responsibility it was to ensure that pupils were provided with the relevant documentation to take home following my visit to the school. For pupils’ parents and

carers, this same information was provided in a letter (Appendix E) along with the reassurance that the study would not interfere with their child's day-to-day learning; details regarding opting out of, or withdrawing from, the study on behalf of their child in line with the school's research policy; and contact information in the event that they had any queries or concerns relating to the study. Children made use of the opportunity afforded through my visits to ask questions. They were particularly interested in the recording and analysis processes, specifically, why I was collecting audio data rather than filming the sessions, and what I was then going to do with the data.

No concerns were raised, nor did I foresee any risks associated with the study. For pupil consent (Appendix F), child-friendly 'permission' forms were discussed and handed to all children at the end of the day. This was intended to allow reflection at home and thus avoid pressurising pupils to consent. Willing participants completed the form and returned it to the class teacher. Participants were reminded verbally about their right to withdraw without consequence prior to each recorded session. Where children were invited to share personal opinions, such as during interviews, I also administered a second consent form to further emphasise their participant rights.

What I had not foreseen, however, was that there would be considerable delays in obtaining consent owing, in part, to the lateness of the time of year. A delay in gaining ethical approval subsequently delayed access within school, at which time the routine timetable was winding down in preparation for Christmas-related activities. With opportunities to record reading sessions dwindling, I had to make a decision about whether it would be appropriate to take advantage of sessions that were being led by a post-graduate student teacher who, at the time, was in the final week of a four-month placement. My dilemma was that although the student was experienced in leading reading sessions and had an established rapport with the class, I did not wish to place pressure on them to consent to participate or add to their discomfort as a second observer, even though I knew from my own experience that classroom observations were a regular occurrence for student teachers. I raised these concerns directly with both the regular teacher and the student when discussing the study's background, methodology and participant rights. I felt reassured by the student's confidence and willingness to participate, and the knowledge that the sessions were pre-planned and would have taken place regardless of my visit.

The need to approach the school for a second time to obtain gatekeeper consent in order to continue data collection following a change in headship was also unexpected. Although I was subsequently able to meet with the English Lead and gain contextual information (the findings of which I present and discuss in Chapter 4), I was unable to secure any further access to the school or its personnel. This prohibited me from directly following up on questions that arose during final analysis processing. Here I made considerable use of information contained within the public domain such as that on the school's website and those of associated organisations. I provide details of these documents in table 3.4.

One further key consideration was the highly pressurised school environment, particularly in relation to time. I discuss time-related issues in Chapter 7 (section 7.2). I sought to avoid inadvertently adding to the teacher's existing workload by following the school's planning wherever possible and keeping meetings brief, purposeful and to a minimum. In addition, I decided to conduct a pilot study with the aim of fine-tuning my research design and ensuring judicious use of time in school for data collection activities. In reality however, unexpected findings from this pilot study led me to rethink my research design rather than simply revise

it. I discuss this further in the next section. These activities are included within the procedural overview in figure 3.1.

3.5 Pilot study

This small-scale study of regular year four reading sessions enabled me to gain insight into the types of talk that were already taking place within the classroom. As these sessions were part of a larger scheme of work, planning and resources were already in place, minimising inconvenience to the class teacher. I maintained a low-profile role within the classroom as an observer, creating field notes whilst discreetly capturing audio data via a small digital voice recorder.

In order to preserve the trustworthiness of my study (discussed further in section 3.8), I discuss my analysis process for this stage of my research before explaining how my findings contributed to the design of my main study.

3.5.1 Analysis process

Transcripts of audio data, collected over three reading sessions, were created in the same manner as those in the

main study (which I discuss in section 3.7 below). Through these, I explored the different types of information being shared between participants to gain insight into their depth of reading. Analysis drew from Hallesson and Visén's (2016) text movability analysis framework (shown in table 3.1 below), which I adjusted slightly owing to the wholly illustrative nature of the text stimuli featured within these sessions. Further detailed analysis was then conducted on two of the transcripts which demonstrated variation in text movability. Here I focused my attention on talk prompt and response patterns, the content and length of responses, and participants' conversational styles (turn-taking, interruptions, and overlaps, for example). I also investigated how peer groups worked together to manage their talk (including conflict resolution) and develop interpretations of texts.

	Low degree	Middle degree	High degree
Text-based dimensions			
1	Gives a short text-dependent answer, for example, picking a word from the text	Gives an independent answer, for example, words from the text are used effectively	Gives an independent and well-developed answer
2	Uses the text for comprehension of vocabulary to a small extent	Uses the text for comprehension of vocabulary to some extent	Uses the text for comprehension of vocabulary to a large extent
3	Summarizes the text or text passage, or parts of it, to a small extent	Summarizes the text or text passage, or only parts of it, to some extent	Summarizes the whole text or text passage
4	Elicits main points from the text to a small extent	Elicits main points from the text to some extent	Elicits main points from the text to a large extent
5	Makes inferences to a small extent	Makes inferences to some extent	Makes inferences to a large extent
6	Draws conclusions, generalizes or abstracts from main points in the text to a small extent	Draws conclusions, generalizes or abstracts from main points in the text to some extent	Draws conclusions, generalizes or abstracts from main points in the text to a large extent
7	Presents a critical view on text content and structure to a small extent	Presents a critical view on text content and structure to some extent	Presents a critical view on text content and structure to a large extent
Associative dimensions			
8	Associates text to personal experience to a small extent	Associates text to personal experience to some extent	Associates text to personal experience to a large extent
9	Associates text to specialized knowledge to a small extent	Associates text to specialized knowledge to some extent	Associates text to specialized knowledge to a large extent
10	Associates text to other texts to a small extent	Associates text to other texts to some extent	Associates text to other texts to a large extent
Interactive dimensions			
11	Talks about text type to a small extent	Talks about text type with regard to content, topic and lexicogrammatical features to some extent	Talks about text type with regard to content, topic and lexico-grammatical features to a large extent
12	Talks about the function of the text, for example, to persuade, entertain, inform or instruct, to a small extent	Talks about the function of the text, for example, to persuade, entertain, inform or instruct to some extent	Talks about the function of the text, for example, to persuade, entertain, inform or instruct, to a large extent
13	Talks about the receiver role in relation to the text content to a small extent	Talks about the receiver role in relation to the text content to some extent	Talks about the receiver role in relation to the text content to a large extent
14	Talks about the sender role in relation to the text content to a small extent	Talks about the sender role in relation to the text content to some extent	Talks about the sender role in relation to the text content to a large extent

Table 3.1: Text movability analysis framework

(extracted from Hallesson and Visén, 2016:4, Table 1)

Comprising of 14 different dimensions (referred to here as ‘D’), each containing three degrees of movability (low, middle and high), Hallesson and Visén’s framework illustrates the increasing complexity of reader skills progression as evidenced through talk. At the most basic level (D1, low) for example, reader comment is limited to vocabulary from the text. A sophisticated response is likely to include reference to personal knowledge or experience (D8-10), text purpose (D12), or reader and writer roles (D13 and D14, respectively). By omitting D2, which relates entirely to vocabulary, and substituting ‘object’ in place of ‘word’ for the D1 descriptor, I was then able to apply the framework to my dataset.

3.5.2 Findings and their significance for study design

Despite opportunities for children to demonstrate skills across all dimension categories, I identified little range within pupil exchanges. These tended to be short (ranging from one to ten words in length) and predominantly of low or medium complexity, reflecting earlier findings by Almasi (1995, discussed in section 2.5.1, Chapter 2). Furthermore, content was heavily text-based (D1 to D7) even where critical

reasoning (D7) was present, such as that exemplified in extract 3.1 below. (Transcription coding conventions are located in Appendix C.) Whilst some breadth in text movability was present within the content of these exchanges, pupils rarely offered elaborated comment without probing from teachers. Where pupil elaboration was present, this also tended to be brief.

Extract 3.1: Critical reasoning

T: if you think he is a good person raise two hands in the air. Two hands in the air if you think he is good. Xxx okay. No that's all I needed. If you think he's a bad person raise your hand in the air. Right. Okay. Now if you raised two hands in the air put them down. Tell me in your magpie books why he is bad.

From these findings, I deduced that although the texts themselves appeared to have the potential to stimulate rich and varied discussion, opportunities for pupils to talk at length, in order for this type of talk to occur, were restricted by the brevity of pupil talk-related activities. At most, this amounted to ten minutes for the completion of a single activity. After finding few of the children's own ideas within the dataset, I also determined that the lack of time appeared to have a detrimental effect on the thinking process that led to the generation of ideas in the first place. This issue seemed to be compounded by the dominance of teacher initiated

'IRE/IRF' exchanges; a pattern of talk I discussed extensively in Chapter 2 (section 2.5). I discuss the theme of questioning in Chapter 6 (section 6.4) in relation to findings from the main study.

For my main study design, where it was essential that children shared their own thoughts and views as they worked towards becoming critical readers, such findings required that I adapt the structure of future reading sessions in order to encourage this type of interaction. I therefore set out to ensure that explicit and repeated reference was made to the need to think about each text prior to participating in collaborative activities. I also recommended that pupil activities be extended to twenty minutes, drawing from my own knowledge of young pupils' capacities for concentration, in order to provide the space for children to elaborate and build upon their ideas together.

A further key consideration for my research design was the issue of agency for reading. Prompt and response patterns seemed to suggest that this agency resided with the teachers, who positively responded to responses (through repetition or positive evaluation) that corresponded with their own agenda (linked to learning objectives, for example) or interpretation (such as that implied through an image filename of '*sinister*'). Similarly, ideas which appeared to

oppose or lead the focus of talk away from this tended to be swiftly terminated (exemplified in extract 3.2 below).

Extract 3.2: Managing idea development

T: …Why is this person bad bad? Why? Why?
P13: cos his hood is up
T: ooh he's hooded. Oka. yeah=
P13: =and he's spying on people
T: you think he's spying on people. Why? How do you know he's spying on people? What makes him look like he's spying on people?
P13: cos he's in disguise
T: you think he's in disguise. In disguise as a spy. That's interesting. Okay. Yes… *{teacher then approaches another pupil for further ideas}*

I also observed instances in which elaboration of pupil ideas came from the teachers themselves. Occasionally, they introduced new ideas to the discussion as well (exemplified in extract 3.3 below).

Extract 3.3: Idea introduction

T: it could be thundering and lightning behind him. Maybe that's why. Like you said there was a bit of a light blue. Maybe it's thundering and lightening in the background*. (addresses P15)*
P15: well. It's like. So. It. he's bad and it's like blue and it might be like lightning

Whilst it is probable that pressures such as time (discussed further in Chapter 7) contributed to teachers' management of the sessions in this way, these findings are also indicative of a lack of authenticity in respect of the type

of questions being asked (discussed by Alexander, 2006; referred to in Chapter 2). Indeed, the direction of talk was heavily led by teachers through both questioning and the surrounding contextual information made available to the children. One text, for example, was presented without reference to its main source and with a small type-written paragraph masked out.

For my main study, I felt that agency for reading needed to pass to the pupils if they were to actively engage with the texts. Findings from analysis, however, indicated that even if teachers were willing to relinquish a degree of control during pupil talk activities, there was a possibility that pupils might resist attempts to transfer agency to them, such was the extent of their reliance on the teacher as an authority figure. Ideas about texts for example, like the one expressed in extract 3.3 above, appeared to be accepted and adopted by the children without question. In addition, pupil language was often found to mirror that of the teacher, particularly in relation to questions (for example, *'What can you see?' – 'I can see…' / 'Why do you think…' – 'I think…'*). However, the potential for children to collaborate independently of the teacher was also evident in the way that they worked together and resolved conflicts without the need for adult intervention, despite various power inequalities within the

group. This led to greater independence for peer group work within the main study design.

Sampson (2004) notes the value of pilot studies and argues for their place within qualitative studies. My pilot study turned out to be of significantly greater value to my main study than I originally foresaw. It led me to refocus and redesign my study to provide greater space, in terms of time and independence, to facilitate collaborative interaction between peers. I subsequently revised my research questions (see section 3.1 above) and altered my approach to analysis to that of an exploratory nature, through which codes are developed from the data rather than applied to it.

3.6 Sources of data

As is typical of case studies (Creswell and Poth, 2018), data collection activities were wide-ranging. Data was collected from reading sessions, pupil interviews, an interview with the English Lead, meetings with the class teacher, a pupil questionnaire, and an assortment of documentation pertaining to the school, its policies, and classroom resources. The various sources of data are outlined in table 3.2 and discussion of each method of data collection follows. Since my

findings are set out across four chapters, I have also detailed where I discuss each data source (see table 3.3).

As I noted earlier (section 3.2.3), I adopted a broad grounded approach to data collection. This meant that where findings from analysis indicated that certain factors (such as time or teacher control) appeared to have a constraining effect on pupils' talk, I was able to recommend ways of addressing these issues in subsequent sessions to further the opportunities in which pupils could exchange their ideas. To minimise the potential influence on the nature and content of talk around reading, and to enable the teacher to retain ownership of the sessions to preserve the 'naturalistic' setting, the majority of my recommendations involved small structural changes.

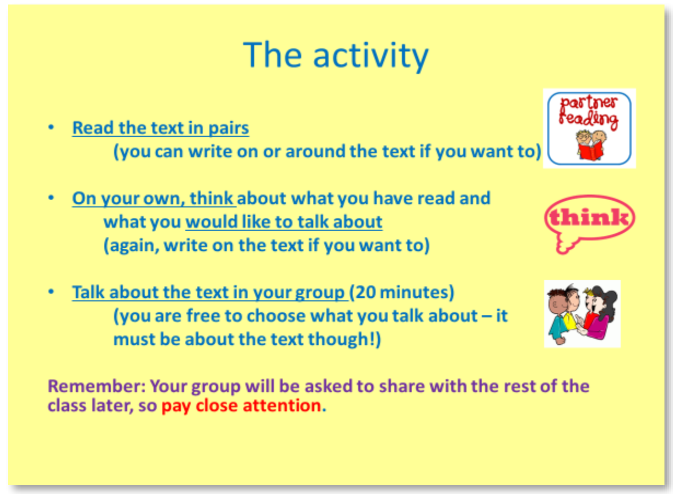


Figure 3.2: **Session one activity structure**

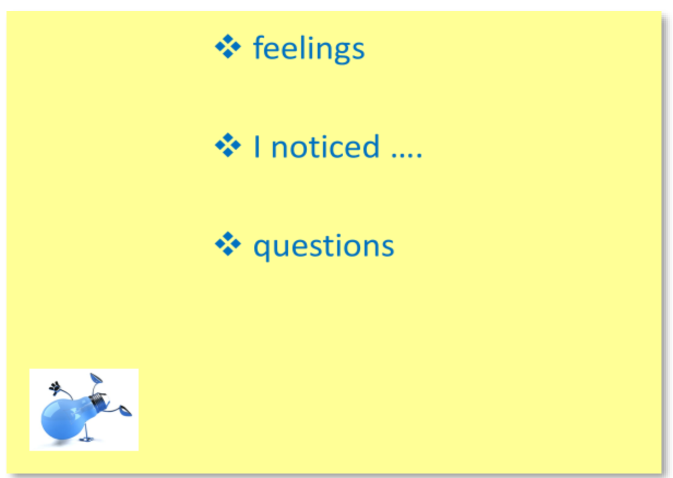


Figure 3.3: Session one talk prompts

In preparation for the first session of the main study for example, I recommended that pupil talk time be extended to twenty minutes to encourage peer collaboration. I also recommended explicit reference to thinking time (shown in figure 3.2) to encourage the children to gather ideas for sharing during the discussion stage, with a reminder of familiar talk prompts to support thinking and talking (figure 3.3). Mindful of the pressures on the teacher's time, I supplied the display resources. The repeated reference to the personal pronoun of 'you' was intended to draw the children's attention to the fact that task ownership, and thus agency, rested with them. Only figure 3.2 was displayed during the activity.

After observing several dominant pedagogies and practices at work in findings from the first session (which I

present and discuss in Chapters 6 and 7), I felt that it would be helpful to provide the children with some support to reflect on textual content and begin to talk together about texts (discussed earlier in section 3.2.2). However, I also wished to avoid overwhelming the pupils with new ways of learning and over-burdening the teacher. I decided upon a think-aloud approach through which the teacher could model different 'text connections' (Keene and Zimmerman, 1997) made between the text and personal knowledge and experience. I provided a brief overview of the concept together with examples of different types of connections for illustrative purposes, based on the *Cinderella is Evil* text (Campbell, 2013). As it was important that the teacher took ownership of the activity, her own 'text connections' were shared with the class. Although the text had been used during the previous session, I felt that it was important to re-use it in this activity to draw the children's attention to the many connections that could be formed, but that appeared to go unnoticed during the earlier reading activity.

The final two sessions took place away from the classroom, in agreement with the class teacher, to facilitate agency for the task to pass fully to the group as no adult support was provided beyond initial instruction.

Research activity	**Date**	**Data collected**	**Notes**
Initial information meeting with teacher and class	November 2016	Contextual information	Included planning, pupil grouping and reading interventions
(Pilot study) Attended routine class-based reading sessions (3x 30 minutes)	November and December 2016	Field observations, audio recording of sessions, photocopy of a completed graphic organiser	Format: teacher-led with whole class, pair and peer group talk activities. Different pupil groups observed Talk stimulus: images from *Window* (Baker, 2002) and *Coming Home* (Morpurgo and Hyndman, 2016)
Information meeting with new class	December 2017	Updated contextual information	Changes in reading curriculum delivery for the new academic year reflected
Individual pupil questionnaire	December 2017	27 completed questionnaires	Administered by class teacher
Class-based reading session	January 2018	Field observations for one group, audio recording, annotated copies of the text	Format: teacher-led with separate stages of activity defined (read/think/talk) and prominently displayed throughout (figure 3.2) Talk stimulus: extract from *Cinderella is Evil* (Campbell, 2013)

Pupil interviews: group and two individual interviews (from same group)	January 2018	Audio recordings of interviews and handwritten notes	Conducted immediately following the above reading session
Brief follow-up meeting with class teacher	January 2018	Handwritten notes captured retrospectively	Conducted immediately following the above interviews (location: playground)
Planning meeting with the class teacher	February 2018	Audio recording and handwritten meeting notes	
Teacher think-aloud immediately followed by class-based reading session	March 2018	Field observations for one group, audio recordings, photograph of ideas collected during teacher think-aloud	Format: teacher-led with brief group talk activity. Think-aloud ideas displayed throughout Think-aloud stimulus: *Cinderella is Evil* (Campbell, 2013) Talk stimulus: extract from *Peter Pan and Wendy* ('The Mermaid's Lagoon', Barrie, 1911)
Review and reflection meeting with the class teacher	April 2018	Audio recording and handwritten meeting notes	

Independent group reading activity conducted away from the classroom	May 2018	Audio recording, pupil annotations created for wider sharing	Format: researcher-led instruction followed by extended group talk activity (20 minutes), then sharing with class (teacher-led) Talk stimulus: extract from *The Demon Headmaster* (Cross, 2009)
Independent group reading activity conducted away from the classroom	May 2018	Audio recording, pupil annotations created for wider sharing	Format: as above with the addition of a visual reminder of stages (read/think/ share/prepare) Talk stimulus: extract *from A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2015)
Semi-structured interview with English Lead (reading curriculum related)	April 2019	Audio recording and handwritten notes	
Exploration of online documents (reading curriculum related)	April to August 2019	Assorted documentation	See table 3.4 for detailed list

Table 3.2: Overview of research activities and data collected

Data type	Chapters in which data is featured
Contextual information (whole school and class) (including internally produced and online documentation sources – specified in full in Table 3.4)	4,6,7
English Lead interview (audio recording and fieldnotes)	4,6,7
Pupil questionnaire responses	4,6,7
Pupil interviews (audio recording and fieldnotes)	4,5,6,7
Planning and review meetings with class teacher (audio recording and fieldnotes)	4,5,6,7
Reading session field observations, audio recordings, and work generated by participants (teacher and pupils)	5,6,7
Researcher-generated memos	6,7

Table 3.3: Discussion of data within thesis chapters

3.6.1 Audio recordings of pupil and teacher talk

In total, audio recordings were made of seven reading sessions, three of which were recorded as part of a small pilot study. Of the four further sessions, two were class-based and two were conducted in an informal working area residing in the main corridor space. This space was used regularly by teaching assistants to provide one-to-one and small group support. Within this working area, a large group table had been created, mirroring the layout of the classroom groups. I placed a small digital voice recorder with similarly sized zoom

microphone attached in the centre of the table. Equipment was set to record before each session commenced and left in situ for class-based sessions. For the out-of-class sessions, I moved the equipment to a table at the back of the room when the group returned to the classroom to share ideas towards the end of the session.

The zoom microphone enabled audio to be captured from the whole class so that I could also explore how group members interacted with peers and with their teacher during whole class activities.

3.6.2 Field observations

Although visitors (including student teachers) to the school were commonplace, I sought to avoid disturbing the setting as far as was possible (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). I therefore maintained a discrete distance from each group under observation, positioning myself next to a wall or towards the back of the classroom. Whilst this meant that I could not always hear what was being said, I was able to observe the ways in which the children interacted with each other physically, such as through gestures and eye-contact, and with the resources supplied to them. Periodic references to

timings throughout note-taking supported data triangulation and ambiguity resolution as I was, in essence, able to re-live each session through unity of sight and sound. These observations tended to feature "very commonplace events", however some evolved into critical incidents during the analysis phase when viewed within the wider context of the reading sessions (Tripp, 1993:24). Incidents of this nature included interruption of teacher instruction at the start of the session following a late pupil's arrival, and multiple interruptions, prior to pupils' arrival, whilst the teacher prepared for the school day.

3.6.3 Pupil questionnaire

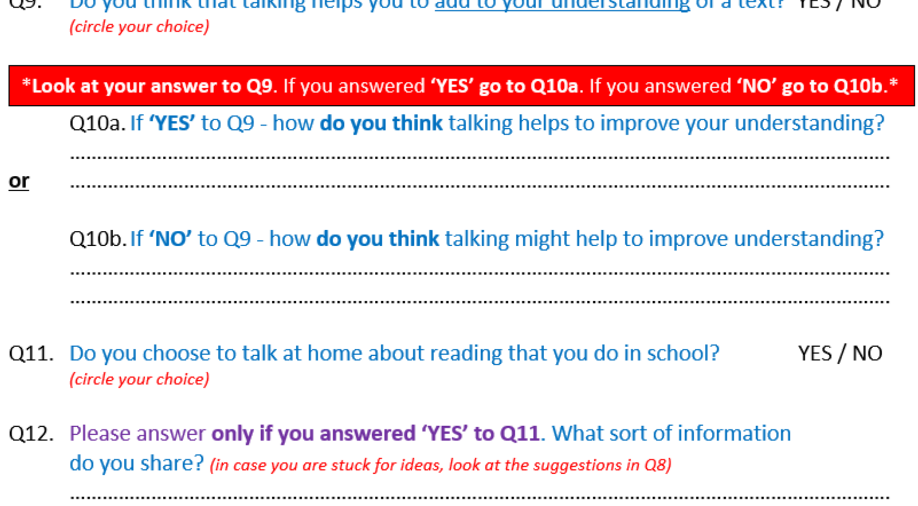
This method enabled me to collect contextual data about reading-related talk at home from pupil perspectives, supplementing documentation collected in school, in order to develop a holistic case study. The questionnaire (Appendix G) was administered in my absence by the class teacher, thus minimising my visits to the school for ethical purposes (section 3.4). However, this also meant that I needed to consider the possibility of bias during analysis, since it was possible that unintentional emphasis on certain response

prompts, or inadvertent suggestions for open responses, may have occurred during its administration.

Physical appearance and simplicity were primary design considerations as I required that the questionnaire appealed sufficiently that the children would voluntarily desire to complete it (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). I therefore restricted it to two sides of an A4 page with the questions spaced well apart, presented in a large font, and colour-coded to differentiate instructions from response indicators so as to avoid overwhelming the children with information. The majority of questions were of the multiple-choice variety for simplicity, in view of the children's age, however many allowed for a further category to be added as a way of passing "…responsibility for and ownership of the data much more firmly in the respondents' hands" in much the same way as open-ended questions (ibid:392). In addition to briefly exploring children's reading habits outside of school, the questionnaire enabled me to collect data related to 'what' the children talked about, 'why' they talked about their reading, and 'how' they thought talking helped to improve understanding of texts.

I conducted a small pilot of the questionnaire with eight randomly selected children from the class who consented to complete it entirely independently. This highlighted the

potential for confusion around the follow-up questions to two earlier dichotomous questions. Q9 and Q11 (in figure 3.4) were intended to funnel the respondents to specific open questions (Q10a or Q10b, and Q12, also in figure 3.4). However, my findings revealed that some children had completed all of the questions instead. To minimise the possibility of this occurring in the main study, I asked the class teacher to read the questionnaire aloud when administering it to the class. Children were also reminded that they could refrain from answering any or all questions. I found few omissions within the 27 questionnaires responded to.



Q9. Do you think that talking helps you to add to your understanding of a text? YES / NO
(circle your choice)

Look at your answer to Q9.** If you answered **'YES' go to Q10a**. If you answered **'NO' go to Q10b.

Q10a. If **'YES'** to Q9 - how **do you think** talking helps to improve your understanding?
....
or ....

Q10b. If **'NO'** to Q9 - how **do you think** talking might help to improve understanding?
....
....

Q11. Do you choose to talk at home about reading that you do in school? YES / NO
(circle your choice)

Q12. Please answer **only if you answered 'YES' to Q11**. What sort of information do you share? *(in case you are stuck for ideas, look at the suggestions in Q8)*
....

Figure 3.4: Extract from pupil questionnaire

3.6.4 Semi-structured interviews

One small group interview and two individual pupil interviews were conducted, following a semi-structured format, to elicit pupils' reflections about their participation in talk activities during reading sessions. The interviews also provided an opportunity to probe children about a response pattern that I had observed when analysing the questionnaires. A significant number of pupils had written *"explains it"* when commenting on how they thought talk helped with understanding texts. The response appeared vague, since it was not clear which aspect or aspects were being referred to. This finding also surprised me in view of the open nature of the question and the lack of elaboration, despite there being space on the questionnaire. I incorporate findings within discussion across Chapters 4 to 7.

Familiar with communicating with children on a daily basis in my role as a teacher, I was conscious of the need to help the children to feel at ease throughout the interviewing process. In addition to minimising the possibility of nervousness and hesitancy, I wanted to obtain the children's own views as opposed to what they thought I wanted to hear, or what they thought they were expected to say by the school (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). I therefore kept interviews brief

(approximately ten minutes), conducted them within the informal setting of the corridor work space, and began with a group format (see procedural overview, figure 3.1) to reduce the adult/teacher-pupil power status imbalance between us (referred to by Eder and Fingerson, cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2011). I also assured the children that all responses were valuable to me, and that no right or wrong responses existed.

With time being short, I prepared as thoroughly as possible in advance of the interviews and constructed an interview schedule (Appendix H), with questions taking an open format so that children could respond individually or through building on others' responses. I also devised a series of probes for each question so that I could gently prompt for responses in the event of hesitancy, uncertainty or misinterpretation of questions. Audio recording followed the same procedure as the reading sessions (minus the zoom microphone) and was supplemented with brief hand-written notes just in case a malfunction occurred whilst recording.

With a relaxed atmosphere established, I then conducted two individual interviews with members of the group. Interviews were entirely voluntary, and only one boy and one girl elected to participate. As it turned out, these children were also very confident speakers, strong readers, and dominant members of the group during reading session

activities. These interviews enabled me to capture personal feelings and views without the children feeling exposed in front of others (Cohen *et al.,* 2011). As before, a schedule was prepared in advance of the interview, with a similar approach to questioning (Appendix H).

One further interview was undertaken, towards the end of data collection, with a member of staff whose responsibilities included leading the programme for English. This interview was dual purpose: to explore the school's wider reading curriculum and to give back to the school (Creswell and Poth, 2018) by sharing earlier findings. The opportunity also enabled me to explore the school's, rather the English Lead's thoughts about them. A time limit of one hour was agreed in advance and strictly adhered to for ethical purposes (discussed earlier in section 3.4). I prioritised questions within my interview schedule to ensure that, should the worst happen and I had to terminate the interview with questions remaining, I collected sufficient data to address the key questions that had arisen through earlier analysis. This interview was conducted across two settings; the school's main meeting room, which was later required by another member of staff; and the school library where several children were also present. I was unable to record the latter part of the interview since these children were not participating in

the study. As previously however, I also made hand-written notes and was therefore able to capture the entire interview. The interview schedule is located in Appendix H, together with an example of the raw data obtained.

3.6.5 Documentation

Merriam and Tisdell (2015:162) note that the term 'documents' is often used to refer to a "…wide range of written, visual, digital, and physical material relevant to the study", included within which are materials generated by the researcher. The documentation collected within this study was similarly wide-ranging, comprising a variety of planning documentation, teaching resources, pupil annotations, memos created throughout the study to capture my thoughts and experiences, and a range of online documentation. Documentation was collected throughout the study and is detailed in table 3.4. As the online documents were sourced from websites reflecting corporate rather than individual views, and were clearly intended for publication by the website owners since they had control over the information published (Basset and O'Riordan, 2002), I did not foresee any ethical issues around consent. Furthermore, these documents

were mainly of a promotional or instructional nature and were therefore intended to be widely shared.

Documents used internally by the school	*Reading Journals* (Clarke, 2015) *Talk for Reading* training documents (Pennington, 2016) Medium term and weekly planning exemplar for *Talk for Reading* (created internally) *Blooms Taxonomy in Action* framework (Nooobie, 2012) *Reading Vipers* (The Literacy Shed, 2017) Summary of year 4 curriculum objectives expressed through 'I can…' statements (source unknown). Year 4 reading group information detailing pupil interventions
Other internally produced documents from observed reading sessions	Children's individual annotations on resources Annotations of ideas captured during group talk activities
Documents published by the school for external communication purposes	School website (including vision, mission statement and ethos; organisational structure; curriculum information and homework details; policy documents; newsletters (various dates); academy consultation letter for parents (dated 7th March 2018); holiday reading activity letter for parents (dated 5th April 2019)
External documents linked to the school's reading curriculum	*Reading Spine* (Corbett, 2015) *Talk for Reading* Techniques (information sheet from *Talk for Writing* website, Corbett and Strong, 2015) 'Core Comprehension Skills – Getting Reading Right!' (article from *Talk for Writing* website, Pennington, n.d.) *Project X Code* (from OUP website, 2019) *Read Theory* website (ReadTheory LLC, 2019) 'Uncovering Shared Social Reading Spaces. Reading for pleasure: Teachers' knowledge of children's reading practices' (article from *The Open University: Research Rich Pedagogies* website, 2019)

Researcher-generated documents	Session and interview audio transcriptions Notes from meetings and interviews Notes from observations of reading sessions Reflective memos

Table 3.4: Overview of documents within the dataset

3.7 Analysis process

Building on findings from my pilot study (section 3.5), which explored the types of information accessed by children when talking about texts, main study analysis looked more closely at how participants worked together to develop textual understanding. I examined both the content and the structure of talk exchanges in order to gain insight into how children might be supported to develop advanced reading skills.

Although I was involved in the planning of the reading sessions, the exploratory nature of my study required that each session evolved naturally, guided by the school's reading curriculum and pedagogical practices. I decided to conduct analysis after each session to explore how talk unfolded and how participants engaged with texts. As I noted earlier in this chapter, this enabled me to observe issues around peer collaboration and co-construction, and find ways

to further opportunities for this to take place across subsequent sessions.

To capture as much of the interactional context as I could (Schmidt and Wörner, 2009), I transcribed audio data as soon as possible after each session. I included behavioural data from my observations (such as pupils appearing to refer to specific parts of the text or playing around with resources) alongside the spoken elements. I also transcribed para-linguistic phenomena (including hesitations, pauses, non-word sounds) in addition to prosodic features (such as emphasis, tone and quality of voice, referred to by Schmidt and Wörner (ibid) as suprasegemental characteristics) since these also convey meaning. To ensure accuracy of transcription I replayed each audio recording several times, and at varying speeds, as occurrences of overlapping speech were frequent (Cohen *et al.*, 2011). The full list of transcription coding conventions is located in Appendix C.

Once all of the reading sessions had taken place, I conducted an intensive and systematic analysis to explore themes across the dataset. Through this, I attempted to identify factors likely to support, influence, inhibit or hinder the children's understanding of texts through the talk; and ensure that analysis did not lack the rigour required for "a

'good' qualitative study" (Creswell and Poth, 2018:47). I discuss trustworthiness in section 3.8 below.

3.7.1 Periodic analysis of talk: session by session

Initial analysis of these sessions involved identifying the different chains of exchanges within audio transcripts. Each of these focussed on a single concept or idea, irrespective of whether, or not, they contained direct reference to the text stimulus or reflected understanding of it. This is illustrated below in extract 3.4a (below) where the focus is on a connection to a film, and in extract 3.4b (below) where the focus is on the quantity of ideas captured, rather than any understanding of the text.

Extract 3.4a: Text-to-text (film) connection, cumulative talk

P1: oh. Oh. Oh. It reminds me of the monster movie
P2: huh. No. the whole idea [xxxx
P?: [umm umm umm. xxxx monster house and monster movie
P?: [xxx xxxxx….
P?: [there's a movie called monster house
P1: monster house. Yeah.

Extract 3.4b: Contribution focus, playful talk

P?: don't know what else to [write
P?: [we've got 1 2 3 4 5.6 7[8,9
P?: [2,3,4=
P1: =99,7,8,9

Once I had identified all of the chains of exchanges and observed how they related (or did not relate) to other chains within the session, I then explored each chain further, guided by concepts which had arisen through my review of literatures (Chapter 2), primarily:

- the different types of classroom talk present (including Mercer's (2000) categories of cumulative, exploratory and disputational talk);
- evidence of reasoning and critical reading;
- patterns in the exchanges (the 'IRE/IRF' type, for example);
- the types of knowledge being drawn from (experiential, other texts, and so forth);
- and enacting of explicit or implicit societal or classroom rules, routines, and norms.

Importantly, this analysis made the dynamics operating within the classroom environment visible at both whole class level, and within the peer group. I was then able to identify how and when power and authority were asserted, how talk

was controlled and managed, and where agency for reading and ownership of activities resided. Findings from each session were contrasted with those from earlier sessions to enable me to draw conclusions about how session format may affect participant engagement with texts. Further authentication was afforded through triangulation of findings with other sources of data collected around the same time (such as the interviews, field notes and pupil annotations). These findings were then shared with the class teacher and used to inform the planning of subsequent sessions.

3.7.2 Intensive analysis of talk: whole dataset

For greater insight into the range of factors influencing text-related talk, I conducted thematic analysis across the entire dataset drawing from Braun and Clarke's (2006) version of thematic analysis, subsequently renamed by Braun and Clarke (2019a) as Reflexive Thematic Analysis (referred to here as RTA). This, argued Braun and Clarke, helped to set it aside from other forms of thematic analysis as a "*fully* qualitative one…that emphasises, for example, researcher subjectivity as a resource…" (Clarke and Braun, 2018:107; emphasis as original).

Selected for its usefulness to studies involving policy development and large bodies of data (Braun and Clarke, 2006), the expediency and straightforward route to analysis offered through this approach was also advantageous to a novice researcher such as myself. Additionally, the approach enabled me to identify the multiple, divergent, and complex themes that surrounded the act of reading within an educational setting. I was then able to consider the interrelations between themes and their potential impact on reading skill development, which I illustrate and discuss within Chapters 6 and 7.

Traditionally, criticisms of thematic analysis have centred upon its perceived lack of rigour and thereby trustworthiness (Nowell, Norris, White and Moules, 2017). Widely used within qualitative research across different disciplines such as clinical, health, and education settings (Braun and Clarke, 2012 and 2019b); thematic analysis has not been afforded the same level of appreciation as other approaches that feature thematic coding such as grounded theory, phenomenology or ethnography (Nowell *et al.*, 2017). This issue has been exacerbated by the lack of discussion regarding procedure (ibid). Braun and Clarke sought to rectify this omission in their 2016 paper in which they advocated for thematic analysis to be considered "as a method in its own

right" (2006:78). They also put forward a recursive six-phase process for conducting RTA (summarised below in table 3.5), together with guiding principles for a systematic approach to facilitate rigour (discussed further in Braun and Clarke, 2019b). It is worth noting however, that the process is not strictly linear (Nowell *et al.*, 2017) as the researcher continually moves across the data, reviewing and reflecting. The approach has since benefitted from renewed interest (Clarke and Braun, 2018) and with trustworthiness substantiated (by Nowell *et al.*, 2017, for example).

Phase	Process description
1 Familiarisation with the data	Reading and re-reading data, becoming immersed and intimately familiar with it (includes transcription of audio data)
2 Coding	Generating labels across the entire dataset for features relevant to the research question(s), collating codes and relevant data extracts
3 Generating initial themes	Exploring collated codes and relevant data extracts for significant broader patterns of meaning to create (potential) themes
4 Reviewing themes	Checking potential themes against the entire dataset in relation to significance to research question(s). Refining or removing themes as necessary
5 Defining and naming themes	Determining the scope and focus of each theme and determining a name that captures this
6 Writing up	Reporting on the themes, relating to examples, data extracts, literature and research questions – final opportunity for analysis

Table 3.5: Six-phase process in Reflexive Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2006 and 2019b)

Where RTA differs from other types of thematic analysis (coding reliability and codebook, for example) is that it is not theoretically bounded. The range of ways in which analysis can be approached (listed by Braun and Clarke (2019b) as inductive, deductive, semantic, latent, constructionist,

essentialist ways; singularly or in combination) affords considerable theoretical flexibility. This makes RTA well-suited to exploratory research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006), such as those underpinning this study (discussed in section 3.1). This flexibility contrasts strongly with other types of thematic analysis that are used in either a deductive way or an inductive way, such as codebook analysis (Gibbs, 2007).

In further contrast to other thematic approaches, the role of the researcher is central to RTA through their "reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with their analytic process" (Braun and Clarke, 2019a:594). Far from a passive role, the researcher is actively involved in "…deep and prolonged data immersion, thoughtfulness and reflection…" (ibid:591), constantly moving back and forth across the dataset throughout analysis, continually questioning interpretations and the underlying assumptions on which they are based. Furthermore, the researcher does not rigidly follow a set of rules, which may result in an array of common codes or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006 and 2012), but is guided by the data and makes decisions about which codes and themes are important in relation to research question(s) and in creating rich description of them.

3.7.3 Conducting thematic analysis

Despite the very different nature of my data, which was derived through interaction between participants in contrast to the narrative accounts told directly to Braun and Clark (2006, 2012, 2019a; and Clark and Braun, 2018), I followed the six-phase process of RTA as closely as possible, as demonstrated below. I conducted analysis manually so that I could continue to view data within the wider context of complete chains of exchanges, as well as those surrounding them. This also facilitated ease of movement through and across the data to ensure consistency of coding, and aided comparison of codes across the dataset. I was then able to identify broader patterns within the talk.

- *Phase one:* I began by re-reading, several times, the transcripts from each of the recorded sessions to re-familiarise myself with the data prior to systematically analysing each in turn.
- *Phase two:* I ascribed single word or short phrase labels to individual participant exchanges throughout a session transcript before moving on to the next. Labels related to the co-construction of meaning, the nature of the content within each exchange, and interactional

features (exemplified in table 3.6 below). In many instances this involved applying multiple codes to the same exchange (same table). I then reviewed all transcripts to ensure consistency and accuracy of coding, and that the labelling truly reflected what was present in the data.

Transcript extract	**Coding example**
P2: what's chande. liers? P1: chandeliers? P2: yeah P1: their like. Their like what xxx have xxxx xxxxxx xxx… P2: I don't think there's anything else P1: let's highlight it green P2: we'll highlight it green. Do you know what [*sounds like uncestral*]. unnecessary means. P1: errr xxxx P2: so basically unusual … anything else P1: no P?: I don't think we're supposed to be doing xxx…	Question: word meaning Short simple response (tentative) Procedure Question: word meaning Short simple response (inaccurate) Seeking contributions from others Procedure/Following teacher instructions

Table 3.6: Coding example (transcript from reading session one)

- *Phase three:* When categorising codes into themes, I reviewed the context surrounding individual codes and reflected on the many concepts that arose during my review of literatures. This enabled me to identify

themes central to policy and pedagogical practice (such as those of 'IRE/IRF questioning', 'vocabulary focus', 'drawing on knowledges', and 'rules for talk'). I also identified several codes that did not appear to be directly related (such as 'ownership of ideas' and 'number of ideas', for example). None-the-less, I collated these codes into broad themes for reconsideration within the next phase of analysis.

- *Phase four:* With all codes assigned to themes, I reviewed them in relation to my research questions, once again revisiting the data so as not to lose sight of contextual factors. Contrary to Braun and Clarke's account of this phase (2006 and 2019a), I decided not to remove any themes, owing to the complexities of both the setting and topic under focus in my study. Instead, I refined themes wherever possible. In retrospect, this decision was justified, for I later realised that themes such as 'rules for talk', and codes that referred to the children's ideas generally, actually had bearing on the way that talk unfolded even though they had appeared irrelevant initially. Consequently, they influenced how texts were talked about. In essence, these were examples of latent themes

(exemplified in table 3.7 below) which may have been missed had I not conducted a systematic and reflective thematic analysis.

Theme	Related codes
Individual performance	Number of ideas Ownership of ideas Quality of contribution Comments relating to progress Unsubstantiated claims regarding possession of knowledge Expressing a lack of understanding (no support provided from group members) Statements of personal intent or action completed Self-aggrandisement Seeking praise or acknowledgement from others

Table 3.7: Codes related to the theme of 'individual performance'

- *Phases five and six:* The next step was to explore the relationships between themes in order to establish the key themes influencing the children's engagement with reading activities. In view of the interconnectedness of teaching and learning, I applied a multi-layered mapping approach which enabled me to organise themes in to three layers: teaching and learning, whole class interaction, and peer group interaction. This is shown in Appendix I. Through this, I was able to consider how text-related interactions were potentially

influenced by surrounding contextual factors. For greater insight, I added themes derived from analysis of observational notes and memos, work generated by participants, meetings with the class teacher, and pupil interviews. Analysis of this data followed the same reflexive process used to analyse the session transcripts, the difference being that codes were generally applied to larger sections of data.

This form of mapping enabled me to discern connections within and across the various layers. These relationships may not have been so visible had I attempted a hierarchical approach. For example, I noted connections between 'individual performance' (table 3.7 above) and 'end goal focus' (at the peer group interaction layer). I deduced that these were likely to be influenced by the emphasis on 'idea generation' and the 'quantity of contributors / contributions' that featured in the 'short, fast paced teacher-led activities' (all at the whole class layer). In turn, these appeared to be influenced by 'time constraints' surrounding teaching and learning (outer layer). Conceivably also accounting, in part, for the 'limited peer-led opportunities' (whole class layer), I identified time as a key theme. After reviewing my

coding and reflecting on the interconnections, I decided to name the theme 'perceptions of time' (see section 7.2, Chapter 7).

I describe and discuss the key themes in detail within Chapters 6 and 7, together with associated issues and implications for children's reading skill development. Included within this are findings from the pupil questionnaires. Each question was coded to establish relevance to key themes. Data from the English Lead interview, which afforded an opportunity to explore key themes further (such as the use of questioning and the emphasis on vocabulary), is similarly interwoven.

Questionnaire and interview data has also been incorporated within Chapter 4 where I present and discuss findings from my study of the school's reading curriculum.

3.8 Establishing trustworthiness

Concerned with extrapolation rather than generalisation (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015), the internal

validity of a qualitative study is of paramount importance (Cohen *et al.*, 2011) in establishing its trustworthiness, if audiences are to be persuaded that the findings "…are worth paying attention to…" (Lincoln and Guba, 1985:290). This concept is operationalised by Lincoln and Guba (ibid) through the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. I discuss the trustworthiness of this study below.

Credibility is Lincoln and Guba's equivalent of internal validity, a term applied in quantitative research (discussed by Cohen *et al.,* 2011), and is an attempt to ensure that readers can recognise the experience (of the study) through the researcher's representation of it (Nowell *et al.,* 2017*).* Here, this is attended to through the cross-referencing (triangulation) of data from multiple sources collected via multiple methods, as is commonly conducted in qualitative studies (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015). Triangulation also benefits from data derived from multiple participant perspectives owing to the holistic nature of case study. In this study, participant perspectives comprise of the class teacher, the English Lead, and individual pupils.

Transferability is facilitated through the richly detailed description of the setting, activities and themes afforded through case study and thematic analysis, allowing for

readers to determine for themselves the extent to which findings can be transferred into other settings (Creswell and Poth, 2018).

Dependability is concerned with the research process, whereas confirmability is concerned with the results of the study (Lincoln and Guba, 1986). Both are attended to within this study through detailed documentation of theoretical perspectives, methodological and analytic decisions, and personal reflections, including positionality. I discuss positionality in the next section and also in Chapter 1. Dependability is further supported through the knowledge that my recording equipment did not appear to distract the children (Simons, Lewis, Bailey and Breakwell cited in Cohen *et al.,* 2011*)*, who largely ignored it. Additionally, neither I, nor any of the other adults in the classroom, noted any unusual behaviour. This suggests that the children felt comfortable and that the setting remained as 'natural' as possible despite my intrusion. I also did not perceive that my presence would influence the way in which sessions unfolded, since teachers (experienced and new alike) were routinely subjected to observation and scrutiny (own experience).

Sessions were planned well in advance and text resources were checked before use to confirm that each contained sufficient references to real-world topics or issues

for the children to form connections to their own experiences and knowledges. This was a key factor in determining whether texts had the potential to stimulate talk indicative of reading beyond the text's surface level. Furthermore, I conducted transcription of audio data myself, with reference to my field notes. I revisited the data many times throughout analysis to aid construction of themes and ensure that findings were not separated from context. Rigour in analysis is discussed in section 3.7 above. I also shared key findings with both the class teacher and the English Lead, neither of whom expressed surprise at any of the findings, supporting credibility in addition to dependability.

3.9 Researcher role

During the classroom-based reading sessions, I conducted unstructured observation as a non-participant, primarily to preserve the naturalistic setting but also to support the transcription and analysis processes, and facilitate rich description of my case. In addition to information about the setting, this method enabled me to observe physical interaction with others and with classroom resources, and I was able to document behavioural changes

within the group in response to the teacher's arrival. This finding also became apparent within the audio data.

As a part-time researcher I was also actively employed providing day-to-day cover for absent primary school teachers across a number of different schools. The physical distance afforded by the non-participant observer role helped me to reposition myself as a researcher whilst collecting and analysing data. Although repositioning became easier as the study progressed, it was not without challenge, for the children within both year four classes were aware of my outside role and my friendship with the class teacher. This created two problems for the study. Firstly, that the children probably perceived me as an authority figure (Simons, Lewis, Bailey and Breakwell cited in Cohen *et al.*, 2011*)* which may have affected the ways in which they interacted with me during interviewing. Secondly, I was approached for help by one of the children during the first recorded session. In response, I redirected the individual to a classroom resource to appear unavailable and physically moved away from the group, taking care to avoid any further eye contact.

Also problematic was that as a non-participant, I was unable to make contact with the class teacher once a session was underway. Consequently, a video clip did not get shared with the class. My intention was that through the modelling

of lively and collaborative discussion between peers, the children might feel emboldened to share their own ideas with others, regardless of how well developed they were to begin with. The oversight did not hamper my data collection for the session but served to highlight one of the difficulties of conducting classroom-based research, with particular reference to the pressure of time and the effect on the teacher.

In my role as researcher, I also supervised the reading activities conducted outside of the classroom, providing initial instruction and monitoring the duration of the task. This helped to minimise the impact of my research on routine teaching and learning. Throughout these sessions, I waited in an area adjacent to the classroom where I remained out of view but could hear the children so that I could respond in the event that adult intervention was needed. My intention was to maintain an atmosphere in which the children could interact as freely as possible.

Whilst I provided direction, in terms of session planning, to ensure plentiful opportunities for rich discussion, a high degree of sensitivity was required to safeguard the teacher's ownership of the sessions so that they evolved naturally and supported routine teaching and learning. This meant that texts used within the study were predominantly

selected by the class teacher in line with the school's reading curriculum. Although I determined a range of possibilities for the children to form connections with the content of each text, I perceived that their potential to stimulate rich or deep discussion varied considerably. Unfortunately, time constraints prevented the sourcing of alternative texts.

I also encountered a dilemma when introducing the concept of 'text connections' (Keen and Zimmermann, 1997) ahead of the think-aloud activity. I wanted to avoid the risk of overburdening the class teacher with too much information, or information that was too detailed in view of the pressures already faced (discussed in Chapter 1). Equally, I did not wish to appear to provide a set of instructions which could risk impairing the 'naturalistic' setting of classroom interaction. On the other hand, however, I needed to provide enough support so that the concept could be confidently conveyed to the class. This balance was achieved through a condensed overview, accompanied by an annotated text exemplar. This afforded the teacher with the freedom to choose whether to share the examples I had provided, or to adapt them to reflect personal knowledge and experience.

3.10 Conclusion

With trustworthiness as a major consideration, I have provided a detailed account of the methodological issues pertinent to my study within this chapter. In the following chapter, I describe and discuss the school’s reading curriculum.

Chapter 4: One School's Approach to Reading

4.0 Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual background to the findings obtained from reading activities conducted in a single year four class. I discuss these activities in Chapter 5. Here, I describe how the reading curriculum is conceived and implemented within Paver Primary School (pseudonym), a large urban English primary school located within the county of Northamptonshire. I draw from a range of documentation (detailed in Chapter 3, section 3.6.5) and data from an interview with the English Lead, to discuss how the school's policies and pedagogies for reading may support or impede the development of advanced reading skills; the central focus of this research study.

To add depth and richness to the description, I begin with a brief contextual overview of the area in which the school is situated. I then narrow my focus to the school community, drawing attention to a key issue that influences decisions about whole-school policy. I also describe various organisational structures at year group and class levels, and curriculum area responsibilities. For ease of discussion, I have

separated the reading curriculum into two elements: reading skill development, which is concerned with academic development; and reading for pleasure, which is associated with creating a culture of enjoyment around reading. Both are statutory requirements of the revised *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013). I also describe whole school pedagogical approaches for reading, supporting resources, and the monitoring procedures set in place to measure the effectiveness of their use across the school.

Pupils are expected to read regularly outside of school hours and to talk with others about their reading. Parents and carers are provided with a homework policy document which sets out age-related expectations. In order to set the scene as fully as possible, policy content relating to reading homework is summarised here. I also include insights from several pupils about both 'home' and school-based reading activities, derived from interview and questionnaire data.

4.1 Location and the wider community

Paver Primary is situated approximately one mile from the centre of a town located in the East Midlands region. The town's population, which numbers in the region of 215,000 (according to Brinkhoff, 2019), is ethnically diverse. The

many transportation networks within easy reach of the town could account for this diversity and, to some extent, the recent boom in the logistics and supply chain industry which the county has experienced as a whole (SEMLEP, 2019).

The county itself has a well-established reputation as a producer of high-quality footwear (Northamptonshire Boot and Shoe, 2013). It is also regarded as "the home of British motor racing" (Silverstone, 2019). Unemployment is very low (ITV News, 2019). The county council, however, is one of several councils in the country which has been experiencing a financial crisis (Shepka, 2018) and, at the time the study was conducted, was working on plans to restructure its local governing body. This crisis may have been a contributory factor in the local authority's decision to advocate academisation to the primary schools under its control. Paver Primary has been exploring its own options in this regard, but operated as a community school throughout the data collection period.

4.2 The school community

Paver Primary and Nursery School is home to some 460 pupils aged between three and eleven. There are two classes

of around 30 children within each year group. A recent inspection judged the school to be 'good' in all areas (Ofsted, 2016).

The school's ethos is one of caring; for others, for the environment, and self-care. This is reflected in the language of the school rules, values and mission statement. School values, for example, are conveyed through the acronym, CARE (Creative, Aspiration, Respect, Enjoyment). The school works hard to establish and maintain strong home-school relationships. Its website, for example, is regularly updated with newsletters, Twitter feeds, and information to support learning outside of school. Parents are warmly welcomed and may accompany their child into the classroom prior to morning registration. Parenting support is also available in the form of externally run family learning courses.

The town's ethnic diversity is reflected in the school community. Although Paver Primary values this diversity, the resultant variation in children's English language proficiency creates considerable challenges for teaching and learning across the school. It is not unusual for up to forty or even fifty percent of pupils within a class to be learning English as an additional language (EAL). In some cases, the school setting provides the only opportunity for children to practise their English language skills. Whilst the school conducts English

language-based interventions to support these pupils, there are implications for children's wider learning in relation to curriculum access and the richness of their learning experiences. I discuss these issues further within this and subsequent chapters.

Through academic and creative curriculums, the school aims to inspire all pupils to develop *"a love of life-long learning"* (school website). A range of topic-related creativity and arts events take place across the year for individual year groups in addition to the whole-school. These include World Book Day and Arts Week, practical science sessions, and externally organised activities to bring history alive.

From nursery age onwards, each year group has three full-time teaching assistants (or part-time equivalents) attached to it. They conduct interventions with individuals and small groups in addition to their daily teacher support roles, at the behest of the class teachers. The school also benefits from two higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs) who, unlike other teaching assistants, are not attached to specific year groups or classes. This support is vital in view of the significant variation in English language proficiently across the school.

Most class teachers also have responsibility for a specific curriculum area. Several also have leadership

responsibility for a specific age range. There are leaders for the nursery phase, the foundation year (reception), key stage one (years one and two) combined with year three, and upper key stage two (years five and six) combined with year four. Allocation of year groups in this manner facilitates greater curriculum continuity, since key stage leaders have knowledge of curriculum content for both key stages and can therefore approach lesson planning holistically.

For some time, England has been experiencing a teacher recruitment crisis driven, according to one teacher's union, by an increased level of accountability (NASUWT, 2019). Paver Primary has experienced its own share of recruitment problems, with senior leadership and class-based positions all being affected. It is not possible however, to determine whether this has occurred through natural change or as a result of general school culture.

4.3 The reading curriculum: whole school focus and rationale

The English Lead, also the leader for upper key stage two and year four, is responsible for all literacy planning and its implementation. This includes:

- sourcing ideas and resources to support the school's goals for reading, including making decisions about the books used within literacy sessions, the acquisition and promotion of stock for the school's library;
- attending meetings, conferences and external training events;
- disseminating information about initiatives and pedagogy within the school (discussed further within this chapter);
- measuring and monitoring the effectiveness of initiatives and teaching throughout the school, and initiating modification where required;
- and occasionally working with teachers across particular year groups to trial approaches, with teacher feedback being key in determining whether roll-out across the school follows.

The reading curriculum can be separated into two constituent components: formal skills development and reading for pleasure. The former takes place through routine whole class, teacher-led reading sessions which follow a pre-determined planning structure directly linked to *National Curriculum* reading objectives. I refer to these elsewhere as

formal reading sessions. Reading for pleasure, on the other hand, encompasses a wide range of informal activities which are often sourced online and implemented shortly after discovery by the subject lead. I discuss these activities in section 4.3.2 below.

4.3.1 Developing skilled readers

The main focus of the literacy curriculum is drawn from the school's development plan. Following publication of the 2015 SATs results, significant gaps were identified in pupil knowledge for vocabulary and comprehension, leading the school to shift away from its emphasis on writing skills in order to concentrate on reading development. The central role that SATs results appear to have in steering future literacy plans draws attention to the performative nature of the English education system (discussed by Ball, 2012). However, in addition to the pressure to support all pupils to achieve specific targets by the end of key stage two, Paver Primary faces additional pressures as a consequence of local contextual factors. For example, exposure to English language outside of school varies significantly among the large number of pupils for whom English is an additional language.

During interview, the English Lead noted that the school faces a *"battle"* as it continually seeks out new ways to deliver and broaden children's language learning. The sense of conflict, conveyed through the military analogy, raises the question of whose interests are actually being served by the system in the long run, for the impetus appears to be on the school's creativity around pedagogy rather than the richness of children's learning experiences.

Smyth (2001) also raises the above question when discussing the marketisation of education. The narrowing of the school's curriculum towards the end of summer, an act designed to *"get them [pupils] through the SATs papers"* (noted by the class teacher), indicates that pupil interests may be secondary to the school's performative needs. Secondly, the impact of this local contextual factor supports Merson's (2001) argument that schools face a far from level playing field. Despite varying local contextual factors, which could potentially result in multiple additional challenges for some schools (such as when both language barriers and poverty exist), all are expected to achieve nationally set targets for pupil progress.

To facilitate vocabulary development across the entire curriculum, the school established a talk-based approach to

learning so that pupils have the opportunity, following teacher modelling, to talk through ideas before committing to a written version. For the literacy curriculum this led to the adoption of *Talk for Reading* (*TfR*), a facet of the *Talk 4 Writing* approach created by former teacher, writer and English Inspector, Pie Corbett. According to Corbett, the approach is underpinned by practical classroom-based research which has led to marked improvements in standardised testing results for reading (Talk for Writing, 2019). This is undoubtedly a large part of the programme's appeal for schools, in view of the performative culture of education.

4.3.1.1 Talk for Reading

I discuss Paver's implementation of *TfR* in section 4.5 below, where I describe the pedagogies and resources used to support reading sessions. In this section I set out the concepts that underpin the approach, as depicted within training material provided by a *TfR* educator who led two days of professional development training at Paver Primary at the start of the 2016 academic year.

Vocabulary is central to children's development in reading and writing. The documentation supports the notion that the majority of an individual's vocabulary comes from reading, and that individuals with limited vocabularies find reading challenging and are therefore less likely to read. Furthermore, according to Goss (cited in Pennington, 2016), beginning school with a weak vocabulary can impact upon an individual's academic progress well beyond childhood and into adulthood, where it can affect employability and have repercussions for an individual's well-being and behaviour. With this in mind, the approach features a range of different vocabulary building strategies and games through which children explain and apply new vocabulary (such as exploding a word, true or false definitions, and inventing words drawing from known words and their meanings). These are exemplified in Appendix J.

Also underpinning *TfR* is the premise that young readers undergo four stages of reading development, as outlined below:

- ***Tacit readers*** who concentrate on decoding and do not retain the content being read.

- ***Aware readers*** for whom decoding requires less concentration (than Tacit readers) and who are able to identify ambiguities in meaning but do not yet possess strategies to resolve them.

- ***Strategic readers*** who draw meaning through the application of a range of reading (including thinking) strategies and are able to monitor and repair understanding when faced with ambiguity.

- ***Reflective readers*** who adapt and revise reading (and thinking) strategies in light of goals or purpose(s) for reading; monitor understanding and thinking; and adopt a reflective stance, revising strategies for greater depth of understanding.

(extracted from Pennington, 2016)

To support children in their development through these stages, *TfR* aims to do much more than build vocabulary. In his introduction to *Reading Spine,* a collection of 'core books' (notably, fiction) to support reading and sharing throughout the primary phrase, Corbett (2015:7) describes *TfR* as "a form of comprehension" suitable for whole class and small group formats. Vague references to comprehension, such as

this, exacerbate the existing issue of ambiguity around key concepts in official policy documentation. I encountered references to multiple types of comprehension during my interview with the English Lead, none of which appeared to be clearly defined within policy. These are presented and discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.1).

Corbett also notes that *TfR* encourages children to become active readers and thinkers, who learn to "read critically, deepening understanding", enabled by the teacher who draws back as children gain confidence. The approach also draws from Chambers' (1993) *'Tell me'* approach to book-based discussion (described in section 4.5.2 below), and a range of book talk activities (discussed in section 4.5.3 below).

Whilst *TfR* closely follows the reading objectives of the *National Curriculum* (those for lower key stage two are featured in Appendix B) and the content domains of the national testing framework (shown in table 6.1, Chapter 6), there are opportunities for children to extend on these objectives in order to achieve greater depth of thought for the development of critical reading skills. Children are, for example, encouraged to consider different character viewpoints or different sides of an argument; to draw from multiple contexts by contrasting content with their own

experiences and previous readings; and to reflect on wider themes within texts, with depth of thinking encouraged through multiple readings of the same texts. The value of re-reading texts is echoed by Barak and Lefstein (2021:16) who, after finding that it took "considerable effort" for teachers to overcome "official [conventional] readings" of texts in order to develop a critical stance, recommended that they engage in re-reading discussions when preparing for dialogic teaching. The same approach is likely to benefit pupils in view of the pervasiveness of the right / wrong dichotomy associated with assessments of children's comprehension skills.

4.3.2 Building a culture of reading for pleasure

In response to the *National Curriculum's* requirement to promote wider reading and encourage children to read for pleasure, Paver aims to inspire pupils' *"love for reading"* through an array of initiatives and activities that are accessible to all pupils, regardless of age (noted by the English Lead during interview). Book-related wall-mounted displays are located in public areas throughout the school buildings (including the main building corridors and the

library space). During interview, the English Lead noted that if sufficient budget is available, ‘chill out’ reading areas with comfortable seating may be set up around school for use during playtimes. An outdoor reading ‘pod’ is also a possibility for the future.

Like many other schools, World Book Day often involves dressing up as favourite characters, sharing favourite books, and participating in a range of book-based activities. However, the main impetus is in the generation of ‘excitement’ around reading. New library stock is promoted during assembly time, where the first chapter of a book is read aloud to whet children’s appetites for reading. All teachers have a ‘class read’ to share with their class, some of which are democratically selected by pupils. ‘Story swaps’ take place within key stages and are shrouded in mystery until the final moment when children find out which teacher is reading the book that they have elected to listen to. Occasionally, a local author visits the school.

Excitement around reading is not limited to reading in school. Activities such as Reading River (sourced from The Open University’s *Research Rich Pedagogies*, www.researchrichpedagogies.org/) and ‘24 hours of reading’ require children to reflect on the diversity of texts that exist outside of school as they capture images, make drawings or

create notes about texts, which are subsequently shared with others through a collage or slide presentation. These activities encourage children to think about themselves as readers and to reflect on the value of reading. They also have the potential to promote reading to a wider audience through collaboration with parents and carers, particularly where support with photography is needed.

Paver Primary is working to establish a community of readers within school. This includes raising the profile of teachers as readers. Whilst a staff book club was trialled but met with varying degrees of interest, due mainly to the impact on personal time away from school, the subject lead hopes to initiate a 'shelfies' competition. Placing considerably less burden on teachers' own time, as only an image of their home bookshelf is needed, pupils would then be invited to match the anonymous photographs with members of teaching staff. Hopefully, this will inspire pupils to develop and photograph their own book collections.

A sense of community is, perhaps, strongest in year six where pupils work with younger children across the school in the capacity as reading 'mentors' or 'buddies'. Some pupils also perform school librarian roles. Overseen by the librarian who manages the day-to-day running of the library and its resources, school librarians are responsible for maintaining

the physical library space and help to create displays. This role is viewed by pupils as a privilege and by staff as a reward for 'good readers', and whilst it is entirely voluntary, the English Lead oversees the selection process.

Sensitive to the diversity of pupils' interests and aptitudes for reading, the library is stocked with a broad range of texts to encourage enjoyment of reading regardless of gender. Fiction texts, for example, are deliberately chosen to ensure that there is a balance in the gender of the chief protagonists. This helps to address variations in boys' and girls' reading interests and motivations (discussed by Lepper, Stang and McElvany, 2021. Although not central to my study, I discuss gender-related issues as an emerging theme within section 7.1, Chapter 7). The library also contains a collection of newspapers, graphic novels and comics. Although recommended within the *TfR* training documentation, Paver has found it difficult to acquire graphic novels and comics suitable for primary aged children. The school is reliant on the kindness of a local retailer who occasionally donates a selection of comics for the school library. Additionally, a small selection of books containing sophisticated or sensitive themes are sourced exclusively for use by year six pupils.

4.4 Measuring success

The success of the school's reading curriculum is judged through findings from both quantitative and qualitative data, collected regularly at intervals throughout the academic year. Most of this is managed by the English Lead.

4.4.1 Pupil progress (quantitative dimension)

At the end of the primary age phase, children complete compulsory reading SATs. These are used to show how the school has 'performed' in accordance with government expectations, and situate the school's results within both local and national contexts. Data is widely published by the Government and viewed by various interested parties, including the families of prospective pupils. Undertaken annually, each test series samples a selection of reading skills from the *National Curriculum* with the intention that, over time, each area of the curriculum for reading will have been tested (DfE, 2016). The 2016 SATs framework (ibid) shows that certain skills are prioritised (for example word meaning, information retrieval and recording, and reasoned inference)

meaning that more questions and thus, more marks, are available in relation to pupils' application of these skills.

Regardless of any limitations that the current testing system may have, the bearing that these results have on the reputation of the school means that any areas of weakness identified in these results are used to drive the school's future reading curriculum. A meeting with a year four class teacher (on 23rd February 2018) reveals that whilst modifications are conducted in respect of planning across the school, it is within key stage two (years three to six) where the greatest impact is felt. Pedagogical practices are described and discussed in section 4.5 below. I later build upon this discussion, in Chapters 6 and 7, following observation of several dominant pedagogies and practices across my study.

Although the official SATs are conducted at the end of year six, pupils within other year groups are not exempt from testing as they undertake written assessments throughout the academic year. These mirror the type of skills, language, and style of questioning of the SATs. Pupils within the upper year groups also complete SATs practise papers. These tests are marked internally and are used to inform pupils' achievements and progress along with informal assessment methods, one of which is through discussion during small 'guided' reading group sessions. Here, class teachers are able

to assess individual pupil progress directly against the age-specific statutory expectations set out within the *National Curriculum*. These expectations are depicted through a series of child friendly '*I can*' statements (for example, '*I can ask questions to improve my understanding of a text'*), empowering pupils to take ownership of their reading development.

Such close monitoring enables teachers to quickly identify those who are at risk of falling behind their peers, and to instigate or adjust additional support. This is generally delivered by teaching assistants and overseen by relevant class teachers, who draw from a class 'reading folder'. This collection of resources is supplied by the English Lead. Resources are predominantly phonics-based for early readers (*Starter Stile* by Shuster, n.d.) or developing readers (*Project X CODE* by OUP, 2019), and actively seek to engage boys. When reviewing research on reading interest (such as that conducted by Logan and Johnston, 2010), Lepper *et al.* (2021:1) note that boys tend to be "overrepresented among readers with lower reading motivation". Paver also subscribes to *ReadTheory* (2019), an interactive online resource which allows pupils to develop their reading skills at their own pace through levelled text-based quizzes. Although aimed at the American Common Core State Standards for reading (the

equivalent of England's *National Curriculum*), it is free of charge and has received positive feedback from the year five and six pupils that have used it. Teachers are able to monitor the progress of each pupil. With no limits on usage, other than a reliable internet connection, pupils are free to make extensive use of the resource at home. Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain any usage data.

4.4.2 Quality of teaching (qualitative dimension)

The majority of the monitoring conducted by the English Lead is qualitative in nature and is primarily concerned with formal reading sessions. Teachers work with their respective year group partner to plan *TfR* sessions using a format devised by the subject lead, who also receives a copy of planning documentation for all schemes of work for monitoring purposes. The template captures details of the relevant curriculum objectives, planned reading activities, key questions, and links to grammar and writing activities for each session within a complete scheme or unit. Delivery of schemes (or units) is observed throughout the academic year through formal lesson observations (which are required as part of the school's annual performance management

programme) and brief informal visits (referred to as 'drop-ins'). Monitoring also extends to periodic scrutiny of pupil work through sampling of literacy books for each class (known as 'book-looks').

Regular monitoring means that the English Lead is able to respond quickly should any issues or areas of weakness be identified. Recently, for example, evidence from a book-look suggested that reading activities and questioning were not being used consistently across the school to stimulate 'rich' talk. This is to be addressed through a 'refresher' internal training session. These whole-school pedagogies are described in section 4.5 and discussed further in relation to their impact upon text-related talk within Chapters 6 and 7.

Arguably, more covert methods of monitoring are also employed. As part of an in-house survey exploring children's reading, pupils were asked to measure the frequency with which their teacher read aloud to them each week. They were also asked to comment on their perceptions of the teacher's attitude towards reading. This included asking pupils whether they thought their teacher read, and how they thought their teacher felt about reading.

To a much lesser degree, the school's goals for reading for pleasure are incorporated within monitoring. Recent classroom observations for example, revealed that several

reading areas *"were looking a bit shabby and unloved"* (noted by the English Lead).

4.5 Delivering the reading curriculum

In this section I describe several pedagogical practices that are used throughout the primary phase to support the delivery of the reading curriculum. This takes place through a daily literacy session, the focus of which alternates between reading and writing schemes (or units) of work. Findings from the second session (discussed in detail in section 5.3.2, Chapter 5) indicated that this may have had a negative impact upon the way that participants (both teacher and pupils) viewed and talked about texts during reading sessions. Further, it may have led to a blurring of the learning objectives for these sessions. Using information derived from *TfR* training documentation, interview with the English Lead, and meetings with the year four class teacher, supplemented with research conducted online, I also set out (as far as possible) the rationale for Paver's pedagogical approaches. Examples of graphic organisers are contained within the appendices (see Appendix J and Appendix K).

4.5.1 General approach to text-based talk

Corbett and Strong (2015) recommend that texts are presented to children line-by-line and chunk-by-chunk to help them piece together ideas from predictions, inferences and interpretations; and to recognise structural patterns and techniques used by the writer to manipulate the reader. They suggest that reading texts in this manner helps children to learn to empathise with characters, broaden their range of vocabulary, apply existing knowledges to the text, and develop a mental representation of it. They also suggest that this approach helps children to develop an enjoyment of reading in general. Findings related to this approach are discussed in Chapter 6 (section 6.2).

Teacher modelling is integral to *TfR*, which recommends 'thinking aloud like a reader'. Suggestions to support teachers to communicate their thinking to pupils as they proceed through texts include:

- make statements – raise questions,
- re-read and read on – self check,
- think about what happened before / next,
- explain what words mean,
- describe what you can 'see' in your head,

- make deductions,
- tie clues together,
- suggest what might be happening,
- refer to what the text says,
- clarify ideas in the light of new information,
- discuss how the writer creates effects,
- get the 'big' picture - summarise.

(extracted from *TfR* training documentation; Pennington, 2016.)

Whilst *TfR* is initially teacher-led (as I discuss in the next section), it is intended that talk leads to dialogic interaction with pupils. Questions therefore need to be structured in ways that open up thinking, so that pupils may add questions of their own to elaborate upon the ideas of others. Questions and questioning are discussed in relation to findings in Chapter 6 (section 6.4).

As pupils develop confidence in talking about texts, they are encouraged to work more independently through small peer groups, using 'talk rules' to facilitate talking together (as recommended by Mercer, 2000; see Chapter 2 (section 2.4.1) for the challenges of group work). These rules may be set by the teacher or devised by the class, and generally serve to remind children to:

- be inclusive,
- to take turns at sharing and listening,
- to be respectful of others' ideas,
- to accept that differences in opinion may exist,
- to justify their own ideas,
- and to be prepared to alter thinking in light of others' ideas.

To support pupils (and teachers when 'thinking aloud') with ideas sharing, *TfR* suggests that class teachers collect phrases for use in sentence stems. Examples offered within the training documentation (Pennington, 2016) include:

- It reminds me of… / makes me think of…
- In my opinion…
- I like the ideas and / but…
- This is similar to… / the same as…
- The writer is suggesting that…
- It makes me feel…because / the effect created on me is….
- The main point might be…
- The book is about…

And for sharing the group's ideas with a wider audience:

- We were thinking that…
- We were discussing that…

This scaffolded approach to pupil independence may, according to notes taken by the year four class teacher during the training session, culminate with group members adopting specific reader roles (such as questioner, predictor, clarifier and summariser) as they participate in reciprocal reading.

4.5.2 Teacher-led questioning

During interview, the English Lead revealed that Paver Primary believes that questioning leads to *"deeper understanding"*. This view has led them to adopt the approach for learning across all curriculum subject areas. Considerable time has been spent on developing teachers' questioning skills. With regard to reading sessions, the English Lead noted that *"the right questions"* help children to express their ideas about texts and encourage deep thinking.

Class teachers are expected to target their questioning to address the relevant age-specific criteria from the *National*

Curriculum and the various SATs framework content domain areas. This focus further intensifies at years five and six. When devising questions, teachers are also expected to draw from resources provided by the English Lead. These contain sentence stems and key vocabulary to ensure that pupils are familiarised with the 'academic' style of language that they will encounter within the formal SATs. These resources comprise chiefly of:

- The question framework from the *'Tell me'* approach to reader talk (from writer and former teacher, Chambers, 1993) which contains:

    - ***basic questions*** concerned with children's likes and dislikes, things that puzzled them, and patterns or connections they have noticed;

    - ***general questions*** concerned with predictions, connections to themselves or other texts, interesting or effective language and passages within the text, how sharing ideas has influenced (or not influenced) an individual's thoughts or understandings, and knowledge of contextual information about the writer or text content;

- ***special questions*** concerned with textual content such as duration of events, setting, characters, narrator, and points of view.

Notes made by a teacher during *TfR* training indicate that teachers choose questions from any category or across different framework categories, and share them with pupils prior to reading.

- *Reading Vipers* which is concerned entirely with questioning in relation to the SATs content domains. This was added to the school's resources at the beginning of the 2017/18 academic year to help teachers target their questioning more closely. From a collection of online resources curated by a specialist primary teacher (The Literacy Shed, 2017), the scheme is an acronym for the domains of vocabulary, infer, predict, explain, retrieve and summarise. A list of focussed question stems is provided for each of the domain areas (exemplified in figure 4.1 below).

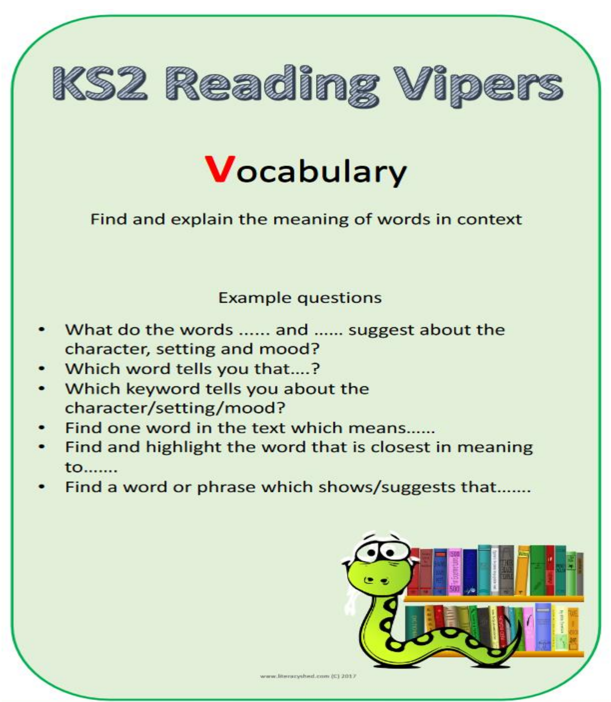


Figure 4.1: KS2 Reading Vipers: vocabulary (extracted from The Literacy Shed, 2017)

According to the English Lead (noted during interview), teachers prefer to work from this resource when developing key questions.

- *Bloom's Taxonomy in Action* (Nooobie, 2012) is a framework setting out a series of core skill areas (domain sub-categories) derived from the cognitive process dimension detailed in the original handbook of *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives* (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill and Krathwohl, 1956). The skill areas, which

are summarised in table 4.1 below, are presented in order of complexity. Although the taxonomy was later revised, it did not receive the same level of attention within the field of education as the original version (according to Seaman, 2011). Adaptations of the original taxonomy can be found on practitioner resource sharing websites (such as TES.com).

It is important to bear in mind that the taxonomy was originally conceived to support the construction of examinations and assessments for complete schemes of learning within advanced educational settings. It is, therefore, generally concerned with learning objectives or educational goals (Krathwohl, 2002). Nooobie's (2012) resource is an adaptation of Bloom *et al.'s* original taxonomy, and for each sub-category of the cognitive domain is a list of associated activities and targeted questions stems for use in the primary classroom. There is also a set of verbs assigned to each area, intended for the creation of focussed learning objectives. This adaptation, however, provides only broad headings for the sub-categories (exemplified in the listing for the 'knowledge' sub-category in table 4.2) and there are no references to the descriptors that

define the various sub-categories (which are presented in table 4.1 below).

Bloom *et al.*'s domain sub-categories	**Content descriptors (where applicable)**	**Examples of associated verbs (from Paver's resource)**
1.0 Knowledge	Knowledge of specific terminology and facts, and ways and means of dealing with them. Knowledge of the universals and abstractions in a field.	Define, identify, locate, recall
2.0 Compre-hension	Translation, interpretation and extrapolation.	Infer, summarise, generalise, predict, explain
3.0 Application	-	Make, modify, prepare, show
4.0 Analysis	Analysis of elements, relationships and organisational principles.	Investigate, categorise, compare, contrast
5.0 Synthesis	Production of a unique communication, a plan or proposed set of operations, or derivation of a set of abstract relations.	Compose, plan, formulate, hypothesise
6.0 Evaluation	Judgements based on internal evidence and external criteria.	Assess, consider, justify, prioritise

Table 4.1: The cognitive domain of Bloom's Taxonomy (adapted from Bloom et al., 1956 and Nooobie, 2012)

<table>
<tr><th colspan="2">KNOWLEDGE</th></tr>
<tr><td>LO Verb:

Define
Draw
Label
List
Describe
Identify
Locate</td><td>

Memorise
Recite
Select
Write
Name
Recognise
State</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Activity:

Make a list of the main events…
Make a timeline of events.
Write a list of as many pieces of information you can remember.
Recite a poem or rap.
Write an acrostic.
Make a chart showing…
List all the… in a story</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">Question stems…

Can you find the word for…?
Who or what were the main characters?
Can you recall?
When/why/how did...?
How would you explain…/describe.../show…?
Where does it say…?
Can you picture…?
Can you select...?
Can you identify…?</td></tr>
</table>

Table 4.2: The sub-category of knowledge in Bloom's Taxonomy

(extracted from Nooobie, 2012)

4.5.3 Text resources

Reading Spine lists over eighty books selected by Corbett which he considers to be "quality models" from which to teach writing and dialogue (Corbett, 2015). Listed by relevant year group, these books have been the foundation for all literacy teaching at Paver Primary since the inception of *TfR* (also created by Corbett). Recently the English Lead has been encouraging class teachers to suggest titles for their own classes to study, however the Lead determines whether they are of sufficient quality, that is, that they are *"well-written"* with the capacity to broaden children's habitual reading preferences (noted during interview). Planning documentation shows that picture books (such as Shaun Tann's (2006) book entitled, *The Arrival*) also feature within *TfR* sessions. For this study, the school's focus on 'quality' texts is an interesting one, for it draws attention to the reproductive output of education in which pupils strive to emulate the features of these texts in their own work (also discussed in Chapter 6). This may have important implications for critical reading skill development, which is also likely to be affected by the lack of text diversity noted earlier. I build upon this notion in my final conclusions in Chapter 8.

4.5.4 Activities to support reading development

Planning assistance extends to activities that support the teaching of the reading curriculum, and the English Lead has also furnished class teachers with a selection of resources designed to encourage pupils to think at depth about the texts they read. Undertaken after text-related talk, most of these activities involve a written element. This was reflected in my study findings, as I discuss in Chapter 7 (section 7.3). These activities provide a permanent record of thinking, which can then be used during the monitoring process to make judgements about the quality and richness of the text-related talk taking place within each classroom.

Derived from ideas expressed in Chamber's (1993) *'Tell me'* approach to talk (promoted within the *TfR* training documentation), the most widely used activity within reading sessions (according to the English Lead and my own observations) is a '4-sharings' grid. According to the English Lead, this is a favourite among class teachers who use it within mathematics sessions too. In essence, this is a two-column, two-row table in which each section is used to capture a different idea about a text, dependant on the focus of the session. A variation of this format is illustrated in figure 7.1, Chapter 7 (an annotated version of the same grid is

located in Appendix K). When comparing two images of similar scenes extracted from a picture book for example, a small peer-led group captured ideas about what they considered to be the 'same' across the two images, what they viewed as being 'different', any 'questions' that arose in response to comparing the two images, and any observations that the group formed about either or both of the images (things they 'noticed'). Ideas from the grid were later shared, sometimes with elaboration, with the wider class.

Graphic organisers are used to support talk activities across all year groups, although usage within key stage one is minimal since the focus is predominantly on word recognition and phonemic development. Within lower key stage two (years three and four), there is an emphasis on organisers that support vocabulary development in addition to textual comprehending (examples are contained in Appendix J). Although children in the final two years of primary education continue to make use of graphic organisers, there is a shift towards the formal presentation of ideas in preparation for SATs.

Further resources drawn upon for reading activities are the *Bloom's Taxonomy in Action* framework (described in section 4.5.2 above), and key stage one and two *Reading Journals* (Clarke, 2015). The latter was introduced at the

outset of the 2017/18 academic year, along with the questioning resource, *Reading Vipers* (same section), to assist teachers in targeting the SATs content domain areas in addition to the wider curriculum objectives. The activities on both resources are broadly similar and may be categorised thus:

- finding / listing (interesting words, key words, words belonging to a particular word class, facts learned, main events, organisational features);
- drawing and labelling (setting, character, story mountain);
- creating a timeline / storyboard / bar chart;
- devising questions / a quiz;
- writing a summary / paraphrasing / book blurb / in a different text type;
- evaluating effectiveness (organisational features, sentence types and length, vocabulary choices, dialogue, figurative language, imagery);
- comparing (features or characters or settings within two chapters, books or different text types);
- determining how the writer tries to manipulate reader feelings / the effect of word or phrase repetition / how features or setting support the writer's aims;

- identifying and explaining connections within texts and other books;
- exploring other types of books written by the same person.

(adapted from *KS2 Reading Journals* (Primary English Education Consultancy, 2015) and *Blooms Taxonomy in Action* (Nooobie, 2012))

4.6 Home-school learning (homework)

Homework policy documentation shows that Paver recognises the value of learning that takes place in children's daily lives beyond school. It also acknowledges that whilst welcomed by many families, completing 'school work' during out of school hours can be challenging for some, if not entirely unwelcome. Although homework is kept to a minimum, parental support levels vary considerably from pupil to pupil. The school often finds that pupils who would benefit from additional support at home are those who tend not to receive it.

For reading development, expectations are that children *"should"* read daily at home, from books supplied by

the school (ibid). Pupils within key stage two classes are also encouraged to expand their text repertoire with news and information texts, including those available online. For reception and key stage one pupils, reading for ten to twenty minutes is recommended, with this increasing to twenty or thirty minutes at key stage two.

Reading comment books enable children's reading at home to be monitored. Individual reading carried out at school, including that conducted with a teaching assistant, is noted in these books. In-school support is available for children who are unable to read at home, however this inevitably involves some loss of free time (playtime or lunchtime, for example), and is therefore not sustainable for those children who rarely read outside of school. According to the English Lead, this issue is a constant source of frustration for teaching staff. Possibly perceived as a punishment by pupils, owing to the loss of playtime, the school's response appears contradictory to their aim of inspiring pupils to read. It also demonstrates the additional challenges and tensions that can arise in a performance-based culture.

Talking about reading is also a feature of reading at home. Families of key stage one pupils are encouraged, through homework policy documentation, to talk about their child's text preferences, predictions, and general ideas about

characters. Families of key stage two pupils are encouraged to "ask them [their child] questions" about the books they read. Ownership of reading is also promoted at the upper key stage where pupils are expected to contribute to the reading comment book. These pupils are also encouraged to develop their depth of thinking by adopting a reflective attitude towards the texts they read. This may, for example, include reflecting on various authorial writing styles.

From time to time, parental support is also sought for reading for pleasure initiatives of the type described earlier in this chapter (section 4.3.2).

4.7 Pupils' views and attitudes towards reading activities

As pupils are at the heart of the education system, it is only right that their views are also included within this contextual study of reading. With limited access to members of the school community, the data obtained is concerned with the views of children from a single year four class. This was elicited through a short questionnaire (Appendix G), which was administered by the class teacher who described herself as an avid reader that regularly promotes the value of reading

to her class. I have also drawn from pupil interview data. The schedules are located in Appendix H. Reading session talk is discussed extensively in Chapter 5.

4.7.1 Reading activities conducted in school

Findings from interviews with peer group members indicated that children appear to place greater value on talk activities over written activities. They claim that talking about texts helps to *"explain"* them. Rather, it helps them to gain either a deeper understanding of the text, or understand more of it, through clarification of an *"outline"* and *"what happens"*. Notably, one pupil claims that talking helps them to ensure that they *"correctly"* interpret texts, reflecting the right / wrong dichotomy associated with reading comprehension (discussed elsewhere in this chapter and Chapter 2). Another pupil sees it as an opportunity to get to grips with *"tricky words"*; a view which reflects the school's pedagogical emphasis on vocabulary development (discussed in section 4.3.1 above, and elsewhere within this study). Others find that talk, especially in relation to techniques and vocabulary, also helps them with their own writing. Furthermore, confident pupils appear to enjoy being asked

questions that require thinking beyond the literal surface level of texts. Questions of this type are generally perceived as *"fun"*.

Group members enjoy sharing opinions through the peer-led small group format, in addition to the freedom it affords in relation to individuals' participatory levels. Pupils did, however, express a preference for friendship groups, in place of the mixed gender groupings currently determined by the class teacher, as they felt that this would minimise the potential for conflict and distractions. An incident of this type occurred during data collection and when interviewed separately, one of the girls from the group reported that her confidence level diminished considerably in response to the behaviour of two boys (discussed in Chapter 5).

Despite such positive attitudes towards peer group work, several group members noted that they prefer *"listening to the teacher"* talking about the texts. Some also make notes during this time. It is also the class teacher to whom they look for motivation and encouragement during reading, a reliance which becomes more apparent in light of suggestions that a teacher placed with each group would improve upon the current format of reading sessions. These findings form part of a wider theme concerned with role and

agency in the classroom which I discuss in Chapter 7 (section 7.1).

4.7.2 Reading activities conducted out of school

According to questionnaire responses, the majority of the class read daily or every other day, more or less in line with current homework expectations (noted in section 4.6 above). The duration of home reading sessions varies considerably, but many pupils choose to read in their own room. Reading in a library is also popular.

Contrary to expectations for homework, very few class members appear to talk regularly about their reading. Those who do participate in text-related talk regularly (as in most of the time) tend to share their interests or ask for others' opinions, whereas those who occasionally (sometimes) talk about their reading tend mainly to respond to questions asked by others. Irrespective of who initiates it, the focus of text-based talk varies little between pupils. Plot, character, setting, relevance to the real world, personal preferences, and aspects that puzzle readers are common topics of conversation. In contrast, new knowledge gained from reading features less frequently. It is rare for children to

share ideas about potential action in conjunction with reader response, possibly because they appear, from questionnaire responses, to derive little enjoyment from doing so. Notably children, in year four at least, prefer talking about their 'likes' and 'dislikes' above all else. They are hesitant to share aspects of texts that puzzle them. They do, however, seem to enjoy talking about their reading with friends; an option widely selected on the questionnaire.

4.8 Summary

The reading curriculum at Paver Primary is influenced by several factors (including the content of the *National Curriculum* for reading and cohort characteristics). Chief among these, is the external pressure to meet nationally set expectations for pupil progress through the compulsory end of primary phase SATs. The direct consequence of this pressure is a narrowing of the curriculum towards the end of each academic year, for the upper year groups, where teaching and learning focuses on these tests. However, there also appear to be year-round consequences as pedagogical approaches (teacher questioning, for example) are targeted at developing pupil skills in line with the content domains of

the SATs framework. It is likely that skills such as word meaning, retrieval and reasoned inference, are viewed by the school as a priority for pupil development as these skills are prioritised within SATs. The school's emphasis on vocabulary development seems to support this interpretation and may also limit, or even hinder, children's reading skill development beyond acquiring proficiency in fluency and basic (or simple) inference.

A further consequence seems to be in the nature of texts that pupils experience during formal reading sessions. The school's reliance on well-written ('quality'), fictional narratives in book form means that the diversity of both text type and quality to be found in real-world texts is likely to be overlooked. As a result, children may have limited exposure to texts produced for a range of different audiences and purposes. In turn, this is likely to limit opportunities for critical reading.

The external performance-related pressure is exacerbated by local situational factors. In Paver's case, it is the high percentage of pupils for whom English is an additional language, for the school feels that it needs to continually evolve language-related pedagogy in order to give pupils the best chance of achieving in the SATs. The English Lead's *"battle"* analogy draws attention to the tension that

this creates internally within the school. The onus is solely on the English Lead, as the single person responsible for devising, implementing, and monitoring the reading curriculum. However, it is the teaching staff, which also includes the English Lead, who are required to continually adapt their practice to respond to pedagogical developments thrust upon them (over and above any changes made to the *National Curriculum* by the Government) as these tend to be rolled out across the whole school. Inconsistencies in the interpretation and delivery of pedagogical approaches are identified through the regular monitoring process and addressed through internal 'refresher' training sessions. These involve all teaching staff, even though it is mainly new members of staff that have tended to require further support. It is possible that the constant changes and retraining may lead to resentment among more experienced teachers who are likely to have formed strong opinions of their own about what does and does not work in their own classroom. This could have a negative impact upon their uptake of initiatives in the future, evidenced, perhaps, in the lack of overall support for the staff book club.

There are, potentially, further pedagogical issues. The *TfR* programme literature notes that *TfR* is intended to open up dialogic interaction with pupils. In contrast, research (such

as that conducted by Alexander, 2006) indicates that the teacher-led questioning, which is favoured by the school, tends to be closed and often leads to brief, low to medium complexity responses of a textually explicit nature (discussed by Almasi, 1995). These features are likely to inhibit, rather than promote, dialogic interaction. Moreover, these findings indicate that schools are likely to benefit from ongoing support, in order to maximise the potential that commercially produced schemes have to offer. Pressure on schools to perform may lead to a 'mish-mash' of pedagogies and practices that may seem well-placed to meet the requirements of the SATs, but might actually work against one another, as I have suggested above. I discuss these factors more extensively within Chapters 6 and 7.

From the range of activities described by the English Lead (such as Reading Rivers and 'shelfies', for example), it is clear that Paver are committed to promoting the enjoyment and enrichment that can result from reading. However, it is also apparent from the ad-hoc and one-off nature of activities, that there are restrictions on time and space within the reading curriculum, for children to participate in these activities as part of the school day. Routine reading sessions therefore remain the primary source for pupils' engagement with texts.

In the next chapter, I focus on four of these reading sessions as I aim to address the first of my research questions and explore the talk currently taking place around texts.

Chapter 5: Talking about texts

5.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I address the first of my research questions - what does the talk around texts currently look like during routine reading sessions?

Findings originate from periodic analysis (detailed in section 3.7.1, Chapter 3) and draw upon audio recordings of pupil and teacher talk, field observations, and participant annotations created during the reading sessions. I also draw from data collected during interviews with pupils (conducted immediately post-session), and planning and review meetings with the class teacher, to avoid making claims based on small pieces of data, and to illustrate and explain the possible implications of my findings. I set out the findings for each of the four sessions in turn to allow me to show how the findings from one session informed the planning of the next, and to explain how each session unfolded. I also discuss my findings in relation to existing literatures, drawing primarily from those reviewed in Chapter 2.

To gain a detailed picture of the talk around texts, I explore interactional features such as the structure of talk

exchanges, in addition to the content of participants' utterances. Insights into the types of information being accessed by participants, when processing texts, also offer an indication of the types of reading skills in use. I discuss these in a separate section towards the end of each session account.

In order to set the scene for these sessions, I commence with a brief description of the interactional settings.

5.1 Interactional settings

As I noted earlier (in table 3.2, Chapter 3), activities for the main study were conducted across two settings. Within the formal classroom setting, activities were led by the class teacher (figure 5.1 below). The alternative informal setting, within the main corridor space, enabled children to work independently and thereby assume agency for reading and talk (figure 5.2 below). Later in this chapter, I discuss further these organisational features, and how they had considerable bearing on the way that pupils interacted.

5.1.1 Class-based interactions

Within the classroom, pupils were seated in groups of six around a large work surface constructed by placing three regularly-sized tables together (shown in figure 5.1). Formed at the start of the autumn, spring, and summer terms, groups featured a mix of gender and reading ability with the latter distributed evenly across the groups. Within each group, one pair of children were seated at the head of the group, directly facing the front of the classroom. Thus, these children also directly faced the teacher, who mainly positioned herself centrally within the room, next to the boards at the front. The table arrangement meant that these children were slightly further away from their peers than the pairs seated directly opposite each other. The opposing pairs were also side-on to the teacher. For both class-based sessions, I observed that regardless of whichever children were seated at the head of the group, they tended to contribute far less during peer-led talk activities in contrast to their peers. This reflects Baines, Blatchford and Kutnick's (2009) finding indicating that pupils did not appear to work as a group even though they were seated within one. It is possible that the noisiness of the classroom setting during talk activities, which was raised during pupil interviews, affected the children's participation in

talk. I suspected that those seated at the head of the group were slightly disadvantaged by their position, as audibility was likely to be compromised as a result of their distance and, potentially, their direction in relation to other group members. Motivation might also have been affected, although I was not able to evidence this directly.

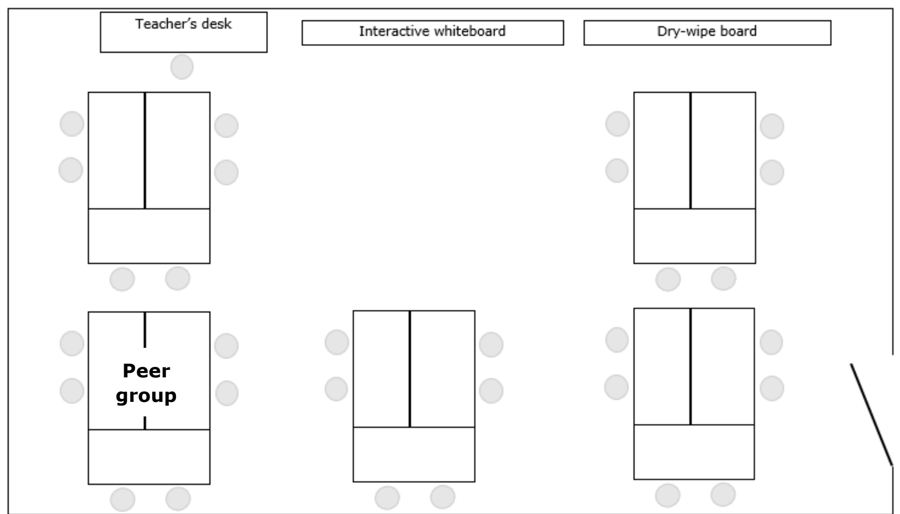


Figure 5.1: Simplified classroom layout (year four)

The area directly in front of the main interactive whiteboard was used for focussed teaching, such as the 'think-aloud' activity in session two. For the remainder of the sessions the children worked at the tables, with the peer group under observation seated at the rear of the classroom. This afforded me the space in which to position myself as unobtrusively as possible within the room, and ensure I

remained physically distant from the class teacher to allow her to work freely with the pupils. With the exception of one very brief visit from the teacher, the peer group was left to work independently during peer-led activities.

In addition to examples of children's work and topic-related information that adorned the walls of the classroom, reading-related displays included vocabulary and story mapping, together with a prominently displayed list of ground rules for 'talk partner' activities. Devised by the children, these comprised:

- speak clearly,
- do not be rude to anyone,
- no shouting out,
- do not talk when the teacher talks,
- look at your partner when they talk,
- no moving around / doing each other's hair,
- we need to listen, and
- ask for help if you get stuck.

Other established routines for talk included pupils raising their hand to signal an intention to contribute, and the teacher's use of named lolly-sticks when eliciting pupil contributions during whole class ideas sharing activities.

5.1.2 Independent interactions

In order to mirror the classroom setting as closely as possible, the peer group occupied the largest of the workspaces set aside within the corridor area. The opposing pairs of children sat at a greater distance from each other however, owing to physical space limitations which necessitated that one side of the table sat up against the wall (shown in figure 5.2 below). Unlike the class-based activities, I noticed that pupils' contributions to talk were broadly balanced across the group.

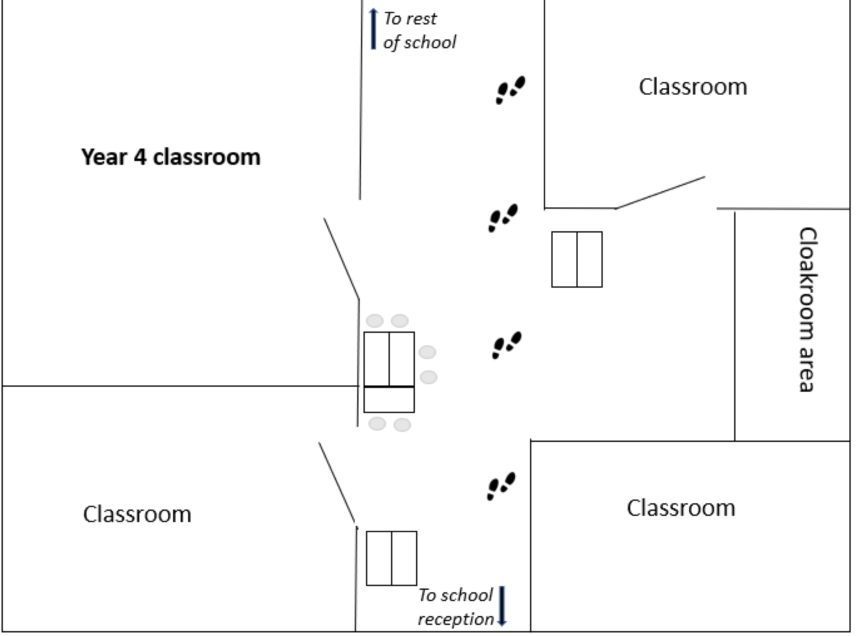


Figure 5.2: Layout of the informal workspace

Whilst the workspace afforded opportunities for the children to work unsupervised, but with support staff

discretely monitoring behaviour as they undertook interventions with other children, its location was not ideal. Staggered playtimes meant that if reading sessions coincided with key stage one's morning break, the area experienced a heavy flow of traffic. During this time, young pupils retrieved, and then returned, items from the adjoining cloakroom area, or waited to be let back into their classrooms. This resulted in significant distraction for the group in session four, evidenced in the frequency of talk of an off-task nature, which often referred directly to the pupils around them. Outside of break times however, the area experienced little through-traffic.

5.2 Text selection

With the exception of the teacher's 'think-aloud' activity, which deliberately re-visited an earlier text when demonstrating reading beyond surface level, each session drew upon a different and previously unstudied text (although it later transpired that several peer group members had read the novel associated with the extract used during the final session). All but one of these texts were selected by the class teacher to comply with the school's curriculum requirements.

These were presented in the form of short extracts (shown in Appendix L), usually no longer than a single sheet of A4 paper and with limited additional contextual information (such as the title and author of the text). To accommodate annotations and highlighting, layout included wide margins and double-lined spacing, and where possible, a large font for ease of reading.

Each pupil received the same text regardless of their reading ability, reflecting the school's usual practice. Whilst the extracts were derived from different source texts, again reflecting usual practice, I observed similarity in relation to genre and narrative content. All of the texts, for example, were of a fictional nature. Furthermore, those selected by the teacher, two of which featured a monster, shared genre type (fantasy). I was unable to discern whether these connections were the result of deliberate action by the teacher, or whether they were coincidental. The selection of texts, however, afforded further opportunities for participant discussion. In addition to the potential topics that I had identified from the content of each extract when checking their capacity for stimulating rich and varied discussion, I identified the potential for comparison of the features across them. I also identified a range of age-appropriate plausible 'text connections' (as determined by Keene and Zimmermann,

1997), a concept introduced during session two (discussed in section 5.3.2 below). For illustrative purposes, ‘connection’ examples are presented in table 5.1 below. This information was not shared with any of the participants during the study in order to avoid influencing the direction of talk.

In the next part of this chapter, I go on to present and discuss findings from each of the four reading sessions.

Potential connections	**Session one:** *Cinderella is Evil* (Campbell, 2013)	**Session two:** 'The Mermaids' Lagoon', *Peter Pan* (Barrie, 1904)	**Session three:** *The Demon Headmaster* (Cross, 2009)	**Session four:** *A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2015)
Knowledge of other texts (text-to-text connections)	• Various contrasting character roles and attributes in relation to traditional tale • Extract opens with character dialogue (knowledge of narrative structure) • Fairy tales sharing similar characteristics	• Fantasy stories (links to mermaids and werewolves in particular)	• Fantasy stories • Stories set in schools	• Fantasy stories (links to monsters)
Knowledge of the world including own experiences (text-to-self and text-to-world connections)	• Preparing for and attending a party • Falling out with others	• Swimming • Young children inventing games • Humans interacting with animals	• Own experiences of beginning a new school • Comparison of character and setting with own school • Predicting the content of the letter based on own life experience	• Nightmares • Absent father figure • Possessing a secret
Issues of power / social inequality	• Cinderella exerts power over others (in contrast to traditional tale) • Character in second part of extract is the subject of bullying	• Adults exerting power over children (bedtime rule) • Tensions between mermaids and humans	• Headmaster could be perceived as powerful or strict • Dinah is presented as a timid character	• The idea of power associated with the monster • Association of boys and the notion of bravery

Table 5.1: Examples of potential discussion topics

5.3 Unpacking the reading sessions

For flexibility, I designed the sessions as stand-alone units. This enabled me to adapt their structure, in light of earlier session findings, to maximise opportunities for children to talk freely and extensively about texts so that I might observe a range of reading skills in action. I hoped that this would afford insight into how talk might support or hinder advanced skill development (such as critical reading). Following the regular class timetable for reading, each session lasted for approximately thirty minutes and texts were read independently by the children, or as a shared read-aloud experience in partner or whole group formats.

Within this section I present, in turn, the findings from each session. To further contextualise my findings, I include a brief summary of the respective text's narrative content. The entire extracts are shown in Appendix L.

5.3.1 Session one

5.3.1.1 Rationale and text resource

Essentially, this session served to establish a base-line from which I could develop subsequent sessions. For breadth of understanding, I needed to explore both teacher-pupil interactions and pupil-to-pupil interactions. As a certain amount of independence from the teacher was necessary to facilitate transfer of agency for reading and talk to pupils during peer work, I created a display resource to support the session (see figure 3.2, Chapter 3). This featured a structural overview of the activity, which can be summarised as read, think, and talk. Pupil agency was emphasised via repeated use of the pronoun 'you'. The only reference to time was to highlight the extended period available for peer-led talk. I hoped that this would encourage the children to take their time when reading and preparing for talk. A brief series of prompts was offered to support children in their talk (see figure 3.3, Chapter 3).

With the freedom to source the initial text, I drew inspiration from McLaughlin and Devoogd's (2004) suggestion of exploring texts from different character perspectives to stimulate talk of a critical nature (discussed

earlier in Chapter 2). From my role as a teacher, I knew that the majority of pupils would already be familiar with a range of fairy tales from their work on traditional tales during key stage one. In addition, the class had explored a tale-with-a-twist in the autumn term, prior to my arrival, during which they had studied an alternative portrayal of a character in *The Wolf's Story: What Really Happened to Little Red Riding Hood* (Forward and Cohen, 2006). I hoped that by selecting another popular fairy tale, the children might re-activate their earlier learning and draw upon it to explore the new resource and, perhaps, even draw comparisons between the different texts. However, as I deliberately withheld the title of the text to avoid inadvertently influencing the direction of talk, a degree of inference was required from the children for identification of genre.

My lack of familiarity with the children's reading speeds led me to extract two passages from the source text, *Cinderella is Evil* (Campbell, 2013; Appendix L). I took care to ensure that their content was such that slower readers, who might only manage to read the first passage, were not overly disadvantaged. Both extracts provided opportunity for critical reading. In the first extract an unknown narrator describes a moody and self-centred version of Cinderella as she prepares to attend Prince Charming's ball. The extension

extract, in which the narrator describes how others behave towards her whilst at the Prince's ball, also afforded opportunity to talk about friendship and bullying; topics that were commonly discussed in schools (evidenced through my own practice).

5.3.1.2 Text-based interactions

Following distribution of copies of the text, the teacher opened the session with a series of instructions, all of which were couched in a manner that placed responsibility for reading and decision-making with the children (extract 5.1, below). For example, although paired reading of the text was non-negotiable, they could choose whether (and how) they shared, or did not share, the reading between them. Similarly, suggestions for ways of working were conveyed through the modal verb 'can' (as in *"…you can make notes / highlight things / techniques…"*) to allow some freedom of choice. Peer group members used highlighter pens to mark lexical items that were unfamiliar to them. Following one child's remark that they believed they *"…have to mark punctuation"* and another's response of *"well that's what I'm doing"*, three members of the group then extended their

highlighting to include every mark of punctuation, without appearing to question the purpose or value of such action.

Extract 5.1: Opening instructional sequence

T: You have a text. Right. So the first thing that you're going to do. Without my help is you're going to read it in your pairs… you can take turns or one can do it if you're a strong reader and then as you read it…

{instruction interrupted as pupil returns to classroom}

…As you've done before when we do talk for reading you can. make notes. Either side of the um writing. The text. You can highlight things that you don't know words you don't know things you're unsure of. You can use different colours if you notice um er techniques that the writer's used. Has used. um er different err types of grammar. different types of punctuation as you read it and notice you can annotate your sheet do you all understand how to do that. Yeah we've done it before haven't we... That's the first bit I want you to do…

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P1: you read. I read this
P2: you read that one and I'll read..
P1: and then I'll read this and you can read that

{continued over page…}

{…continued from previous page. Children read aloud, P1 and P2 reach the end of the text before the rest of the group and begin to talk about it}

P1: are there any words that you don't know?
P2: I don't think so
P1: what
P2: I don't think so
P1: what does gold mean?
P2: g-a-l
P1: yeah
P2: …can't find it ok so…is there any other words that you …
P2: what's chande. liers?
P1: chandeliers?
P2: yeah
P1: their like. Their like what xxx have xxxx xxxxxx xxx… *{note: later in the transcript this question is asked again and the response is 'it's basically a really fancy light'}*
P2: I don't think there's anything else
P1: let's highlight it green
P2: we'll highlight it green. Do you know what {*sounds like uncestral*}. unnecessary means?
P1: errr xxxx
P2: so basically unusual … anything else?
P1: no
P?: I don't think we're supposed to be doing xxx…

{Pupils P5 and P6 now finish reading and begin talking}

P5: ok so any words that you don't know?
P6: no

Direction was provided by the teacher (exemplified in extract 5.2, below) at five-minute intervals as the session progressed through its constituent stages of read, think, and talk, followed by a whole class ideas-sharing activity which brought the session to a close.

Extract 5.2: Preparing to talk in groups

T: …either individually or in your pairs you can then share what you want to talk about. about what you've read to the other people in your group and xx be coming round and listening in. so have some questions really clear in your mind about what you want to talk about. Xx it could be that the other people on your team might give you some answers. That's fine. That's what xxx {*pupil coughs*} the discussion. Ok. So choose whose going to go first second third and then. Go

In addition to the unexpected support from the class teacher, several unplanned incidents also occurred during the session. As these are likely to have affected participant interaction to some extent, I note these below:

- the first instructional segment had to be paused briefly to allow the teacher to place a latecomer into a group as slight grouping adjustments had been necessary when forming a group for observation;

- the slide with the talk prompts did not get shared with the children, possibly as a result of the above interruption, although this had been intended to accompany a later stage activity;

- in reality the children experienced barely more than five minutes of peer-peer talk. This was half of the time

allocated to teacher-led talk, and only a quarter of the time that I had originally planned for. Subsequent discussion with the class teacher revealed that this reflected the usual format for apportioning time across the session, and could be consequential of time-related pressures. I discuss these further in Chapter 7. The brevity of peer-led talk activities, which I also observed across session two (section 5.3.2 below), might also reflect uncertainty around the value of peer-led work. Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009) for example, commented on practitioner scepticism in relation to the effectiveness of the approach and the children's communicative abilities.

The pupils talked together without conflict or dispute and whilst frustration occasionally arose, this tended to be expressed only by children who had been identified by the teacher as 'high ability' readers. These instances were short lived and were quickly resolved without appearing to cause friction within the group as shown in extract 5.3 (below) where, following numerous repetitions of the same question, a direct request, in the form of *"no don't just do what words are…",* led to an immediate change in the direction of talk without further incident. Talk of a playful nature and bursts

of laughter were present across the peer-led activity (although instances were few in number) suggesting that the children were enjoying talking together.

Extract 5.3: Overcoming frustration

P?: what does gall mean?=
P1: =no. oh my god. A different one to that
P?: what does. Umm
P?: ok you dunno
P?: *{calling across to another pupil, words inaudible}*
P?: shhh=
P1: =no don't just do what words are. That's annoying now
P?: why is it so girly?

Absence of conflict may be attributed to the turn-taking system adopted by the group during the discussion stage (extract 5.4, below), where members shared questions that they had devised when talking with their reading partner. Children who claimed not to *"have"* or *"know"* of a question were allowed, by the rest of the group, to 'pass' their turn. Once a response had been received, regardless of whether or not it directly answered the question posited, the question was deemed to be *"finished"* and the question-response cycle began anew (shown in extract 5.1 above and extract 5.5 below). I observed similar exchanges during teacher-led activities. Vocabulary also featured significantly within exchanges. Both questions and vocabulary are discussed from a thematic perspective within Chapter 6.

Extract 5.4: Turn-taking

P?: …let's work as a table
P?: what? ok
P2: so he goes first then me then you then him then you then
P?: yeah cos…
P6: me last
P?: yeah
P?: ok. I'll go [first
P?: [no you're first
P?: xx first
P?: I don't know what to ask
P?: I do. ok so let me ask [one thing
P1: [no I'll go first. Um. *{laughs}* Why you think it's about Cinderella?

Extract 5.5: Closing sequence of peer-led talk

P?: ok. You've had two questions [already
P?: [What does chandelier mean?
P?: oh um. Its basically a really fancy light
P?: yeah. You don't know-
T: *{counts down from five… xxx}*
P1: no. no. I've got a question. What does gall mean?
T: talking…across the table from each other. Keep going…
P?: …chandelier means. you know um=
P?: =[ok=
P1: =[I've got two questions that are weird
P?: what is [chandelier? then …
P1: [the first one is why is it Cinderella? and the other one is why is it so girly?
T: …lids on your pens now. Pencils down.

Pupil contributions were brief, predominantly comprised of around eight to twelve words. They were also relatively simple in terms of structure owing to their similarity in format and singular focus. Furthermore, feedback and challenge rarely featured, whilst elaboration and reasoning

were non-existent. In view of the brevity and simplicity of talk, it was unsurprising that there was little cumulative or exploratory talk present. These findings appear to reflect the type of talk likely to occur when skills to think collectively are not taught (discussed by Mercer and Howe, 2010). Comment from the class teacher, indicating that pupils at Paver Primary did not receive explicit instruction around text-related talk, appear to uphold Mercer and Howe's view. Consequently, the children may not have known how to interact with one another in ways that could open up talk. This could account for their utilisation of turn-taking; a feature of dominant classroom pedagogy (as occurs in questioning, for example).

In terms of opportunities for exploratory talk, several potential avenues arose during peer-led interaction, as I discuss in the following section. The contributions within these exchanges however, varied little in length to those observed across other talk exchanges and may have had a constraining effect on the type of talk possible.

5.3.1.3 Reading skills conveyed through talk

Children's references to textual content were few and appeared in the form of single unrelated words. With the

exception of *'Cinderella'*, these words appeared in enquiries about meaning. Together with observational findings indicating that members of the group had only made one full pass of the text during the session, I deduced that little reading had taken place beyond the text's surface level.

The more proficient readers (the more 'able' readers within the mixed ability group) seemed to draw upon information from both within and beyond the text, indicating that these children were also beginning to read beyond surface level. The positing of *"unusual"* in place of 'unnecessary' (within the phrase "Mother put a jewel in my hair, which I thought was completely unnecessary"; referred to in extract 5.1 above) suggested drawing upon sentential content to derive meaning (information within the text). Similarly, the phrase "I knew she would be smirking at my gall…" appeared to give rise to the possibility that 'gall' was *"something like laughing"*.

Use of prior knowledge (information beyond or external to the text), such as that pertaining to the traditional tale, appeared to be limited to knowledge of word meaning (such as the chandelier in extract 5.1 above). Some character-related examples were also present (extract 5.6 below), however these tended to be concerned with the group members' familiarity with, and the author's decision to write

about, the main character. Absence of responses to the latter could reflect pupils' disinterest in the subject matter, or that authorial decisions were not perceived to be important. Regardless, there appear to be implications for critical reading since author motivations are key considerations.

Extract 5.6: Text-to-text connection

P1: my first. My first question is why is it about Cinderella? *{different voice applied to final word}*
P2: umm let me think. Obviously because it's a story it can be about anything
P?: yeah. And xxx Cinderella so that's why they put that.
P5: {*Calls to P2*} do you know who Cinderella is?
P2: I do

During the post-session pupil interviews, I became aware that one pupil (pupil 2) had actually read at considerably greater depth than I had originally perceived from the classroom talk. Observations that *"Cinderella wasn't acting so kind and she wasn't acting poor any more. She was like being a bit rude and umm a bit generous and jealous"* (extract 5.7, below) indicated a high level of cognitive demand owing to the modern and traditional tale character comparison. They might also have led to talk of a critical nature (including the writer's motivations) but, unfortunately for the study, they were never shared within the group owing to a critical incident (discussed in section 3.6.2, Chapter 3)

which arose early in group talk, in which one of the boys described the text as *"girly"*. This is discussed further below.

Extract 5.7: Comparing characters (post-session interview)

P2: … I thought it was. Uh Do you know the first story of Cinderella?
R: yeah
P2: it was a lot different to it.
R: right
P2: because Cinderella wasn't acting so kind and she wasn't acting poor any more. She was like being a bit rude and umm a bit generous und jealous

{P2 is then asked if there were any parts of the text that she would have like to explore further}

P2: umm. I'd like to know more about how the story goes on after the end *{referring to the end of the extract}* because the story was quite interesting. umm. as I said I've umm never seen Cinderella act like this. But I wannoo know more like because in the normal story it usually ends with the mother dying and stuff like that but then in this story it's just a snapshot of. she still has she still has her mother but then she doesn't have a father… but yeah

The incident, which appeared to originate in response to negative associations with the text (and possibly in relation to the character), also has significant implications for peer-led activities, for pupil 2 then decided to withhold ideas from the group (discussed during our one-to-one interview). The incident also highlights the degree to which stereotypical perceptions of gender can not only influence the type of talk around texts, but also the degree to which children engage with them. During interview, one of the boys explained that

the text was *"…a bit like girly and stuff… we [boys] don't really like girl things and stuff"* (interview with pupil 1). When asked to comment on the actual content of the text, his response was to provide a generic account of narrative structure (beginning, middle and end), suggesting that he had engaged very little, if at all, with the text itself.

I also learned, from pupil 2, that this type of incident occurred regularly. This finding came as a surprise to the class teacher, who also expressed surprise at the boy's perception of the text in light of his participation in previous sessions connected to *The Wolf's Story*. This text might also be considered to be 'girly' in view of the female lead character in the original tale of *Little Red Riding Hood.*

Despite the lack of focus on textual content, the question *"Why is it so girly?"* led to one of the liveliest exchanges of the session where several children contributed in a cumulative manner (shown in extract 5.8 below). Interestingly, although pupil 2 chose not to share her thoughts about the text, she seized the opportunity to challenge perceptions about gender and topic suitability.

Extract 5.8: Challenging gender stereotyping

P1: why is it so girly?
P2: ok. So what would. What should we say if it. If the story was about. Let me think. Dogs?=
P?: =why is it about dogs?=
P2: =or football?
P1: oh yeahhhh
P?: yearh
P2: would we say why was it too boyish?
P?: no
{laughter}
P?: obviously not me I don't know about you

Crucially, insights from the children's talk indicated that whilst the structure of their interaction and the time available were likely to have inhibited the development of ideas, the children's engagement with textual content was extremely limited.

5.3.2 Session two

5.3.2.1 Rationale and text resource

To support the children to read more closely than observed previously, which I also hoped would lead to an increase in lively exchanges about the text, this session focussed on forming personal connections with texts (Tovani cited in Kardash, 2004; Leslie and Caldwell, 2009). The concept, based on Keene and Zimmerman's (1997) 'text connections', was introduced and modelled through a 'think-

aloud' led by the class teacher, who revisited the *Cinderella is Evil* text from the previous session. My intention was that, by encouraging the children to view a familiar text through a different lens, they might begin to develop an appreciation of the potential benefits of undertaking multiple passes of a text. I also hoped that they would begin to understand how different ways of reading may lead them to think differently about content, contributing to the development of textual comprehending.

As I sought to avoid inadvertently influencing the direction of talk, I provided an alternative text for the peer-led activity ('The Mermaids' Lagoon' from *Peter Pan and Wendy* (Barrie, 1911); see Appendix L). I also requested that teacher instruction be kept to a minimum. The narrative, supplied as part of curriculum learning, is written from the character's (Wendy) perspective. It describes a scene in which children and mermaids play games together in an island lagoon, with a focus on the mermaids' behaviour. Whilst the atmosphere is one of fun, content alludes to a sense of danger "at the turn of the moon", providing opportunities for hypothesis and prediction. Published at the turn of the 20th century, the text contains some old-fashioned vocabulary choices ('gay', for example, conveys a sense of 'joy'). The children had access to regular classroom resources

such as dictionaries, but no further language support was provided for the activity.

5.3.2.2 Session preparation

Aware that the concept was new to the teacher, I provided a brief description of the different connection types (text-to-self, -text, -world) together with a range of prompts that could be used to externalise thinking. These included:

Text-to-self:

- What is similar / different to my life?
- How does this relate to my life?
- What were my feelings when I read this?

Text-to-text:

- What does this remind me of in another book I've read?
- How is this text similar / different to other things I've read?
- Have I read something like this before?

Text-to-world:

- What does this remind me of in the real world?
- How is this similar / different to things that happen in the real world?
- How did that part relate to the world around me?

(Extracted from Kardash, 2004)

For additional support, I provided an annotated copy of the text to show a range of possible connections. These included examples showing multiple connection types in reference to the same part of the text. The twinkling chandeliers and live orchestral music described within the narrative, for example, could result in text-to-self connections (such as concerts) and text-to-text connections (such as televised period dramas). The teacher and I briefly discussed the examples. We also talked about how the 'text connections' concept might help the children to deepen their understanding of the text, in view of the additional information made available to them when activating various connections (such as sensory information from personal experiences). With the intention of demonstrating what an active, small group, peer-led text-based discussion might look like, we viewed and discussed a short video of a

children’s literature circle in action. I asked that this also be shown to the class, prior to their talk activity, in the hope that it would offer some ideas about how the children might manage their own talk, with a view to facilitating open and exploratory discussion. This had been absent from the previous session.

5.3.2.3 Text-based interactions: teacher-led activity

For the ‘think-aloud’ activity, pupils sat informally on the carpet around the main whiteboard as the teacher read aloud from the text. After establishing that the purpose of the activity was to *“think a bit more about what the story means [to me]”*, reading was paused at intervals to share thoughts about personal connections to the text. For the most part, these were described as ‘happenings’ (for example, *“…things that have happened to me…happened in another text that I’ve read before…happens in the outside world.”*), and introduced to the children through the phrase *“it (or ‘that’) reminds me of…”*

From the outset, the children were invited to contribute evaluatively (*“You can agree with me”,* for example) or by sharing their own ideas to *“help”* the teacher. A lively twenty-

five-minute exchange of ideas involving multiple contributors followed. In addition to exchanges featuring anecdotal examples focussed on word meaning, a theme I discuss extensively within Chapter 6, a small number of character-based exchanges are particularly noteworthy in terms of the type of talk that occurred within them. These exchanges, such as extract 5.9 below, tended to develop cumulatively as multiple participants elaborated on previous contributions. They also included content of an exploratory nature as pupils began to draw character-related comparisons from across the different versions of the narrative.

Much of the elaboration within the exchange (same extract) came from the teacher, who linked ideas together as different class members offered contributions. All discussion was, however, confined to the identification of contrasting behaviours. Given the abundance of contrasts identified, I found it interesting that neither teacher, or pupils, shared hypotheses around the reasons for characters being presented in this way. Rather, the exchanges seemed to be focused on 'spotting the differences' across the modern and traditional versions. I was reminded of the feature spotting approach that tended to be connected with writing sessions. The class teacher, for example, had noted that these sessions focussed on the vocabulary, punctuation, grammar, and

writing techniques featured within texts. As reading and writing schemes occupied the timetabled literacy slot in rotation, with each lasting around one or two weeks at a time, I wondered whether this had led to some confusion around the purposes for reading texts during dedicated reading sessions. If texts were also being analysed for their writing features on a regular basis, this risked undermining the importance of reading for understanding. It could also have a negative impact upon the way that children processed texts both in and out of school over the long-term. I also reflected on the potential constraining effect resulting from the teacher's approach to sharing reading with the class, and I discuss this further in Chapter 6 (section 6.2).

Extract 5.9: Cumulative exchange (teacher-led 'think-aloud')

T: it's a little bit different to the story I know. Umm
P?: I know what…
T: *{names P3}*
P3: xxxxx
T: you think it's the opposite. It's the opposite. Ok. the opposite of who or what? The opposite of what? Cos it's not. The Cinderella story I know and I've seen on tv she's not like this. She doesn't say **Cinderella pointed directly at her mother, making it clear who she was accusing** *{names Px}*
Px: umm. Cinderella has. She's. in the other story she's kind but then she said that xxxx {*loud banging noise like the classroom door closing}*…
T: yeah. So the story I know she's usually kind. and patient. and she does good things and she doesn't usually. Well she I haven't known her to actually. be angry at all. But in this one it seems to be that she's the opposite
P?: she's horrible
T: um. *{names Py}*
Py: umm now. Umm now her mother and sisters are happy and [xxxx=
P?: [xxxxx xx xx
T: =arrrrr. So you've made the connection there *{names Py}* so what you've noticed is that in the traditional story the mother and the ugly sisters are. What what are they like *{names Py}*?
P+: xxxx that's what I noticed=
T: =hold on. Mean and cruel. And Cinderella is kind. but in this little extract what's happened
P+: =xxx xxx xxx
Py: they turned around
T: so. so usually the err the mother. Step. Was it the step mother?
P+: yeah.
T: wasn't it
P?: the step sisters and step [mother
T: [yeah. So the step. mother and sisters. are usually the ones that are horrible. and Cinderella is kind. but in this one it's. They've swapped over. In this one. They are kind. and Cinderella is a bit mean. So far but I'll read a bit more…

Despite the exploratory nature of talk, children's contributions remained brief in length, even when prompted

by the teacher (shown in extract 5.9 above). In contrast to the previous session, exchanges of talk appeared to reflect features of natural conversation. For example, turn-taking occurred implicitly at natural end points rather than through named invitation or direct questioning, and partial contributions often latched directly on to one another as ideas were developed. Ideas were recorded on a neighbouring whiteboard where they remained on display throughout the session to support independent peer-led talk (figure 5.3 below).

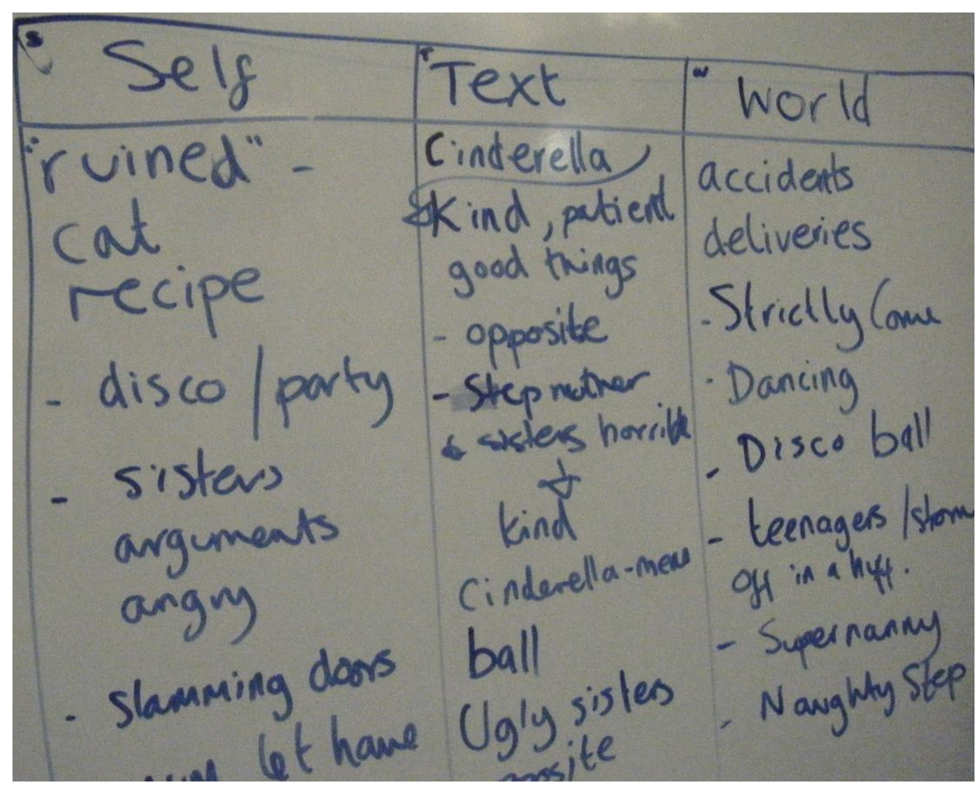


Figure 5.3: Ideas about 'text connections' ('think-aloud' activity)

5.3.2.4 Text-based interactions: peer-led activity

Unfortunately, the children's literature circle video clip was overlooked as the session progressed directly from teacher-led to independent group work. I deduced that this oversight was a consequence of workplace pressures, having observed multiple demands on the teacher's time directly prior to this session. I offer extensive discussion of time-related issues and their impact upon teaching and learning within Chapter 7 (section 7.2).

Minimal instruction followed distribution of 'The Mermaids' Lagoon'. The teacher's emphasis lay on independent silent reading before moving on to *"discuss it [the text] with the people on your table"* and *"see if you can pick up on the self, text, or world"*. The talk activity lasted for six minutes. The teacher briefly visited each group during this time. Findings were broadly similar to those of session one, with a few notable exceptions which I present below.

- There appeared to be a sense of urgency to complete a first pass of reading the text and move on to discussion of it, with the majority of group members signalling that they were *"done"* within two minutes of commencing reading (extract 5.10 below).

Extract 5.10: Opening sequence (peer-talk activity)

P?: *{whispered}* have you read…?
P?: nearly
P?: xxx reading
F?: Done.
P?: sh
P?: {*whisper*} I'm nearly done.
P?: Yeah. Done now.
P?: N:::o. you…
F?: ok what shall we talk about?

- Minimal overlapping speech and few interruptions suggested that turn-taking was in operation in a far less explicit way than I observed for session one. Similarly, the question-answer pattern did not dominate the session to the same extent, much as I had observed in the teacher-led 'think-aloud'.

- In contrast to the many connections shared during the 'think-aloud' activity, I observed just one explicit sharing during the peer-led activity (extract 5.11a, below). Notably this connection was later restated upon the teacher's arrival (extract 5.11b), and further restated during the whole class plenary (extract 5.11c). It fell to the teacher, however, to elicit reasoning from pupils (extracts 5.11b and 5.11c). In response, a short cumulative exchange evolved with

several pupils appearing to work together in a supportive manner, providing evidence from the text (extract 5.11b).

Extract 5.11a: 'Text connection' (teacher absent)

P1: we swim. We swim. We swim *{gets slightly louder with each repetition}*=
F?: =yeah *{said with a laugh}*

Extract 5.11b: 'Text connection' (teacher present)

P1: at the top where it says swimming that's self
P2: yeah
T: why? Why?
P1: cos we do it [at school
P2: [cos we do it at school
T: uhumm uhumm
F?: and umm [the mermaids
F?: [and umm the children spent often. um **Often spent a long summer day**=
T: =ahhhh=
F?: =**at the lagoon**. Probably is xxxx …

Extract 5.11c: 'Text connection' (whole class activity)

P1: umm. At the top line near the end where it says swimming
T: yes
P1: umm that would be self
T: because
P1: because we do it at school
T: oh right so it's something you do at school. You do that every week when it's in term time. Arrr {*names pupil*}

The declaration *"…I don't understand it."* revealed the existence of textual ambiguity which, I noted, appeared to be experienced by at least two members of the group. Only one pupil appealed directly to others for support when enquiring

"…what's it [the text] really about?" Absence of any evidence of peer support in this regard raises the possibility of ambiguity issues across the group. Notably, especially in view of the presence of old-fashioned language with which the children may not have been familiar, there was no reference to exploration of whole text understanding during the teacher-led plenary. This stage was connection-focussed with the teacher asking pupils whether there was *"…anything in the text…remind you of anything?"*

5.3.2.5 Reading skills conveyed through talk

Enquiries about word meaning dominated peer-led talk as they had in session one (discussed earlier in section 5.3.1). I found this surprising in view of the emphasis on 'text connections' immediately prior to the peer-led activity. Encouragingly, several references to ideas plausibly connected to textual content suggested that the children had engaged more deeply with the text than observed across the previous session. Even so, my findings indicated that reading had been mainly at the text's surface level.

There were indications that children drew upon their pre-existing knowledge of words, primarily in relation to roots

and suffixes (information beyond the text). I identified instances where the children talked about associations between words such as *'gay'* and "gaily", *'maroon'* and "Marooners' [Rock]", and *'civilised'* and "civil [word]". The children also associated the latter with archaic language when positing it to be from the *"olden…days"*. Seldom however, were ideas challenged or developed.

Sentences often included descriptive elaboration that could have aided the children in their attempts to decipher word meaning. However, group members only seemed to consider words in relation to brief phrases comprised of surrounding vocabulary ("hitting them gaily", for example). This greatly constrained the amount of contextual information available for processing. This is likely to account for the declaration that *"we don't even know what lagoon is"*, even though it was a high frequency word offering numerous clues to meaning across the entire extract. In actuality, the children only appeared to refer to its presence within the text's title, 'The Mermaids' Lagoon'. As the most abstract reference to 'lagoon', it was unsurprising that the children struggled with meaning making.

In terms of drawing from information external to the text, the connection of *"we swim"* (extracts 5.11a&b) indicated drawing from personal experience (text-to-self).

There were also indications of text-to-text type connections being formed. One pupil expressively offered *"hitting them like a baddie"* as an explanation for "hitting them gaily", suggestive of narratives where 'good' versus 'bad' (evil). Similarly, *"Marvel Avengers"* was later offered in connection with "civil word" which, given the mispronunciation as *"civil war"*, may have stemmed from the film *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). Interestingly, multimodal texts also featured within class sharing activities. Examples included television programmes such as *Strictly Come Dancing* and *Supernanny,* and films such as *The Little Mermaid* and *Pirates of the Caribbean.* Notably, these texts were perceived by all participants as text-to-world, rather than text-to-text connections, raising questions about the way that different modes of texts are perceived by educators and, potentially, policy-makers.

Overall, the 'text connections' experience was viewed positively by the teacher, who reported greater pupil enjoyment and engagement with activities in contrast to the previous session. She also referred to the possibility of incorporating the various connection types within the frequently used '4-sharings' grid pupil resource, and indicated that the approach may benefit pre-talk activities in future

sessions. I discuss the use of this grid in Chapters 4 and 7. In relation to textual content however, my findings indicated limited pupil engagement and a general lack of idea development. Although connections to texts were established, the degree to which they aided understanding of content was unclear.

5.3.3 Session three

5.3.3.1 Rationale and text resource

In view of pedagogical constraints around classroom-based activities, such as time and teacher direction, subsequent peer-led reading activities were moved to a more informal setting (detailed in 5.1.2 above). In agreement with the class teacher, I worked with the peer group, managing the time and instruction for this activity to ensure opportunity for the children to talk freely and extensively about their reading. This meant that disruption to routine teaching and learning was kept to a minimum, as the teacher was available to work with the rest of the class. In recognition of the possibility that increased freedom may lead to an increase in talk of an off-task nature, and potentially lead to loss of focus, I also arranged for the group to present their ideas and

understandings to the class at the end of the peer-led activity. This took place in the main classroom. I furnished the group with three large sheets of paper and a selection of coloured pens. Intended to support preparation for the final sharing, it is also possible that these resources influenced the way that the children approached the activity as a whole.

Upon visiting the school for data collection, I discovered that the text originally supplied had been read and discussed by the class during previous sessions. This raised the possibility that the content of children's talk may not reflect their own ideas or understandings about the text. After expressing my concerns to the class teacher, she substituted the text with that of *The Demon Headmaster* (Cross, 2009; shown in Appendix L). Set within a "very strange school", the text describes an encounter between a young girl on her first day, and a formidable headmaster, for whom she has a letter. Although the text contained brief background information to set the scene, the potential existed for hypothesis and prediction in respect of both the content of the letter, and subsequent action.

5.3.3.2 Text-based interactions

With the intention of promoting 'natural' interaction between peers, I restricted my involvement to a brief introduction at the start of the session and requested that staff working close by refrained from engaging with the group unless warranted by, say, behaviour-related issues. I provided minimal guidance so that agency for reading and talking resided with the children and emphasised that they were to talk *"about what you understand about the text"* before leaving them to work independently (shown in extract 5.12 below).

Extract 5.12: Opening sequence

R: …I'm going to leave you alone for twenty minutes…I want you to read the text. I would like you to talk about the text so that at the end of those twenty minutes. You can come back. And in front of the class share your ideas. And the things that you understand about the text ok…What you talk about is entirely up to you…you can make some bullet…notes…spider diagram if you want to. You might create a table or something to show your ideas…

In view of the extended time for talking and encouragement to reflect on content through the previous session's 'text connections' activity, I found it surprising that the children's talk offered little insight in to their understanding of the text. Beyond the act of reading aloud or

making decisions about what content was perceived to be important enough to record, there were few references to textual content. This is demonstrated in extract 5.13 below, in which issues around engagement with the text, and with each other, can also be seen. Reading is interrupted by procedural talk before later resuming, and a disputation takes place around the use of resources. Issues such as these have implications for the use of peer-led collaborative activities as a way of developing understanding of texts. They may also lie beneath the practitioner scepticism noted by Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009).

Extract 5.13: Referring to textual content

P5: *{reading aloud}* **immaculate**. But. **black suit**
P+: **Black suit. from** on **his shoulders a long black teacher's gown**=
P2: =**hung in heavy folds like wings giving him the appearance [of a huge crow**=
P?: [hummmm
P3: =what?
P1: I put heading
P?: uuuh
P?: right
P?: stop there.
P?: you stop
P?: xxx these are the colours I've..
P1: no. but. K
P?: No sto:op
P6?: I'm not
P?: that's the xxxx xx. Waste all [the paper why xxx…
P1: [xxxx of the
P4: that's *{names p6}* turn
P1: we needed to know that as well but.
P?: *{reading aloud continued}* A book
P1: A bookcase with a row of books.
P?: I didn't need to know all that

Furthermore, the group did not appear to read through the entire extract. This action would almost certainly have prevented understanding at whole text level. Shared reading ceased midway through the third paragraph (approximately half-way through the extract) and did not resume, despite it being bought to the group's attention some ten minutes into the activity when pupil 2 enquired, *"…Who has even read this by the way cos we haven't even read it yet?"* The subsequent responses from two of the boys were particularly striking, owing to the casual nature of their delivery. This contrasted sharply to the girls' responses, and seemed to suggest that the boys did not appear to perceive completing reading as an essential part of the activity. One boy, for example, expressed *"oh I've read a bit of it"*, whilst another (pupil 1) blatantly stated, *"oh I haven't"* and declared that he *"[didn't] even need to I can just um [record ideas]"*. I deduced that pupil 1 had adopted the role of 'scribe' as a means of avoiding reading. If accurate, my deduction raises a number of important questions about pupils' perceptions of group reading activities in relation to their purpose and value. These perceptions might limit, or worse, prevent the development of understanding if left unchecked by the teacher. Further comment from Pupil 1 (during individual interview) noting

that he *"…just let all the others do it [talk] until I want to come back in…"* seemed to suggest that he did not view peer-led interactions as highly as those with the class teacher. I observed him as a regular participant during teacher-led exchanges.

My findings indicated several further factors that were likely to have impeded the children's engagement. I discuss these below.

- *Exchanges of an off-task nature* regularly featured throughout peer-led interaction. Several of these exchanges referred to the freedoms afforded through the activity (freely obtaining a drink and visiting the toilet, for example), suggesting that the children were unused to working in such an unsupervised manner, thus highlighting the novelty of my study activities. Requests to clarify content position during reading suggested that some children also experienced difficulties in following the read-aloud, and flow was further hampered when turns at reading paused and re-started, occasionally repeating content.

- *Evidence of discord among group members* was apparent across the activity. For example, I frequently

observed peers telling each other to *"stop"* or *"shut up"* as disputes broke out. And, although these were resolved by the group without further incident (such as in extract 5.14), there was strong evidence of growing frustration, particularly in relation to the more proficient readers. This finding has implications for the organisation of peer-led activities.

Extract 5.14: Disputational talk

P?: oh my god. Read from here to the end of that=
{*laughter from another pupil*} =oh my god=
=just read it from here
P?: =you're not xxx properly=
P1: just read it for flips sake
P?: {audible sigh}
P?: go on read it
P?: I'm reading it in my head
P?: just stop … just shut up…. what xxx
P?: xxxx xxxxxxxxxx[xxxx xxxx….
P?: [xxxxx you look there… just xxxx
P3: **Dinah Glass**… *{reads from extract}*
P1: no, you've read your bit. Who's turn is it now?
F?: it's xxx turn quickly
P1: no. it's her
P5?: shut up.
P2: *{reads from extract}* **it was the tidiest...**
.
.
.
P1: we're not gonna get it all done
F?: =Just flipping read it=
P?: =we're gonna get told off=
P?: =reeeead it=
P5: =ok. **she took it all...** {reads from extract}

- *Asymmetries and inequalities within the group* became increasingly marked as the activity progressed. One member was accused of *"not doing anything"*, whilst another was subjected to personal criticism and marginalisation through claims that as he *"never understands anything"*, there was no need to *"bother with [him]"*. This resulted in feelings of unease for at least one member, who alerted me to the situation at the end of the independent activity. Despite this pupil's efforts to remedy the situation by allocating a role to the individual, she was not supported by the rest of the group. The two more proficient readers appeared to dominate group talk, an issue discussed by Mercer and Littleton (2007). They also seemed to assume responsibility for most of the group's decision-making. Of the two, the female pupil repeatedly engaged in conflict resolution and returning the group to task. With other group members appearing to defer to them by default, there seemed to be an inequality in power and status across the group. This may have accounted for the rarity of challenge, for the only instance took place between the two dominant pupils (shown in extract 5.15 below). I also identified possible gender-related issues reflected in an exchange about gendered reading

preferences. Issues related to this first appeared in session one (section 5.3.1 above). I discuss gender in relation to role and agency in Chapter 7 (section 7.1).

To some extent, pupil 1 (male) and pupil 2 (female) may be viewed as equals. Both, for example, were framed within the school system as 'high ability' (proficient) readers; a label that set them apart from the rest of the group. The way that the children engaged with each other led me to conclude that pupil 1, in particular, did not share this view of their relationship. Rather than constructively seek justification for pupil 2's idea (also extract 5.15), his decision to dismiss and then make fun of it, may be interpreted as an indication of his belief that he held superior status. Whether his view is a consequence of this type of labelling is beyond the scope of this study.

Extract 5.15: Issuing a challenge

P?: yeah. Just do who it's by
P1: we don't need to know who it's by
P2: the author is important
P1: *{using a different voice}* important
{girl's laughter}

- *The recording of ideas became a priority* when the group reached the tenth line of the text. Curiously, the children began to gather ideas well in advance of determining that they would present a 'review' to the class. With the absence of discussion about how they would record ideas it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the information recorded comprised chiefly of extracts or paraphrased content, rather than their own ideas about the text (shown in table 5.2). In contrast to the intended 'review', the group later took turns to simply read-aloud these extracts. The resultant lack of coherence necessitated teacher management of the activity when the group returned to the classroom to share their ideas. Questioning was used to draw out elaboration and reasoning for the benefit of other class members.

Nature of 'idea'	**Recorded information**	**Location within text**
Direct quotation from text	"The Demon master by Gillian Cross" "Dinab Glass is the new girl at a strange school. It's her first day and she has a letter for the headmaster" "she took it all in one second and then forgot it as her eyes fell on the man standing by the window" "He went on staring at her for a moment or"	title (inaccurate recording) complete introductory paragraph opening sentence, paragraph 2 opening sentence, paragraph 4
Paraphrased content	"She has a letter on her first day" "A bookcase with a row of books." "She stepped into the tidiest office she had ever seen."	sentence 2, introductory paragraph final phrase, paragraph 1 sentences 1 and 2, paragraph 1
Inference	The headmaster was a demon."	title

Table 5.2: *The Demon Headmaster*: children's 'idea' annotations

5.3.3.3 Reading skills conveyed through talk

Whilst few clues about reading skills were afforded through the children's talk, their annotations (table 5.2 above) offered some insight. I gained the impression that the children had 'skimmed' through the text, as many of the above ideas were derived from sentences located at either the beginning or end of paragraphs. This suggested that, as

in previous sessions, reading appeared to be mainly at surface level. The sharing of a single basic inference lent support to this interpretation, in view of the low cognitive effort required, and the absence of elaboration (including reasoning) that I associated with deeper reading.

I found the children's apparent lack of engagement with the text surprising in view of the improvement, noted by the teacher, following the previous session. It was also interesting that the children did not seem to draw upon their earlier learning experience of the 'text connections' concept to stimulate talk around textual content. In retrospect, there were many factors likely to have had a significant impact on their interaction. Among them were the alternative setting, the transfer of agency, and the extended discussion time. All of these factors contrasted greatly from the children's usual reading-related experiences. Unsurprisingly perhaps, the apparent novelty of the activity drew attention to the dynamics of the group: the way the children interacted with each other, the roles they assumed, their motivations, and their ability to remain task-centred. Teacher and pupil roles, and agency are discussed further in Chapter 7 (section 7.1).

5.3.4 Session four

5.3.4.1 Rationale and text resource

The children's tendency to move directly from reading to talking, without appearing to reflect at depth upon textual content, led me to scaffold support for the next session. In addition to my opening instruction, I provided a visual prompt in which the activity was separated into key stages (figure 5.4). 'Think' was depicted as a separate stage in order to encourage reflection. As previously, the group were to work independently for twenty minutes, with minimal adult contact, to allow interaction to unfold 'naturally'.

Activity: understanding a text

❖ Read (self)	Think as you read.
❖ Think (self)	Now take a few minutes to think about how you understand the text. *(You might write on the text to capture your thoughts.)*
❖ Share (group)	Share your thoughts, ideas and understandings about the text with others.
❖ Prepare (group)	Capture information to share with the class. *(You might use bullet points, a spider diagram, a simple labelled drawing or another method.)*

Figure 5.4: Instructional prompt

The text extract was derived from the novel *A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2015; shown in Appendix L). It centres upon the thoughts of a single character and features rising tension as

the cause of a recurring nightmare is gradually, but not explicitly, revealed to the reader. Content includes sensory information and description of character thoughts, presented through a wide range of structural and literary devices at sentence and paragraph level (including wide-ranging punctuation marks).

5.3.4.2 Text-based interactions

Once seated, I asked that the children read independently and *"think about what you're reading"* as they did so. I also suggested that once an initial pass of the text had been completed, they take *"a few minutes out to think"* and possibly *"make some notes"* about their thoughts prior to talking in their group. For emphasis, I ended my instruction by reiterating the need to *"read and think first"* before talking with peers.

Despite my attempts to promote reflection, the initial pass of the text was completed with the same sense of urgency that I had observed in earlier sessions. One pupil for example, claimed to have *"done"* reading during my opening instruction. This comment seemed to encourage others to 'race' through the text (extract 5.16 below). This pass appeared to have been completed by all members within

approximately four minutes whereupon the focus of talk moved on to ideas recording. Consequently, there was little evidence to suggest that the separate 'thinking' stage had taken place. In contrast to session three, talk drew upon earlier learning, for it mirrored the 'text connections' concept (including the method of recording) used by the class teacher earlier in session two. (See figure 5.3 in section 5.3.2.3 (above) for the teacher's annotations, and figure 5.5 (below) for the peer group's annotations.)

Extract 5.16: Opening sequence (peer-led talk)

R:	…so your 20 minutes start now yeah
P1:	done
F?:	no you haven't
P+:	*{whispering}*
P1:	xxx xx xxx do this
F?:	ok
P3:	ok. I'm done
M?:	uuuuuho
P3:	shall I write on this sheet?
M?:	brrrrrrrrrrr
P2:	ok. I've got it. Shall we do world text and self?
P3:	yeah. I'll do it here

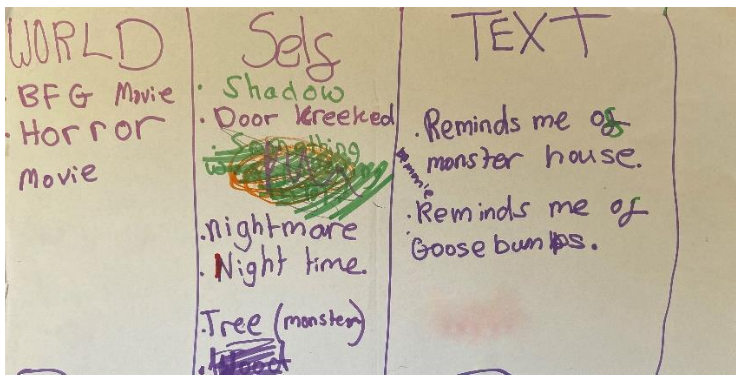


Figure 5.5: Children's ideas about 'text connections'

There were also parallels with data obtained during session three, particularly in reference to exchanges of an off-task or disputational nature, and contributions that were generally short and of low complexity. However, there were also several noteworthy exchanges that suggested the children were beginning to work together to develop ideas in a collaborative manner. These findings may be connected to the scaffolded support which was not present in the previous session. Interaction is also likely to have been influenced by familiarity with the text. This unforeseen finding is discussed in the following section.

In contrast to the previous session, I observed an increase in the number of cumulative exchanges, together with an increase in the range of ideas recorded by the children. Both are indicative of considerable engagement with

the text. Noticeably, cumulative exchanges were often terminated upon agreement or approval from another group member, and were therefore generally very brief in length, containing between three and six contributions (exemplified in extracts 5.17 and 5.18 below).

Extract 5.17: Cumulative talk (a)

M?: a monster came into my room. A monster came into my room=
F?: =like a shadow. A shadow
P?: we're doing that

Extract 5.18: Cumulative talk (b)

P1: oh. Oh. Oh. It reminds me of the monster movie
P2: huh. No. the whole idea [xxxx
P?: [umm umm umm. xxxx monster house and monster movie]
P?: [xxx xxxxx....
F?: [there's a movie called monster house
P1: monster house. Yeah.

On occasion, challenge also featured within cumulative exchanges. Extract 5.19, for example, demonstrates how single word question prompts led to a brief causal statement by way of reasoning, as also occurred when used by the teacher when visiting the peer group during session two.

Extract 5.19: Developing an idea through challenge

P2: B.F.G. movie
P1: w[hy?
P1: [how?
P2: cos it's a monster xxxster

Challenges tended to originate from pupil 1, the dominant male. They were not always conveyed in a supportive manner, for they sometimes suppressed idea development even when curiosity was expressed by others (pupils 2 and 6 in extract 5.20 below, for example). This finding reinforces the notion of asymmetries and inequalities that I discussed for session three (section 5.3.3 above), and also highlights their probable impact upon less confident children. The 'crossing out' of an idea, for example, could signify a developing reluctance to suggest new ideas with significant implications for engagement and enjoyment of reading activities over the longer term.

Extract 5.20: Unsupportive challenge

P1:	what you doing? Someone [.] what are you writing?
F?:	what xxx xx write
F?:	something for xxx
P1:	something. something
P6:	something funny *{laughter}*
P1:	what the hell. That's just.
P2:	why do you cross it out
P6:	what does it. What. what does it say?
F?:	I've got an idea. cos I've got an idea.

On the whole, instances of challenge and reasoning were few despite the increase in cumulative exchanges, indicating that little talk was of an exploratory nature (as defined by Mercer, 2000). One possible reason for this is the groups' goal-oriented focus, which I observed across my

study and discuss within Chapter 7 (section 7.2). In extract 5.21 below, which is striking also in terms of its length, the groups' attention appeared centred upon recording ideas. Much of the discussion was concerned with what to write, and where to write it, drawing attention to the abundance of procedural talk. Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009) also referred to the dominance of talk of this type within cooperative peer-led interactions.

Collaborative working, on the other hand, was less evident. Idea development seem to take place in a fragmented way, interspersed with the procedural talk. Thus, development of understanding, in addition to exploration of textual content, may have been impeded as a result. My finding of a single exploratory exchange (same extract) appears to support this view. I also observed several missed opportunities for exploration, which arose naturally through talk, such as when the narrative was described as an *"angry story"*. I concluded that the group were inexperienced in independent exploration, which may have led to confusion around the session objectives, as indicated by the children's focus on recording over reading. It is also possible that the children simply did not perceive exploration of the text to be of importance.

Extract 5.21: Working together

P3: I know. Something was calling [his name
P1: [otherwise I'll call him cringey man
{laughter}
P2: that's what xxxx xx
P?: something was calling his name
P?: we already wrote [like xxx
P?: [in the corner in the corner=
P?: =cringier
P?: that's more of a room
P3: that's his name. that's his name=
P1: =who?=
P3: =conor=
F?: =conor=
P1: that's his name. [ ]no. no. the monster is a dream
F?: [it's not corner]
P2?: Yeah I know
P1: write it down. Put in self=
P?: =world=
P2: =no=
P+: =in self
P1: cuz you've seen a tree before haven't you? a tree as in a world
P6: you've seen a tree
P2: ok. so tre[e
P3: [and you can just put add it world if you want but like xxxx.
.
.
.
P2: I know that the monster's a tree cos look it says xxx
P1: yeah cos that's what I just said
P2: yeah but I read something at the bottom
P1: what?
P2: the last sentence I think
P1: he didn't want [to go and look
P2: [no no no at the same=
P1: = no but [at the same
P2: [then then starts at then I think
P1: then he heard a heavy creak of wood outside
P2: kind of xxx
P1: nu. Clearly=

Extract 5.21 also draws further attention to the asymmetries within the group. The two most proficient

readers (and dominant pupils) seemed to bear the majority of the cognitive effort. Ideas were conveyed by the dominant male with evidence located by the dominant female. In contrast, talk contributions attributable to other group members demonstrated little, if any, depth of reflection in relation to content.

The asymmetries within the group may also account for the limited peer support that I observed. I found evidence of pupils supporting one another to resolve ambiguity at the level of basic content (for example, when establishing that Conor was the name of the boy and not the monster). However, this support did not appear to extend to the development of understanding beyond the text's surface level. Ideas about the *"monster is a dream"* arising from sounds made by a 'tree', for example, were asserted or alluded to without elaboration or reasoning. This finding implied the existence of shared knowledge among group members. The idea may have been derived through inference as it was not explicitly stated within the text, but I later became aware that some of the pupils were familiar with the original novel (illustrated in extract 5.22).

Had the children been engaged in true collaborative endeavours, in so much as they worked together to "create or achieve the same thing" (CUP, 2020), I would have

expected the above knowledge to be shared for the benefit of those for whom the text was unfamiliar. Conversely, I observed a competitive element (also shown in extract 5.22) that seemed contrary to the spirit of collaboration. Only pupil 2's quest to locate supporting evidence seemed indicative of the latter, and this may have been a reflection of her sensitivities to the needs of others (as I observed in the previous session), rather than conscious collaboration. Indeed, the abrupt termination of the exchange, which prevented developing reasoning from being shared with other group members, raised questions about the children's experiences of, and perhaps their attitude towards, working collaboratively. The routine practice of 'partner talk' (noted by the class teacher), and apparent novelty of my study activities (which I have noted elsewhere in this chapter), appeared indicative of the former.

Extract 5.22: Prior knowledge of the text

P1: that was xx I bet you haven't even read the text
P?: I've. I've read. yes I have actually
P1: I'm reading the book so I know more than everyone
P2: yeah. I've read the book. already. I've got xxxxx
P6: …have you?
P1: yeah. When did you read it?

To bring the session to a close, the group then shared their ideas (figure 5.5 above) with the class who had

undertaken a similar 'text connections' activity with the teacher. Almost exclusively, these were introduced through the phrase *"it reminds me of…",* and were shared without elaboration or reasoning. This led the teacher to undertake the majority of the cognitive effort through question prompts, which became increasingly focussed towards eliciting reference to specific textual content. In some cases (extract 5.23 below, for example), the teacher also directed the children to appropriate lines from the text. Hesitant and tentative responses to teacher questioning, even when addressed to the group as a whole, served to support my earlier interpretation regarding the absence of the 'thinking' stage of the activity.

Extract 5.23: Teacher prompting

T: ohh. Shadows. Why that? Why did you say shadows?
F?: cos well.
T: was there something in the text and you thought ooohhh?
F?: yeah
T: what? What bit? Can you remember?
F?: was scary.
T: would it be the bit where he says umm. the curtains? Yeah. The curtains shu? Oh yeah. Fabulous.

5.3.4.3 Reading skills conveyed through talk

In comparison to earlier sessions, peer-talk from this session yielded the largest and most diverse range of text-related ideas. Furthermore, the majority of these ideas, which included different types of inference (as suggested by Tennent, 2015; discussed in Chapter 2), were indicative of reading well beyond the text's surface level, with children drawing from a combination of information both within and external to the text.

Inferences such as *"something was following him"* (most likely derived from the sentence "…push the nightmare back, not let it follow him…"), indicated that some children focussed on information at word or phrase level, thereby missing additional information contained within the wider sentences. And although this mirrored findings from session two, I also observed instances indicative of drawing more widely from content, possibly at a whole text level. Attempts to resolve ambiguity around the character's name and to locate a quotation to support inference (both of which I discussed in the previous section), would almost certainly have involved drawing from content beyond a single paragraph.

As noted earlier, some children may also have drawn from prior knowledge of the text to form an inductive inference (Tennent, 2015). It is, in my opinion, unlikely that the children would have deduced that *"the monster is a tree"* from the few clues contained in the extract alone (which comprised: "the creaking and cracking of wood", "wood outside", and "something gigantic…across a timber floor"). I did not, however, identify any specific references to additional knowledge of the text within the children's talk.

Children also drew upon personal experiences of *"night time",* and other texts that they had read or viewed (information beyond the text). These texts were predominantly films (the *"BFG"*, *"Monster House"* and horror movies in general, for example; noted in figure 5.5 above). The recording of these films under the headings of both '-text' and '-world', suggested some uncertainty about their perception as types of text. This finding raises questions about how texts are used and valued within the educational setting from both practitioners' and pupils' perspectives. The extracts presented to the children within this study reflect the *National Curriculum's* traditional emphasis on printed texts, which I discussed earlier in Chapter 2.

The wealth and range of text-related ideas and the inclusion of inferences, the number of cumulative exchanges,

and the suggestion of the early stages of idea exploration, indicated that the children had engaged with the activity, each other, and the text more deeply than I had observed across any of the other sessions. Repeated reference to their desire to gather *"more"* ideas, in contrast to the previous session, provided further evidence of increased engagement. It also drew my attention to performance-related issues which I discuss further within Chapter 7.

I therefore concluded that the data from this session was likely to be the truest reflection of the children's potential for developing understanding of a text through peer-led talk, without initiating teaching interventions. As this would risk imposing upon the teacher's time and interfering with the school's curriculum, neither of which were desirable from an ethical standpoint, I decided against collecting further reading session data. I therefore shifted my focus to an exploration of the whole school approach to reading, to develop my understanding of the contextual factors underpinning the sessions. This study is described in detail within Chapter 4.

5.4 Summary

My study of the talk around texts currently taking place during year four routine reading sessions revealed that little was of an exploratory nature, irrespective of whether it was teacher- or pupil-led. This finding is not altogether surprising in view of the brief and simply structured participant contributions, and relatively short, occasionally cumulative exchanges. Moreover, it seems to be part of an ongoing issue, for Mercer and Howe (2010) drew similar conclusions following their study of classroom talk within English primary schools over a decade ago. Yet, there had already been several attempts to raise the profile of talk in the curriculum through talk-centred initiatives such as '*Tell me*' (Chambers, 1993) and *Thinking Together* (Dawes, Mercer and Wegerif, 2003). More recently, pedagogical support has been developed for dialogic teaching (such as Alexander 2019, 2020), however few elements of this were present within the talk I observed. Discussion and dialogue, for example, were absent from peer-led talk. I found little elaborative content, even within the cumulative exchanges. Reasoning and challenge were also in short supply. I surmised that pupils did not explicate reasoning as a matter of routine when the teacher had cause to prompt for it twice. Initially, when the

same idea was shared by the same pupil during group talk and later, when engaged in whole class talk. Teacher-led activities fared little better with questioning dominating talk, leading to similarly structured talk exchanges. I discuss this finding more extensively within the next chapter (section 6.4, Chapter 6).

Strikingly, there was a sense that peer-led talk was not valued within reading sessions by the teacher, and potentially by the school, in view of the emphasis on teacher-led pedagogies (which I exemplify and discuss in Chapters 6 and 7). Pupils, for example, rarely received more than five minutes for activities of this type. This was particularly noticeable within the first session where the teacher interjected with instruction at regular five-minute intervals across the entire activity. The amount of support from the teacher, who undertook the majority of the cognitive work in teacher-led exchanges, also drew attention to the children's inexperience in working independently and autonomously as a group. This finding became more apparent in the activities conducted outside the classroom, where the novelty of my study activities gave rise to talk about the children's newly acquired freedoms. The children's inexperience also accounts for my finding little evidence of the children working collaboratively either inside or outside of the classroom. I

detected the beginnings of collective idea development, however this tended to be fragmented, and naturally arising opportunities to explore ideas were not taken up. I identified procedural talk representative of cooperation, such as turn-taking and allocation of in-group roles and responsibilities. Few of the ground rules for talk (presented in section 5.1.1) appeared to be present however. None-the-less, the children's ability to work cooperatively suggests that with the right type of support, they could be encouraged to work collaboratively.

In addition to the children's apparent inexperience in collaborative working in a group context, the make-up of the group resulted in a number of inequalities and asymmetries which affected individual member participation and, subsequently, idea development. In addition to group size and furniture layout (which I discussed earlier in the chapter), Blatchford, Galton, Kutnick and Baines (in Blatchford *et al.*, 2010) highlight the importance of group composition for effective group work. There were indications of power-play, sometimes reflecting gender inequality. This affected two of the girls; one decided to withhold an idea, whilst another recanted her idea by crossing through it on the recording grid. My attention was drawn to the potential frequency of these events when, during a pupil interview, I was informed that

"The boys usually say stuff. Why is the story too girly and stuff like that…" If this is the case, there are important implications for the organisation of peer collaboration activities. I also found evidence indicating that the two more proficient readers (one male and one female) found group work to be a cause of frustration at times. They also appeared to dominate talk outside of the classroom and take on the majority of the cognitive work, raising questions about the benefit of the peer-led talk for less proficient readers. Particularly as additional knowledges, such as prior knowledge of the text, were not shared. Nor was support offered by other group members when issues of ambiguity were raised. Instances of disputational talk were numerous (and sometimes involved personal criticism), however conflicts were quickly resolved without the need for adult involvement.

Despite these issues, group members appeared to perceive benefit in talking together, declaring that *"talking is better than worksheets"*. One pupil later noted that the sharing of ideas enabled her to *"gather up more information",* which she was then able to draw from when participating in teacher-led talk. Evidence of some talk of a playful nature, including word-play, suggested that despite the conflict and frustrations, there was an element of enjoyment to the tasks.

In terms of reading skills, the focus of this study, talk contributions often referred to specific words or phrases in isolation, indicating that reading appeared mainly at the surface level of texts. This interpretation is supported by further findings indicating that pupils read speedily, and seemed to make only one pass of texts. Further, they did not appear to engage in dedicated 'thinking time' before participating in talk with peers. This occurred despite repeated reminders to 'think' about their reading, through verbal and visual prompting. As a result, peers frequently entered into conversation in an unfocussed way (exemplified in the chapter's opening extract). Casual statements about not having completed the reading of one of the texts indicated gender-related attitudes to reading. Two of the three male pupils, for example, appeared unconcerned and seemed to perceive completion of reading as being unimportant to completion of the final activity task. Contrastingly, this appeared to be a matter of concern to at least one of the female group members.

Observations such as those in the previous paragraph appear symptomatic of a goal-oriented approach towards tasks. I identified this within each of the sessions and discuss this further in Chapter 7. This approach might also account for the teacher's simplification of the 'text connections'

concept, where connections were introduced primarily through the phrase *"it / that reminds me of…"*. This contrasted with the variety of prompts on the supporting documentation that I provided. Similarly, connections were shared in an abstract manner, without reference to how they aided or enhanced understanding of the text.

Data also indicated that several group members were beginning to read beyond the surface level of the text. One pupil, in particular, appeared to have read at considerable depth. It was unfortunate for this pupil, and the study, that she had not felt comfortable sharing her ideas with others, for it may have led to a far livelier and richer exchange of talk between pupils than that observed. The exchange may also have reflected aspects of critical reading. Curiously, understanding at a whole text level was rarely referred to by any of the participants. This tended, for example, to be limited to teacher-led enquiries aimed at establishing whether children felt that they had, or had not, understood the narrative. There are, undoubtedly, major implications for the advancement of children's reading skill development, since understanding at whole text level is likely to be essential if the ideology contained within texts, and the motivations behind their creation, are to be uncovered.

In the following chapter, I begin to address my second research question – how might this talk support or hinder the development of advanced critical reading skills? I explore the key themes associated with the school's response to the *National Curriculum* for reading.

Chapter 6: The impact of national policy on shared reading experiences

"As you've done before when we do talk for reading you can make notes…You can highlight things that you don't know; words you don't know, things you're unsure of. You can use different colours if you notice techniques that the writer's used, different types of grammar, different types of punctuation - as you read it and notice…"

"…so have some questions, really clear in your mind, about what you want to talk about…"

(extracted from teacher talk, session one)

6.0 Introduction

Through the following two chapters, I aim to address the second of my research questions - how might the talk that takes place during routine reading sessions support or hinder the development of advanced critical reading skills? I do this through the exploration of several key themes around pedagogy and practice. The themes contained within this chapter are specific to the reading curriculum. Those featured within Chapter 7 are of a cross-curricular nature but were, nonetheless, found to impact upon children's shared reading experiences.

Within this exploration, I refer to existing literature. I discuss what I consider to be the core issues and insights associated with each theme, in relation to the potential for reading skill development within the current classroom culture. I draw from the entire dataset, comprising:

- audio, observation and pupils' own work from reading sessions,
- interviews with pupils and the English Lead,
- meetings with the class teacher,
- contextual information associated with session planning and curriculum development (detailed in Chapter 4),
- pupils' responses to the reading-related talk at home questionnaire,
- my own memos relating to critical incidents (discussed in section 3.6.2, Chapter 3) and personal reflections across the duration of the study.

I described and discussed the full range of data collected in my methodology (Chapter 3). Despite this range, there are several important considerations regarding the limitations of my study; not least, the apparent novelty of the activities conducted. This will almost certainly have had an effect on participant engagement and interaction, and might

therefore account for the limited amount of text content-related talk observed across the sessions. In addition to restricted perspectives (mainly of members from a single year four class), limited access to staff and pupils also resulted in few opportunities for me to explore participant ideas further, or to investigate my interpretation of findings. I discuss study limitations more extensively in Chapter 8 (section 8.1). The centralised management of reading activities across the school by the English Lead, however, could conceivably lead to similar experiences within other classrooms throughout the school. Findings might also be representative of other schools in England, particularly in view of the growth in multi-academy trusts and the possibility of a rise in centralised pedagogy.

In this chapter I present four themes associated with Paver Primary's response to the *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013) requirements for reading. They reveal the extent to which certain views about reading, reading skill development, and pedagogical techniques permeate, and in some cases dominate, routine reading sessions. These themes comprise:

- my analysis of Paver's conceptualisation of comprehension, including the reading skills involved;

- the approach to the shared reading of texts in the classroom;
- the embeddedness of certain practices within routine reading sessions, particularly in relation to the use of questioning to talk about texts, and an apparent emphasis on word meaning.

I offer a brief summary of the key points at the end of each theme, for convenience. I then draw the chapter to a close by discussing potential shortcomings and implications that the themes may have in relation to teaching and learning within formal reading sessions. Implications may be wide-ranging and could affect other reading activities conducted within the school setting (such as independent reading for pleasure and reading in other subject areas), and also at home. This is, however, beyond the remit of this study.

I begin with an exploration of the concept of comprehension, as conveyed through conversations with the year four class teacher and the English Lead of Paver Primary School.

6.1 Theme: comprehension as a distinct area of the reading curriculum

When talking about the whole school roll-out of pedagogical practices, the English Lead referred to comprehension as a *"technique"* used to *"think deeply"* about texts. The class teacher referred to an inference-based set of *"comprehension skills"* through which pupils *"draw things out of the text"*. It also appeared to be viewed as a distinct component of the reading curriculum that built upon the skills developed through the school's main reading pedagogy: the *Talk for Reading (TfR)* programme (described in section 4.3.1.1, Chapter 4). Routine *TfR* practices were therefore supplemented with *"formal comprehension techniques"* (English Lead). These were further supplemented by the class teacher with occasional comprehension-specific activities, which usually culminated in pupils providing written responses to a series of text-related questions in a style similar to formal national assessments.

Adult participants repeatedly talked about comprehension using language associated with negative connotation. The class teacher recounted that, during a key stage two meeting, teachers had surmised that pupils

appeared to find the comprehension component of the SATs *"always quite difficult"*. Additionally, results from recent internal assessment had led the school to perceive pupils' comprehension skills as *"weak"*. The nature of the challenge believed to exist for primary aged readers became apparent when the teacher, also a former secondary school English teacher, noted that *"a lot of teenagers…can only just manage to infer and draw inferences but we're having to do that with children in year four and younger…"* Seemingly within this statement is the implication that this challenge is shared by teachers; particularly those responsible for developing skills in young readers. Furthermore, concerns about the dominance of 'question and answer' style assessments, led the teacher to raise the possibility that many children simply *"don't know how to"* express themselves through the required format.

Through discussion with the class teacher and English Lead, I became aware of several other pedagogical issues that appeared to arise as a consequence of comprehension being viewed as a distinct curriculum area. The class teacher, for example, felt that comprehension had been *"squeezed out"* of the curriculum owing to the school's emphasis on *TfR* (and writing). In addition, reading sessions did not take place daily throughout the academic year, owing to the ongoing

rotation of *TfR* and Talk for Writing schemes across the allocated daily literacy slot. This meant that a week or more could pass between reading sessions, dependent on the length of the writing scheme temporarily occupying the slot. Stand-alone comprehension-specific activities were only possible *"now and then"* owing to the already crowded curriculum.

The English Lead spoke about the need for teachers to integrate *"comprehension techniques"* within *TfR* sessions in order to improve pupils' skills. Internal monitoring had indicated that some teachers, particularly those new to the school, had been *"… using the activities and the techniques but… hadn't been asking children the right questions to get the deeper level thinking."* This may suggest that *TfR* does not naturally lend itself to comprehension skill development. Alternatively, there may be issues around the school's implementation of it, for the subsequent internal whole school training session to address *"…deal[ing]with more formal comprehension techniques"* emphasised the use of teacher-led questioning alongside *TfR* programme activities. (Questioning is discussed further in Chapter 6, section 6.4.) This finding, which seems to support Alexander's (2018) suggestion that schools are resisting moving away from questioning, is likely to have implications for the types of talk

that could potentially develop during reading sessions. Authentic and exploratory discussion (or dialogue) may be impeded as a consequence.

Despite the inclusion of comprehension-specific teaching within routine reading sessions, uncertainties remain in respect of whether, or not, this will be sufficient to address the perceived skill weakness. The class teacher, for example, argued that comprehension skills were *"completely different"* to routine reading skills, warranting *"almost a separate lesson"*. This reasoning underpins her periodic implementation of supplementary comprehension activities. The difficulties experienced by some teachers when attempting to incorporate *"comprehension techniques"* within *TfR* may not, therefore, be the result of a deficiency in teaching skills as alluded to by the English Lead. Rather, it could be the result of an internal tension arising through a juxtaposition concerning what teachers are being asked to do, and their personal beliefs about, and experiences of, comprehension skill teaching. Due to the limitations of my study, which included access, I was not able to explore this further. The tensions between teachers' values, beliefs and experiences, and external demands have, however, been explored by others (such as Ball, 2003).

6.1.1 Associated reading skills

Exploration of the language surrounding explicit references to reading skills afforded some insight into views around the relationship between comprehension and other reading skills. Data from discussions with the year four class teacher led me to deduce that skills were perceived to be hierarchical in nature, as I illustrate below (extract 6.1).

Extract 6.1: Foundational skills

T: …I've looked at the reading samples and there's a lot of reading to do and if they're not strong readers I don't know how they will manage… That's why the reading [activities] we do are really important. If they're not of the ability to look at a piece of text and skim and scan it and retrieve key words, what else can they do?

When discussing the need to be *"strong readers"* to cope with the volume of reading required in standardised comprehension assessments, the teacher referred to the skills of skimming, scanning and retrieving key words (extract 6.1). The suggestion that pupils' performance in SATs would be severely compromised without these skills (same extract), especially as *"a lot of the questions are retrieval based…"*, indicated that the teacher viewed them as fundamental foundation skills. In addition to appearing important for academic success, there was a sense that acquisition of these

skills paved the way for the development of other reading skills, such as fluency and inference.

Extract 6.2: Comprehension and reading fluency skills
T: …inference. And that is something we have picked up on in the last reading paper that we have done with them. That is one of the things that is weak. They can read, they can read fairly fluently – most of them . . . T: …comprehension skills, that's a completely different thing. It's almost a separate lesson which we do put in now and then but it wasn't a huge focus so yeah, they can read fluently.

My conversations with the teacher also indicated that mastery of reading fluency was perceived to offset shortfalls in pupils' progress in comprehension (illustrated in extract 6.2 above). Moreover, the school seemed to have historically prioritised progress in reading fluency above development of textual understanding. This imbalance was presently in the process of being redressed through modifications to the *TfR* sessions. The teacher's comment that *"comprehension wasn't a great part"* of the *National Curriculum*, especially for year four pupils, led me to question whether this issue stemmed from the school's interpretation of statutory policy, or ambiguity around the wording itself. Limited access to the school meant that I was unable to further this line of questioning. Additionally, the teacher's unprompted references to both fluency and comprehension on each

occasion (same extract), seemed to imply that the two skills were believed to be interrelated. Whilst it was impossible to determine the manner of their relatedness, the apparent historical trade-off in favour of fluency indicated the probable assumption that proficiency in fluency needed to be achieved before comprehension skills could be developed.

6.1.2 Possible implications for advanced reading skill development

In addition to the possible risk that support for the development of particular skills may cease once pupils are deemed to have ‘acquired’ them, there are two further issues which could have implications for advanced skills such as critical reading. As these are concerned with the conceptualisation of comprehension, one of many key concepts rarely clearly defined within official guidance (which I discussed earlier in Chapter 2), it is likely that these issues are not unique to Paver Primary.

The notion of a hierarchy of reading skills gives rise to the existence of a developmental scale or continuum. Based on study findings, figure 6.1 (below) illustrates how particular skills are perceived to form a foundation for acquisition and mastery of more advanced reading skills.

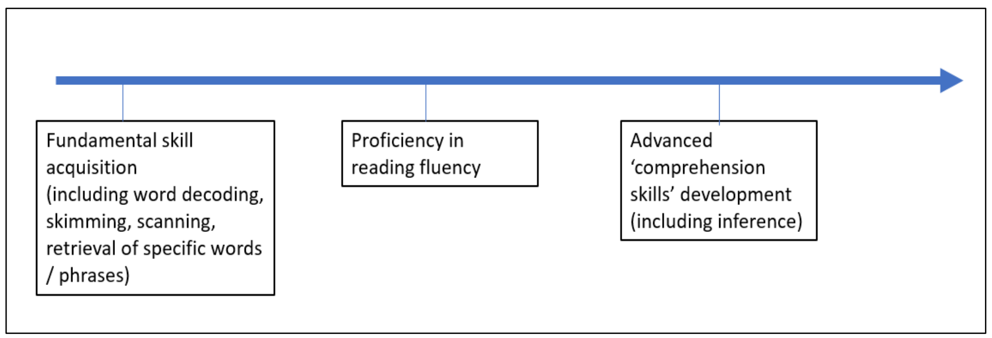


Figure 6.1: Example of a reading skill continuum

Under this view, development of inferential and critical reading skills would therefore be unlikely to take place much before the latter years of primary education, once pupils have achieved a reasonable level of reading fluency. Teachers' efforts to promote advanced skills could be hampered as a result of pupils' lack of experience in thinking deeply about their reading, or externalising their thoughts during formal reading sessions. This may lead to narrowly targeted pedagogical approaches. Heavily constrained learning may have detrimental effects on children's attitudes and motivations towards reading in school. Targeted support to promote specific skill development, in order to progress along the continuum, might also result in similar barriers to learning. Crucially, there is a further risk that reading development is held back for some pupils, particularly where national age-related expectations for skill development (as

set out in the *National Curriculum)* guide judgements about pupils' progress along the continuum.

Conversations with the English Lead and year four class teacher revealed that comprehension tended to be associated with "*deeper level thinking*" as pupils "*delve deeper*" to facilitate "*deeper meaning*", and thus "*deeper understanding*" of texts. The associated reading skills however, seemed to be limited to inference. The class teacher, for example, cited a "*typical*" SATs question in which pupils were asked to determine word meaning, taking into account the context in which the word was applied (exemplified in extract 6.3 below).

Extract 6.3: Comprehension skills (class teacher)

T: …Some typical SATs questions is the author's used the word is 'distant'. What does this suggest to you about the character? They *{year four pupils}* will probably say distant means far away, full stop, but they won't say because maybe she feels distant from a relative...

The example shared by the English Lead focussed on pupils drawing conclusions about a character's thoughts and feelings, reflecting the interpretation of inference set out within the *National Curriculum.* For the year three and four age group, this is described as:

> “…drawing inferences such as inferring characters’ feelings, thoughts and motives from their actions, and justifying inferences with evidence”
>
> (extracted from DfE, 2013:36)

Inference also dominates SATs. At the time of writing, questions of this type may account for up to half of the total number of marks available (see curriculum reference 2d in table 6.1 below). With such high stakes for schools (discussed elsewhere within this document), it is of little surprise that Paver Primary School appears to equate comprehension with inference. Or at the very least, it prioritises the development of pupils’ inferential skills. In the same vein, it is possible to see why the class teacher felt that comprehension did not feature greatly within the year four curriculum, since inference featured in only one of the sixteen comprehension-related learning objectives for years three and four (shown in Appendix B).

National curriculum reference	Number of marks	Percentage of total mark
2a give / explain the meaning of words in context	5–10	10–20%
2b retrieve and record information / identify key details from fiction and non-fiction	8–25	16–50%
2c summarise main ideas from more than one paragraph	1–6	2–12%
2d make inferences from the text / explain and justify inferences with evidence from the text	8–25	16–50%
2e predict what might happen from details stated and implied	0–3	0–6%
2f identify / explain how information / narrative content is related and contributes to meaning as a whole	0–3	0–6%
2g identify / explain how meaning is enhanced through choice of words and phrases	0–3	0–6%
2h make comparisons within the text	0–3	0–6%

Table 6.1: 2016 KS2 SATs marking profile by content area (extracted from DfE, 2016:12, Table 9)

Williams (2014) discusses inference as a unitary construct (see Chapter 2). The limited view of the skills associated with comprehension at Paver Primary could be interpreted to suggest that it is perceived in a similar way. This is likely to have negative consequences for children's experiences of reading within school, especially where activities become tightly targeted to support specific skill development. From the perspective of this study, opportunities for the development of more advanced reading

skills are also likely to be affected. Critical reading for example, as discussed in Chapter 2 (section 2.5.4), necessitates reflection at the level of whole texts and beyond to include real world experiences.

On a further note, the English Lead's reference to *"formal comprehension"* and *"formal written comprehension"* would seem to suggest that multiple types of comprehension are also perceived to exist. This finding serves to strengthen an argument for a clear definition of the concept of comprehension within educational guidance. Whilst these terms were not explicitly defined, our conversations led me to deduce that *"formal written comprehension"* was a reference to the structure and style (including the academic language) of standardised assessments (SATs) with their *"formal questions"*. *"Formal comprehension"* appeared to be a general reference to comprehension activities conducted within the school setting ('formal' learning). Pedagogy for this was *"tailored"* for children lower down the school (such as those in key stage one). Arguably, the existence of a 'formal' type of comprehension presupposes the existence of an 'informal' type, which raises questions about the possible effect that setting (home, school, and so forth) may have on how texts are processed and subsequently, reading skill

development. Unfortunately, this falls beyond the scope of my study.

Main findings:

- comprehension is perceived as a separate and additional component to main reading pedagogy.

Consequences and implications:

- there are pedagogical and performance-related challenges associated with comprehension for both teachers and pupils;
- further challenge and tension may arise where teachers believe that the comprehension component of reading requires dedicated space within the school curriculum;
- comprehension appears to be narrowly associated with inference;
- the manner in which different reading skills were referred to, primarily by the class teacher, indicates the existence of a continuum of progression ranging from foundational skills to more advanced skills;
- it is possible that different types of comprehension are believed to exist (including *"formal"* and *"formal written"* types).

The seemingly narrow view of the concept of comprehension also appeared to be reflected in classroom practices around reading, for a small number of techniques appeared to dominate teaching and learning. These seemed to begin with how the texts themselves were 'read' by participants, particularly during shared endeavours. I discuss this further within the next section.

6.2 Theme: a fragmented approach to reading

Session transcripts revealed that when texts were shared with others, participants often read aloud in sections or 'chunks'. At the end of each section, generally comprised of one or two sentences, readers then paused to discuss content (as in the teacher-led think-aloud), or to facilitate a change in reader (such as through turn-taking during peer-led reading activities).

Unless directly instructed by the class teacher to *"read the text independently"*, pupils adopted this approach for conducting a first pass of texts within both paired and group activities. Within each of these contexts, peers readily agreed to *"take it in turns"*, quickly determining who would be *"reading it first"*. Since there was little discussion around how sections of text would be shared out among the readers, I concluded that this was an example of routine practice. It was also a practice recommended within the *TfR* programme documentation (Corbett and Strong, 2015; also discussed within section 4.5.1, Chapter 4).

This way of working appeared advantageous for the teacher. 'Chunking' of the text facilitated pausing at intervals to draw the children's attention to specific elements of textual content (words, phrases or ideas) in order to model the

formation of personal ‘text connections’. Furthermore, this approach made it possible to vary the speed of reading whilst progressing through the text. ‘Chunks’ that did not feature connections were swiftly passed, affording more time for discussion around the relevant ‘chunks’ and opportunity for pupils to contribute examples of their own.

In contrast, this fragmented approach to viewing texts appeared less helpful to pupils’ development of textual understanding when working independently of the teacher, as extract 6.4 (below) demonstrates.

Extract 6.4: Reading a text (peer-led activity, session three)

P1: no, you've read your bit. Who's turn is it now?
P?: it's xxx turn quickly
P1: no. it's her
P5?: shut up.
P2: *{read with expression}* **it was the tidiest office she had ever seen. There were no papers** or files. Or **pictures on the walls. Just a large empty-topped desk. A** filling *{as in getting full}* **cabinet and a bookcase**=
P?: =*ummm hummm {loudly}*=
P2: =**books. She took it all in** [xxx forgot it **as her eyes fell on the man standing by the window. He was tall and thin. Dressed in an immaculate [black suit**
P?: [*{calls to p3}* I need a bit of paper. I need a bit of paper
P1: [you know we're all gonna read it=
P2: yeah. So. Here you are. You read from there
P3: no. hey…
P?: from
P3: …you read lots and I just read one sentence xxx xxx xxx *{audio unclear, sounds like: I want to read}* more
P?: ok. she took it all [in one [second
P?: [oh my god *{muttered}*
P?: [from. Start from flipping xxx
P?: *{squeal of laughter}*
P3: from his shoulders=

Issues associated with the practical aspects of reading, such as uncertainties and arguments about turn-taking or content to be read, together with delays in taking up a turn, often resulted in repetition of content. On one occasion, this resulted in a return to the very start of the text. Consequently, turns at reading a 'chunk' were frequently interrupted with talk from other group members. Therefore, the reading of texts was protracted. Sometimes the first pass was not actually completed.

The resultant lack of flow in the children's reading seemed to contribute to a growing sense of frustration for some group members, indicated in the final four turns of extract 6.4 above. Thus, there are possible consequences for engagement with both texts and reading-related activities. My observations also led me to deduce that habitual fragmented reading practices might also have consequences for text processing, as the children's comments in extract 6.5 (below) would seem to suggest. Potentially, there could be even greater consequences for bi- and multi-lingual children, in view of the additional complexities around information storage and access (discussed elsewhere throughout this study).

Extract 6.5: Talking about understanding (peer-led activity, session two)

P3: so. It's strict. Oh, this is really strict cos it
P6: xxxx
P3: this text is really strict….
P6: Don't be xxx
P3: I don't know why it's so strict
P1: what. What. What's so strict?
P3?: the text. And what's it really about? The text
P2?: yeah.
P3: I don't understand it

At least two members of the group seemed to struggle with achieving a broad level of understanding of the text extract. Uncertainty over what *"the text"* was *"really about"*

indicated issues with coherence at whole text level, an interpretation supported by pupil 3's subsequent declaration of *"I don't understand it"* (extract 6.5 above). One possible interpretation is that pupils had processed 'chunks' of text in isolation from one another, which would account for the problem in reconciling why the text was perceived to be *"strict"* (same extract). It is also possible that the absence of surrounding contextual information, to support the children's reading of the extract (which also applies to the majority of texts viewed across the sessions), hampered their efforts to achieve a coherent understanding, especially as this text contained period language.

Notably, reference to content at a whole text level rarely occurred during the sessions. Talk was limited to generalised comparisons of character portrayal across different text versions during teacher-led talk (session two), and to establishing that *"the monster's a tree"* in peer-led talk (session four). Although the latter session transcript revealed that some group members possessed additional knowledge of the text extract, having previously read the novel from whence it came, they referred only to extract content. Beyond these examples, reference to whole text understanding tended to be limited to broad teacher-led enquiries about whether pupils did, or did not, understand texts (exemplified

in teacher instigated questions such as, *“did you understand?”* and *“was there anything you didn’t understand?”*). This would seem to suggest that understanding at whole text level is of little significance to reading during *TfR* sessions. This interpretation is supported by the class teacher’s observations that the schemes are chiefly concerned with word and sentence level understanding; mainly in relation to vocabulary, grammatical features, and authorial techniques. This might also account for why text extracts tended to be presented to pupils with little or no background contextual information. The findings from the observed sessions therefore indicate that a ‘chunking’ approach to reading can support analysis of micro level features within short texts of the type viewed during formal reading sessions. It is unclear however, whether such an approach is suited to the complexity of longer texts such as children’s novels, where themes and ideas develop and are often interwoven.

Main findings:

- teacher-led and pupil-led shared reading took place in 'chunks' of one or two sentences at a time;
- 'chunking' was also used by pupils for first passes of texts;
- a 'chunking' approach to reading is recommended by the *TfR* programme.

Consequences and implications:

- a 'chunking' approach appears advantageous for the exploration of specific word and sentence level features (which are central to *TfR* pedagogy);
- some pupils experienced issues with coherence beyond sentence level; particularly at whole text level.

Within the reading sessions studied, I found that much of the focus on the micro level features of texts centred on understanding at word level. This theme is discussed further within the next section.

6.3 Theme: unfamiliar vocabulary and word meaning

Vocabulary-related exchanges dominated peer-led talk and also featured extensively within the teacher-led 'think-aloud' activity (session two). Classroom-based peer talk opened with questions (repeatedly in the form of *"are there*

any words that you don't know?") and statements related to unknown vocabulary (for example, *"It says Marooners. I don't know what that [means]"*). Many of the teacher's early 'sharings' during the 'think-aloud' seemed to be aimed at broadening pupils' vocabulary knowledge, through brief anecdotes illustrating particular words in alternative contexts to those depicted within the text. The range of vocabulary items discussed during the session, including the various contexts, is shown in table 6.2 below. Although it was not clear why these particular examples were chosen, 'accident' features within the year four statutory word list (DfE, 2014).

Vocabulary focus	**Narrative context**	**Class teacher's examples of usage in alternative context**
ruined	'that was my dress, you **ruined** it'	wet paw prints ruining paperwork, baking without following the right procedure or ingredients
accident	'they made a mistake or had an **accident**'	a delivery gone wrong, a motorway accident
ball	'You didn't want me to go to the **ball**…'	school disco, Strictly Come Dancing (television programme)
unnecessary	'…jewel in my hair, which I thought was completely **unnecessary**.'	contradiction in views about what to wear to a party

Table 6.2: Teacher-led talk: vocabulary development

The degree to which vocabulary-centred practices were embedded within formal reading sessions became apparent

when the children moved from teacher-led modelling to independent peer-led talk. Despite explicit instruction from the teacher to identify 'text connections' *"…just like we've just done"*, vocabulary continued to dominate peer group talk. Consequently, the only 'text connection' that was shared during the activity was not taken up for discussion within the group.

Contrastingly, in transcripts from sessions conducted outside the classroom, I identified only one vocabulary-related enquiry. It concerned the meaning of a word spoken in off-topic talk which evolved into word play (see extract 6.6 below). It did not, however, appear to be directly related to textual content.

Extract 6.6: Word meaning in off-topic talk (peer-led activity, session four)

P3?: **Mon[sters were for babies. Monsters were for babies** *{reading from text}*
p1?: [where?
p4: What the heck? that's [cringey
p1: [cringey. You're cringey=
{background chatter is audible throughout the exchange but it is unclear whether it originates from the peer group or others working in the corridor}
p2: =you don't even know what cringey means do you?
p4?: Where's *{names p5 who arrived late to school today}*? I'm gonna get her
p?: ok
P6: what does cringy mean?

The number of peers involved in the word play appears indicative of an innate curiosity towards language. It is interesting that textual content did not appear to pique the children's interest in the same way, if at all, across any of the reading sessions. This finding surprised me, particularly with regard to session four where the increased number of cumulative exchanges and ideas expressed, in comparison to earlier sessions, suggested that they were most engaged with the text. I concluded that routine practices around reading may actually have a detrimental effect on the way that children perceive texts read in the classroom. In addition, children's motivation and engagement in reading activities may be negatively affected. Plausibly, this might also extend to reading conducted at home.

As I discussed earlier (in Chapter 4), the *TfR* programme and the writing programme with which it is connected, are underpinned by the belief that vocabulary is central to children's literacy development. Both programmes aim to build individuals' vocabulary banks through activities designed to support explanation and application of 'new' vocabulary. The emphasis on 'new' could explain why participants' vocabulary-related talk revolved exclusively around word meaning, for I did not observe any instances in which participants expressed personal opinions about

vocabulary, or talked about purpose or effectiveness in relation to authorial choices. Nor did teacher-led discussion about word meaning (table 6.2 above) explore how this knowledge aided or enhanced depth of understanding (such as in relation to the text's setting, events, character and so forth).

Paver Primary's vocabulary-oriented approach to reading reflects the Simple View of Reading (SVR) (DfES, 2006a) which is concerned only with decoding and language comprehension. It is of little wonder therefore, that their reading pedagogy appears to be centred on word level understanding. The conceptual framework is not without problems (as I discussed in Chapter 2), one of which is the risk that decoding skills could be emphasised at the expense of meaning (Burgoyne, Kelly, Whiteley and Spooner, 2009). The apparent weakness in children's inferential skills at Paver Primary appears illustrative of this problem, as understanding beyond word level was rarely discussed and, as a result, opportunities to explore inference were limited. It is likely that this also created restrictions on the type of inferential skills which could be developed. With focus at word level, or even sentence level, there would have been limited information to support the formation of bridging, elaborative and inductive inferences (proposed by Tennent, 2015; shown

in table 2.1, Chapter 2). This could lead to an emphasis on the development of deductive inferences (those based on clues explicitly stated within the text).

Routine practices around reading demonstrate the embeddedness of the vocabulary-centred pedagogy. During a meeting, for example, the teacher referred to the practice of highlighting unknown or ambiguous words and phrases within texts in preparation for whole class meaning-related 'discussion'. In comparison, whole text understanding appeared almost irrelevant. For although some children experienced difficulty around coherence with the second text during session two, this was not raised with the teacher, nor did the teacher share interpretations of the text at any point during the session, despite the period-specific content. My findings also raised the possibility that children's first pass at reading (also often the only pass of a text) might be concerned exclusively with decoding individual words and phrases as children actively looked for 'new' vocabulary.

In addition to giving rise to coherence-related problems, failure to explore meaning beyond word or phrase level may have further consequences for bi- and multi-lingual pupils, since the development of schemas around multiple languages could become increasingly difficult if concept mapping is hindered (discussed in Chapter 2). Consequently,

there are questions around the benefits of vocabulary-driven learning, particularly over the longer term. Cummins (1979), for example, suggests that cognitive and academic language support is likely to be beneficial.

From conversations with the class teacher, I learned that SATs was the main driving force behind this pedagogical focus. Retrieval skill-based questions, where pupils were required to *"identify words and phrases that suggest etc."*, appeared to be the leading factor. With so much at stake, Paver Primary is likely to be reluctant to move away from this approach unless guidance and support is readily available.

Also pertinent to this study, is the finding that pupils appeared to be heavily reliant on support from the teacher when processing meaning, for even when possibilities for word meaning were proposed from within the group (shown in table 6.3 below), they were not explored, challenged, or evaluated in relation to the context of the text itself. I discuss this reliance further in Chapter 7 (section 7.1) in conjunction with the theme of roles and agency.

Session	Vocabulary focus	Narrative context	Suggested meaning (where posited)
One	Gall	'… smirking at my **gall**…'	like laughing
	chandeliers	'**chandeliers** twinkled with the light…'	fancy light
	unnecessary	'…which I thought was completely **unnecessary**.'	unusual
	gaggle	'Lilybeth's **gaggle** of girls'	-
Two	marooners	'especially on **Marooners'** Rock'	maroon
	hitting them gaily	'…balls, **hitting them gaily** from one to another…'	hitting them like a baddie (linked with 'gay')
	intentionally	'…not by accident, but **intentionally**.'	-
	lagoon	'Mermaid's **Lagoon**' '…edge of the **lagoon**…'	-
	bask	'…Rock, where they loved to **bask**…'	-
	civil word	'…she never had a **civil word** from one of them.'	Civilised (linked with 'olden days')

Table 6.3: Peer-led talk: thinking about vocabulary

This pedagogical emphasis was also reflected in pupil interviews. I gained the impression that one of the purposes for reading during *TfR* sessions was to collect *"words that we might need"* in preparation for independent writing. From my findings, I deduced that texts were primarily viewed as a

source for vocabulary building by teacher and pupils alike. This is illustrative of the blurring of boundaries between reading and writing, which could result in confusion over the main purpose of reading. It might also affect the way in which texts are then read. Furthermore, it is suggestive of a trade-off between understanding of micro level features (words and phrases) and understanding at whole text level. Undoubtedly this could hamper, and possibly even prevent, the development of advanced reading skills, as I have discussed elsewhere within this chapter.

Main findings:

- there was a pedagogical emphasis on word meaning, including usage in multiple contexts;
- acquisition of 'new' vocabulary is promoted within the *TfR* programme;
- texts serve as a vocabulary source for independent writing.

Consequences and implications:

- word-centred learning dominated class-based talk;
- pedagogy was linked to retrieval style SATs questions;
- there is a risk of a possible trade-off between word level and whole text understanding, especially as word-centred learning appears deeply embedded within routine reading practices.

In addition to vocabulary, dominant pedagogical practices around reading in the classroom also included the use of questions. This technique was sometimes used when talking about vocabulary (as I noted earlier) and identified in both teacher-led and pupil-led interactions.

6.4 Theme: questions and questioning

The majority of text-related questions were generated by the teacher during class-based interactions. These were used primarily to *"extract"* pupil ideas about texts (a term used by the teacher), to prompt for elaborative content, and to later encourage pupils to sustain talk when sharing ideas with the wider class. The teacher's dominance within classroom talk is reflective of traditional teacher-pupil roles of authority-subordinate. I discuss this further in Chapter 7 (section 7.1).

The class teacher noted that questioning was central to the *TfR* programme, and that it resembled a *"system"* of *"questioning [for reading]"*. This emphasis had resulted in significant in-house support to build teacher confidence around question development for fostering pupils' depth of thinking around reading (which I note in Chapter 4). Despite

this additional support, I found that teacher-led questioning tended to revolve around a limited range of three question prompts: *'why', 'what'* and *'did'* (illustrated in table 6.4 below). A dominance of questions featuring the *'what'* prompt suggested that the teacher bore the majority of the cognitive effort when talking about the texts (a finding also observed by Newton, 2017). Prompting intensified within sessions three and four leading to chains of questions, and increasingly leading questions, as the teacher worked to elicit pupils' reasoning. This drew attention to the possibility that questioning may not actually promote children's thinking (Alexander, 2013 and 2006; Almasi, 1995). The brevity and low complexity of children's talk contributions might also be considered evidentiary of their lack of experience in talking about texts, or sharing their own ideas about them.

Session and phase	**Questions asked (including contextual information)**
One (plenary stage)	What was your question that you asked? Can you give us the example that you showed me…?
Two (plenary stage)	Did you [pupil name] understand [about the text]? What made you understand…? What did you notice? What did it remind you of…? Did it remind you of anything? Has anybody else heard of [film connection]? What / who is the text about? What's made you remember [connection]? Did you recognise anything in the story? What's interesting about [feature in text]? Questioning at group table: • Why?
Three (prompting of group during classroom sharing)	Is that what you've been looking at? What did you understand about the text? What's the character's name? Where was the story set? Was the setting [school] like our school? Why wasn't it…? So when you read that did you think about our school… making a connection to the real world? Did you all think that? Questioning addressed to specific pupils: • What did you think about the headmaster? Was he like Mrs x? Why not? When you thought about our school…what did you think when you read that? • When you read about the headmaster, what did you think about…? Did you think about Mrs x? Why would you say that?

Four (prompting of group during classroom sharing)	What else? Why did you say…? What bit [of text]… remember? Would it be the bit where….? What about the door? What did you / why did you think about the door? Why did you notice that? Has it reminded you of something else? Were you thinking of these things straight away as you read it? Questioning addressed to the whole class: • Did you find it easy to read the text or not? • Were there any difficult words? • Was there anything you didn't understand? • Did you get the idea of the story? Questioning addressed to a specific pupil: • What was the idea of the story? What was it [text] trying to do to us the reader?

Table 6.4: Teacher's text-related questions

Almost certainly due to the amount of prompting undertaken by the teacher, questions tended to be highly focussed (illustrated in table 6.4 above) and I detected few opportunities for exploration of textual content. Similarly, there appeared to have been limited opportunity for children to demonstrate advanced reading skills. I also observed some patterning in the type of question prompt and response format, a finding also discussed by Pearson (1974-5) (see section 2.5.1, Chapter 2). This was most evident in *'why'* prompt questions which tended to be met with simple causal reasoning statements commencing with *"cos…"* (because).

My findings indicated that it was not only the type of questions that seemed to restrict the depth of reflection around texts. The question-led interactional style, for example, resulted in exchanges of talk comprised chiefly of initiate (teacher asks a question) and response (pupil provides an answer), exemplified by *"why…?"* / *"cos…"*. These were occasionally punctuated with initiate-response-evaluation or feedback exchanges, such as when the teacher responded, with *"maybe",* to the suggestion that the writer was trying to give the reader nightmares, before adding *"… the bit that scared me the most…"*.

My observations indicated that these exchange patterns enabled the teacher to remain in control of classroom talk, and might also have enabled her to manage the type of contributions offered by pupils. The limited range of question prompts may have influenced the content of their contributions. In longer exchanges, for example, the teacher initiated multiple 'IR' cycles, enabling her to probe children's responses. Predominantly, these appeared to be used to obtain relevant evidence from the text. In addition, I observed a small number of occurrences in which her questions were chained together without pause. Thus, there was no opportunity for pupils to respond until the end of the final question (exemplified by *"…what made you understand*

it. What were you doing on your table or what were you doing personally that made you understand it? What were you talking about?"). This may have been intended to extend thinking time in view of the repetitive nature of the question content. However, it might also have intensified the pressure for pupils to respond in a timely manner. The notion of questioning as a means to control talk gives rise to questions around the school's understanding of dialogue, and its perception of pupils' communicative capabilities. The latter is an issue raised by Baines, Rubie-Davies and Blatchford (2009), albeit in reference to peer-led work (see Chapter 2).

In addition to functioning as a pedagogical tool for teachers, I also observed the children using questions to talk about texts. I discuss my findings in the following two sections.

6.4.1 Questioning as a tool for peer-led text-talk

In session one, pupils were instructed to "*have some questions…about what you want to talk about"*, indicating that questioning was also viewed, by the teacher, as a way of stimulating text-related talk between peers. Notably, pupil questions also feature within *National Curriculum* reading

objectives where it is stated that children be taught to ask "…questions to improve their understanding of texts" (DfE, 2014; Appendix B). I address this further in the next section.

I deduced that the teacher believed there to be a direct link between the pattern of questions-answers and discussion-type talk, in view of her subsequent comment that pupils may receive answers from peers and that *"That's what xxx {speech inaudible} the discussion".* I was not, however, able to discern the nature of the link, or gain insight into her perceptions of text-based discussion. This left me wondering whether the question-answer exchange was perceived to constitute discussion, or whether it was seen as an avenue through which to achieve discussion. It was possible that the former was believed to automatically lead to the latter. Furthermore, the teacher's confession that she was uncertain whether the children actually possessed the skills to discuss texts, since no explicit teaching of skills had taken place during the academic year, suggested that text-based discussion might also be perceived as being different in some way to that experienced across other areas of the school curriculum. Whilst this is possible, I was unable to substantiate or disprove the notion through my study findings owing to the limited quantity of content-related talk. I did, however, conclude that children seemed to rarely, if ever,

experience opportunities to talk freely and extensively about their reading in school due to the dominance of teacher-led questioning (discussed in the previous section), and the children's use of questions. Pupil questions are discussed below.

6.4.2 Pupils' use of text-related questions

Text-based questions featured mainly in class-based peer group talk (see table 6.5 below). Often centred on vocabulary and word meaning, questions of this type tended to be used to open peer-talk. This finding was indicative of routine reading practices at work.

In comparison, few text-based questions were found within talk conducted outside of the classroom, where children's enquiries were solely concerned with eliciting reasoning to support peers' ideas. These questions also tended to be very brief in length, often comprised of a single word. This strategy mirrored that employed by their teacher during a brief visit to the group.

Session and location	Questions asked
One (classroom)	Are there any / any other words that you don't know? What does [lexical item] mean? What is the proper meaning? Why is it / why you think it's about Cinderella? Do you know who Cinderella is? What is the action word [because I can't say it]? Why is it so girly?
Two (classroom)	What is [meaning of lexical item] / what does [lexical item] mean? Why is it about Mermaids? What's so strict? What's it [the text] really about?
Three (corridor)	(procedural questions only)
Four (corridor)	(mainly task / topic and procedural questions) Why? How? How does it?

Table 6.5: Children's text-related questions (peer-led talk)

As noted above, responses to *'why'* prompt questions tended to be met with responses commencing with *"cos…"* and this was irrespective of whether the instigator was the teacher or a peer. However, the brevity and simplicity of the causal statement which followed (such as *"cos we do it at school"* and *"cos it's a monster"*) led me to suspect that children were not expected to offer further elaboration. This seems probable in view of the dominance of question-answer exchanges in both classroom talk and assessment practices (including SATs, where the length of written responses is

constrained by the space allocated within the resources). However, it is also possible that shared knowledge among participants rendered elaboration redundant.

I observed further mirroring of the teacher's style in the pupils' limited range of question prompts (such as '*what'* and '*why'*), which were similarly dominated by those of the '*what'* variety. Generally, questions were short in length and simple in terms of their complexity, decreasing in number as the sessions progressed. In view of the contrast in number between the different talk settings, findings could be interpreted to suggest that children do not naturally interact with others through questioning when talking about their reading. From a pedagogical perspective, this potential finding raises a number of issues around the effectiveness of a question-driven approach to text-based talk, particularly as a means of opening up talk.

Questioning appeared to be unhelpful to improving or deepening pupils' textual understanding, for few answers were posited in response. In addition, questions rarely focussed on content. One of the longest exchanges actually originated from an expression of opinion (where the narrative was referred to as '*girly'*) and did not directly reference any of the text's content. Whilst it is likely that the comment arose solely in response to the text presented, I could not rule out

the possibility that a connection with the traditional tale of *Cinderella* had led to this idea, even though no such connection was apparent within the children's talk.

The peer group's decision to share their questions through a system of turn-taking is also likely to have limited affordances for development of textual understanding. The children's attention appeared to be focussed on the sharing of questions rather than their use to reflect on the text itself (discussed in relation to session one in section 5.3.1, Chapter 5).

Extract 6.7: Asking questions (peer-led activity, session one)

P6: I don't have a question. *{background noise}* I don't have a question
P?: If no one else thinks of a question I will
P?: yeah
P6: question I don't have a question
P?: xxx question… question
{tapping sounds originating from the group}
P?: what does gall mean?
P?: ok *{names p2}*
P2: ok. no it's your go we passed
P?: we've asked ours to all of us so we don't need to say xxx
.
.
.
P?: we all said that question except xxx
P?: Umm let me think of one
P?: ok-
P?: -ok.[oh yeah. I pass
P?: [what does gall mean?
P?: ok your go
P?: I pass
P?: ok *{names p2}* your go

Whilst turn-taking is a strategy generally associated with cooperative work within the primary classroom (evidenced through my own observations and teaching experience), this system of talk seemed to have a constraining effect on the children's conversation. The emphasis on having (or not having) a question to ask appeared to provide little space for responses to be offered, or for talk of a discussion-type to evolve (illustrated in extract 6.7 above). I therefore found it unsurprising that answers were few, brief, and without elaboration. More surprising, perhaps, was the tentative manner in which answers were couched. A chandelier, for example, was described by one pupil as *"oh um. It's basically a really fancy light."* However, a later turn within this exchange, in which a negative statement was issued by another peer (*"yeah. You don't know")* indicated the presence of disharmony within the group. It is probable that group members had been reluctant to posit suggestions in view of the risk of being subjected to judgement or criticism from peers.

The children's emphasis on sharing questions over the exploration of text afforded through them, was also reflected in the teacher-led plenary activity. Here, the teacher invited groups to share *"interesting"* questions and, on occasion, the

reasoning underpinning their creation. Although it was not clear whether children's self-generated questions were routinely treated in this way during reading sessions, the finding led me to consider possible reasons for this. For example, were children's questions perceived, by the teacher or by the school, to be of lesser value to learning than teacher questions? Were dominant pedagogies so deeply embedded within teaching and learning that there was little space or motivation for teachers to seize opportunities to develop textual understanding using questions that children develop during sessions? Although further research would be necessary to address these questions, the school's drive on teacher devised questioning, certainly seemed indicative of the latter.

6.4.3 Talking about texts through questions: teacher and pupil views

The class teacher's description of *TfR* as a *"system"* of questioning signalled that the programme may be a cause of tension for some teachers, as they may not welcome its pervasiveness within reading sessions. That the approach is part of prescriptive whole school reading pedagogy and

therefore regularly monitored, by the English Lead, makes this tension all the more likely. Our conversations also raised the possibility of further tensions for teachers, in so much as there appeared to be a considerable contrast between perceptions of children's reading experiences out-of-school, and what the children were expected to read and do during formal reading sessions. When referring to reading beyond school, for example, the teacher commented on the *"instant"* and easy access to information (through online search engines, for example) and an apparent reading (or viewing) *"diet"* of television. These, the teacher believed, involved minimal cognitive processing and appeared to negatively affect pupils' engagement with questioning in school, where the intention was to promote thinking at depth. Of the opinion that *"if the answer doesn't pop out of the page…that's it",* the class teacher noted that she frequently found herself undertaking much of the cognitive effort. My findings, which I discussed earlier in this section, support this view. This is part of a wider theme concerned with the thinking around texts, which is presented within the next chapter (section 7.3).

Conversely, pupils spoke positively about teacher-led questioning, possibly due to their familiarity of a culture dominated by it. Interviews with individual members of the

peer group, for example, revealed that pupils enjoyed questions which enabled them to express personal preferences, thoughts, and views about texts. Questions such as these undoubtedly suggest a willingness to engage more deeply with reading. However, the depth of textual understanding which may be developed through them is less certain due to their opinion-based nature. Prompting would almost certainly be required to promote deep thinking and thus, the cognitive burden would continue to reside with the teacher. Interview data also indicated that pupils were open to making greater use of self-generated questions, suggesting that they could *"ask more questions"* and *"make questions more funner"* to improve sessions. Unfortunately, I was not able to clarify their interpretation of a 'fun' question.

Children's home reading experiences also featured adult-led questioning. This finding is unsurprising in view of the school's homework policy (2018) which advises parents to *"Ask them [their children] questions about the book…"* More surprising, perhaps, is that for approximately one third of pupils responding to the questionnaire, this was the singular motivation for talking about reading at home. This finding strengthens the argument for children to be provided with opportunities to engage in regular quality or productive text-related talk within the classroom setting.

Main findings:

- teacher-led questioning dominated class-based reading activities;
- a questioning approach was recommended by the *TfR* programme;
- both teacher and pupils drew from a limited range of question prompts (such as *'why', 'what', 'did'*);
- pupil answers were generally few, brief, and lacked elaborative content;
- adult-led questioning around children's reading was advised in the school homework policy document.

Consequences and implications:

- talk exchanges comprised predominantly of short initiate-response ('IR') exchanges;
- a possible assumption exists in which answer-response exchanges lead to or resemble discussion;
- a possible assumption exists that text-based discussion differs from that in other subjects;
- there is a risk of a possible trade-off between simple causal reasoning ('because' statements) and depth of textual understanding through investigation / exploration of questions;
- there is a possible risk that the majority of the cognitive effort for textual understanding resides with the teacher.

6.5 Summary

The pedagogies and practices used to support children's shared reading experiences are shaped by national policy.

This has an impact upon the way that children read texts, and how they engage with textual content. The dominance of vocabulary-related talk and ‘chunking’ within reading sessions emphasised the pedagogical focus on word and sentence level features of texts. This focus is promoted within the *TfR* programme and its writing-centred counterpart. *TfR* also accounted for the prolific use of questions during these sessions.

These talk-based programmes were procured to address the language needs of Paver Primary’s pupils, a significant percentage of whom were non-native English speakers (as I discussed in Chapter 4). However, the pedagogical practices promoted through them appeared deeply embedded within class-based teaching and learning to the extent that these practices (vocabulary and questioning in particular) seemed to take precedence over newly acquired learning. This was demonstrated most clearly in the children’s talk immediately following the teacher-led ‘text connections’ ‘think-aloud’ activity (session two). It was also observable within the selections shared by the teacher, where examples were often concerned with word meaning. It is possible that cognitive support (Cummins, 1979), as opposed to vocabulary building activities, may be more beneficial to

some groups of pupils, such as those who face increased processing complexity over native mono-lingual pupils.

Discussions with teaching staff also drew my attention to the significant impact that SATs had on the school's reading pedagogy. In addition to prioritising the teaching of certain reading skills, such as retrieval and inferential skills, it is highly probable that SATs content domain descriptors have led to a limited view of what it means to comprehend texts. The school, for example, seemed to conceptualise comprehension as little more than the application of inferential skills to draw meaning from texts. In turn, this may have led to a limited or restricted conceptualisation of inference. This is not helped by the over-simplified conceptual framework for reading which underpins education policy. The absence of contextual knowledges from the framework may result in an emphasis on deductive inference skills (Tennent, 2015), thereby reducing opportunities for the depth and richness of children's reading experiences in school.

Although it is unsurprising that SATs should dominate pedagogy around reading, given their high-stakes nature, there appear to be major implications for the advancement of children's reading skills. SATs descriptors do little to promote reflection at the whole text level since references to content beyond sentential level is vague and limited to "…more than

one paragraph", "…within the text" and "…meaning as a whole" (DfE, 2016; shown in table 6.1 above). Similarly, I observed few references to whole text understanding within my dataset. In addition to SATs-related practices, my findings also highlighted several non-reading specific pedagogical practices that seemed to influence how participants engaged with reading and talked about it during the sessions. I discuss these separately within the next chapter (Chapter 7).

Findings also suggested that the scheduling of reading sessions, which alternated with writing sessions, might also hamper advanced skills development. Reflecting a blurring of boundaries, I observed references to writing features (grammatical, punctuation, and writer's techniques) within teacher talk during early reading sessions. The children also referred to texts as a vocabulary source for independent writing. These findings suggested that the educational emphasis, during these sessions, was on knowledge reproduction (through children's writing) as opposed to achieving depth of textual understanding.

I also observed several implementational features that could constrain or even prevent advanced skill development. The extensive use of 'IR' patterned exchanges across all participant talk, together with the limited range of question prompts, seemed to afford little opportunity for reflection of

content beyond the main focus of the question. Requests for elaboration generally led to simple reasoning supported with evidence in the form of words or phrases from the text. In short, questions were rarely used to interrogate or explore texts, suggesting that engagement with textual content tended to be superficial. For more experienced readers, this may lead to a reduction in the motivation to engage in future class-based reading activities.

Findings from data captured in the informal corridor workspace setting revealed that children were naturally curious: they participated in word play, seeming to try out the sound of *"cringey"*. I deduced from their exchange that they perceived value in knowing about word meaning. The children also requested reasoning from one another. In fact, these were the only type of text-based questions observed across these sessions.

The stark contrast in the number of text-based questions across the different settings, with far fewer observed in the informal workspace talk, strongly suggests that social interactions around texts are not naturally question-centred. This finding, which might also account in some way for the brevity of pupil responses, appears to be at odds with the question-led practices promoted under the *TfR* programme. It therefore raises a number of questions about

the programme's suitability, and perhaps even its effectiveness, as a mechanism for opening up text-related talk for depth of understanding, and as a basis upon which to develop more advanced reading skills.

Whilst a discussion-based approach may be more helpful in this regard, it was also evident from the study that ambiguity exists in relation to what text-based discussion might look like. Furthermore, I did not observe any talk of this type, suggesting that participants rarely, if ever, actually discussed texts (based on Wolfe and Alexander's (2008) definition of discussion; see section 2.5.2, Chapter 2). Instead, there appeared to be an expectation that the teacher would lead talk and, as a consequence, the manner and depth in which pupils reflected on textual content.

In the following chapter, I discuss participant roles and agency, together with several additional themes that appeared to affect teaching and learning within reading sessions.

Chapter 7: Further pedagogical practices that impact upon shared reading experiences

"[support in reading sessions] is very scaffolded. Everything is very scaffolded..."

"Everything is ten minutes here, five minutes here, ten minutes there. Get this done. Get this done. Oh right, we've got to change lessons now. Get this done. Plenary..."

(teacher, extracted from transcript of meeting on 23rd February 2018)

7.0 Introduction

In addition to the themes presented in the previous chapter, which are directly related to reading pedagogy, I identified several practices of a generic nature that appeared to have considerable bearing on classroom interactions around texts. I explore these practices through three themes:

- role and agency,
- time,
- thinking around texts.

Practices associated with these themes, which tend to feature extensively across whole curriculum teaching and learning, are likely to be deeply embedded. Their effect on reading skill development might be overlooked as a result of their seeming disconnect from the pedagogies around reading in particular. My findings, however, indicated that the implications for children's skill advancement are both important and wide-ranging.

As in the previous chapter, I draw from across the entire dataset and discuss the core issues and insights associated with each theme, referring to existing literature. I have also included a summary of the key points for the individual themes. In the chapter summary, I discuss the implications that my findings have for teaching and learning.

I begin with an examination of teacher and pupil roles, and explore how their relationship influences activity engagement.

7.1 Theme: roles and agency in the classroom

Throughout my study, the teacher adopted an authoritative role and retained control in class-based sessions. This appeared to extend to any activity conducted

within the classroom, such as when the peer group shared their ideas with others following independent working. In contrast, pupils adopted subordinate or compliant roles. The division of power in accordance with these distinct and traditionally hierarchical roles worked against my intention of passing agency for activities to pupils. In agreement with the class teacher, additional activities took place outside the formal classroom setting (and is discussed in my study methodology, Chapter 3).

The teacher's power was discernible in several ways. Much of this was conveyed through the organisation and management of time (discussed further in section 7.2 below), and teacher-led pedagogies around reading (discussed earlier in Chapter 6), both of which placed her in control of sessions. Pupil responses to what she said, or did, also reflected this position of power. This was demonstrated in the pupils' response to unplanned guidance from the class teacher at the start of session one (extract 7.1 below).

Extract 7.1: Suggested ways of working (teacher talk, session one)

T: …right so…you're going to read the text. Not with any help from me. Just by yourselves. As you read it. As you've done before, when we do talk for reading, you can make notes either side of the writing. The text. You can highlight things that you don't know, words you don't know, things you're unsure of. You can use different colours if you notice techniques that the writer's used. Has used. Different types of grammar. Different types of punctuation. As you read it and notice, you can annotate your sheet. Do you all understand how to do that? Yeah, we've done it before haven't we? Yeah…that's the first bit I want you to do…

I had intended for my concise activity guide to be the sole source of guidance for the session so that pupils' talk could unfold as naturally as possible. (The guide is shown in figure 3.2 and discussed in section 3.6, Chapter 3 and section 5.3.1, Chapter 5.) The teacher's input however, though mainly suggestive through frequent reference to the modal verb, *'can'*, had considerable influence over pupils' subsequent actions. The peer group seemed to perceive the suggestions as expectations and adopted the ways of working noted by the teacher. I observed dominant pedagogy in use, such as the highlighting of individual lexical items, which I discussed earlier in Chapter 6 (section 6.3). Furthermore, peers challenged those who appeared to move away from the teacher's suggestions. Rather than assuming ownership or agency of the activity as I had hoped, statements such as "*I*

don't think we're supposed to be doing [that]" and *"I'm not going to do this. It feels wrong..."* indicated that pupils were hesitant or reluctant to do so. The feeling of 'wrongness' might also be interpreted as a sign of the degree to which the authority-subordinate roles were embedded. It is possible that pupils felt powerless to challenge the teacher's authority. Where roles are prescribed through school-wide pedagogy, the teacher might also be reluctant to relinquish any control. Long-term exposure to traditional pedagogies of this type could be detrimental for pupils. Motivations, attitudes, and potentially also aptitudes for working autonomously, may all be negatively impacted. However, I was not able to substantiate this through my findings.

Extract 7.2: Answer elaboration prompted by non-words (teacher-led talk with group, session two)

T: What else have you noticed?
P1: at the top where it says swimming that's self
P2: yeah
T: why? Why?
P1: cos we do it [at school
P2: [cos we do it at school
T: uhumm uhumm
P?: and umm [the mermaids
P?: [and umm the children spent often. um **Often spent a long summer day=**
T: =ahhhh=
P?: =**at the lagoon**. Probably is xxxx
P2: cos we don't even know what lagoon is=
P1: =I suppose it's=

The peer group's response to the teacher's presence during peer-led talk also drew my attention to her authoritative status. When attending the group's table during session two, the only occasion when she did so, children's talk contributions evolved into a lengthy and rare cumulative exchange (shown in extract 7.2 above). The teacher actually spoke very little after the opening question, yet her presence and attentiveness, the latter of which was conveyed through non-words such as *"uhumm"* and *"ahhh",* seemed to encourage pupils to elaborate upon their previous contributions. The exchange, which also reflected the spirit of collaboration, as pupils worked together to provide reasoning and explanation, differed markedly from those that I observed elsewhere across the sessions. This raised the possibility that they were aiming to impress the teacher. It is therefore possible that direct interaction with the teacher may be viewed more positively by pupils than peer-to-peer interaction. Several group members certainly seemed to prefer "*listening to the teacher"* talking about texts over their peers (noted during interviews). Potentially, this could lead to lower levels of engagement in peer-led activities. The apparent unwillingness of pupils to support each other during study activities, where reasoning, knowledge, or

understanding were rarely shared within the group, lent support to this interpretation.

The peer group's decision not to share text-related ambiguities with the teacher, during her 'visit', could have been a consequence of the authority-subordinate classroom roles. The teacher's instructional phrases, such as *"read it all by yourself"*, *"without my help"* and *"talk in your table groups"*, may have led to pupils feeling unable to ask for support, or perceiving a risk to status in the event that they did so. However, it is also possible that the novelty of the activity had led to a situation that the children were unfamiliar with, and that they were uncertain or lacked the confidence to request adult support. These possibilities could have implications for activities of an exploratory nature, for children may be reluctant to share tentative ideas or opinions around texts.

During our meetings the class teacher noted that support was *"very scaffolded"* within reading sessions, a reference to the teacher's role in "guiding children's learning and development" (noted by Verenikina, 2003:1) in reference to the views of Stone, Wells, Hammond and Daniels) as pupils move from 'novice' to independent 'expert' (see discussion of Vygotsky's principles in Chapter 2). Her references to *"prompting"* and trying to *"extract"* pupils' ideas, usually

through questioning, indicated that much of the cognitive load during sessions rested with the teacher rather than the pupils. The emphasis created through repetition of the instruction for pupils to *"think"* about textual content, and topics for talk (extract 7.3 below), further drew my attention to the novelty of the study activities. It also indicated that pupils rarely, if ever, experienced opportunities to decide on the direction of their own talk. In addition, my finding raised questions around the use of thinking time to promote pupil reflection about the content of texts. I deduced that pupils did not routinely participate in activities that involved explicitly thinking about their reading. Further findings, which I discuss below, support this deduction.

Extract 7.3: Instructions (teacher talk, session one)

T: …I want you to think about what you read and what you would like to talk about. If you want to write some questions down on your sheet about the text. About what you'd like to ask. You can do that also. So another couple of minutes now to go back through the text. Identify things that you noticed and think about what you'd like to talk about. If you want to write some questions down then do so. It's up to you. Individually think about what you'd like to ask. Ok?

When interviewed, the peer group explained how it was usual practice for the teacher to lead activities. After reading the text, the teacher then:

"[she] tells us to mark the important places and then she asks us questions, and then she marks it together with us. And then she asks us if there's any things we don't understand, or anything like that."

Although there is no direct reference to thinking about their reading, the teacher may have assumed that the children needed to think about textual content in order to identify *"important places"*. Arguably, this could be carried out through surface level reading alone, as may occur when identifying words or phrases of interest. Further findings that sessions routinely involved pupils *"listening to the teacher"* and *"writing the important bits down"*, indicated that there was little motivation for them to actively engage in reflecting deeply about their reading. Furthermore, this meant that shared understandings tended to be from the singular perspective of the class teacher. This has important implications for the advancement of children's reading skills, since critical and reflective thinking are required for high-level comprehension (Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey and Alexander cited in Maine and Hofmann, 2016).

As I noted earlier in Chapter 2, the sharing of multiple perspectives is likely to be beneficial to skill development and I gained a sense that pupils were keen to do this. When asked

what they could do to increase textual comprehending, one group member suggested that pupils be allowed to share *"first thoughts"* with peers. Further suggestions for improving sessions however, served to reinforce the authoritative status of the teacher. These included placing *"more teachers in the classroom"* and *"one teacher on each table so that if anyone's stuck the teacher can help them"*.

The above examples serve to illustrate the children's lack of agency, an interpretation that is further supported by the finding that pupils also look to the teacher for motivational support. When asked what the teacher might say or do to improve reading sessions, for example, the peer group referred to the teacher's commonly used phrase of *"don't give up".* These findings came as a surprise to the class teacher who exclaimed, during our follow up meeting, *"They're not independent at all. But, see, that's always something that I strive for them to do"*. This statement could be perceived as being unremarkable since independence and independent thinking would facilitate children to contribute effectively on a societal level in the future. The teacher's emphasis on her own role, however, drew my attention to possible consequences of the hierarchical classroom roles. It seemed that, through her authoritative role, she had also assumed the burden of effort for pupil autonomy. It is one of

several accountability-related issues that I observed during the study and discuss elsewhere.

In addition to highlighting pupils' lack of agency, these examples draw attention to the range of factors that may impede or inhibit its transfer to pupils if the current classroom culture remains unchanged. The brief opportunities for peer-led talk in the classroom, together with pupils' comments about the newly acquired freedoms arising from the novelty of working outside the classroom (such as drinks and toilet breaks), suggest that there are few opportunities for pupils to actively engage with texts independently of the teacher. It is, therefore, unsurprising that the children seemed to rely on teacher support. This reliance might also account for the children's frequent adoption of words and phrases used by the teacher (such as *"it reminds me…"* to introduce 'text connection' ideas). Dependence on stock phrases such as this could be a consequence of a SATs-driven curriculum, the impact of which I discuss further in Chapter 8. These phrases might also provide valuable cognitive and academic language support for non-native English speakers; offering a way to think and express ideas about texts. However, the reliance on the teacher could also result in pupils resisting attempts to transfer agency to them, especially where they lack motivation for reading, or for working with peers.

Subsequently, this could result in passive reading experiences where low levels of engagement with texts could have major implications for reading skill development. There may be wider implications for children's perceptions of their own agency for learning, and for what counts as reading. Both are likely to impact upon how they perceive their identities as readers.

Although not central to my study, where the focus is on reading skill development, my observations indicated that children's ideas about gender influenced how peer group members engaged with activities across the study. I discuss this briefly in the following section.

7.1.1 The influence of gender on pupil roles

Observations, mainly from reading session data, led me to deduce that several members of the peer group were aware of, or appeared to identify with, stereotypical gender traits in relation to reading. These included their attitude towards the act of reading, reading preferences, their engagement with reading-related activities, and with one another during peer-led talk.

Gender differences in young readers are well documented. In their review of literatures, for example, Logan and Johnston (2010) discuss factors such as behaviour and motivation, cognition, and reading strategies and styles. Paver Primary's procurement of fiction texts that address both boys' and girls' reading interests and motivations when stocking the library (noted during interview with the English Lead, see Chapter 4), demonstrates that they are aware of these issues. Their awareness of how gender-related differences manifest in routine reading sessions, and their effect on pupil interactions around texts, is less certain.

Data from my study indicated that the boys were put off by texts that they construed as *"girly"* (extracted from peer talk during the first reading session) to such an extent that engagement with content, and most probably motivation for reading it in the first instance, was adversely affected. The findings from an individual interview with one of the boys appeared to support this view. When asked to elaborate on what was meant by this term ('girly'), he responded with "well like *we [boys] don't really like girl things and stuff"*, conveying the strength of his feeling. When asked about his understanding of the text, he responded with a generic structural account of the alternative *Cinderella* narrative (which is discussed further in section 5.3.1, Chapter 5). This

indicated very little textual engagement and led me to question whether he had even read at the text's surface level.

Low motivation for reading seemed to be a male issue within this small sample, for at least two of the three boys appeared unperturbed by the group's incomplete first pass of the text in session three (discussed in section 5.3.3, Chapter 5). This issue had been raised by one of the girls, who also tended to assume responsibility for getting the group back on task following outbreaks of off-topic talk. These findings reflect those from previous studies which suggest that girls demonstrate "significantly higher intrinsic motivation" towards reading (McGeown, Goodwin, Henderson and Wright (2012:331). This issue may stem from the fact that reading is culturally regarded by boys and girls as a more feminine activity (Dwyer, 1974). Consequently, it is likely to be a problem experienced across classrooms in England.

The age at which children begin to identify with specific gender traits is unclear, but pupils' suggestions that topics such as dogs and football might be perceived to be *"boyish"* indicates that the year four children were sensitive to them (discussed in section 5.3.1, Chapter 5). Dwyer's (ibid) observation that it is less acceptable for males to participate in female roles, than it is for females to participate in male roles, has implications for children's attitudes towards textual

content. Critical reading affords opportunities to discuss and subvert these attitudes.

Issues around gender also appeared to extend to pupils' engagement in reading-related activities. During peer-led talk for example, comment from boys sometimes had a detrimental effect on the girls' participation, leading to the withdrawal and the withholding of ideas (discussed previously in Chapter 5). During pupil interviews, one of the girls remarked that *"The boys usually say stuff why is the story too girly and stuff like that…"*, highlighting the magnitude of the problem. Yet, it came as a surprise to the class teacher when I shared my findings with her. I wondered whether this was a further consequence of the classroom role hierarchy and that, in addition to the possibility that the girls felt powerless to raise the issue with the teacher, they also felt intimidated by the boys' attitudes. One possible reading of this would be that in the teacher's absence, the authoritative role had passed to the boys. It is also possible that the girls simply chose to avoid confrontation, however questions are then raised about whether this is a classroom or cultural issue. There are implications for the organisation of peer group work, particularly if this pattern were to be reflected more widely across the classroom or school.

The number of ways in which pupil participation appeared to be influenced by gender-specific traits within my small-scale study is interesting. There appear to be considerable implications for children's motivation and engagement in activities around reading and thus, their reading skill development. Further research would be beneficial to gain deeper insight into the influence of gender characteristics, and to support schools to put in place appropriate interventions to address issues such as these, without alienating those who already participate fully.

Main findings:

- traditional power-status inequalities appeared to be perpetuated through authority (teacher) and subordinate or compliant (pupil) classroom roles;
- dominant teacher-led pedagogies served to perpetuate these roles;
- children's attitudes and behaviours towards reading and related activities appeared to be influenced by cultural perceptions of gender-specific traits.

Consequences and implications:

- the teacher appeared to bear the majority of the cognitive load thus interpretations of texts were mainly those of the teacher;
- pupils seemed reliant on teacher support and may resist attempts to transfer agency to them;
- peer interaction appeared to be influenced by the teacher's physical presence suggesting that children may have viewed peer-peer interactions less favourably than pupil-teacher interactions;
- there may be few opportunities for pupils to work autonomously or share their own views about texts;
- both parties may be reluctant to participate in authentic exploratory activities which would necessitate a shift in power-status;
- boys in particular, may experience low levels of motivation and engagement in reading activities, especially where they perceive texts to be of a 'feminine' nature.

Time-related issues, which I discuss below, are likely to have had bearing on the distribution of power and status within the classroom. As the authority figure for example, the teacher was able to, and felt pressured to, manage the speed

and duration of individual activities to make the most of the time available within reading sessions.

7.2 Theme: perceptions of time

I identified many references to time in both teacher and pupil talk across the study sessions, including whilst reading was taking place within the peer group. I gained a sense that time was perceived, by both parties, as a precious resource. The seeming scarcity of it, alluded to by the class teacher on several occasions during our meetings, appeared to pose a number of challenges for teaching and learning, as I illustrate below.

The teacher's comment that *"…it is a luxury"* to have the opportunity to listen to individual children read *"as I haven't got time to do it"* (shared during one of our meetings), offered insight into the effects of a busy curriculum upon the teacher's day. I observed the teacher's dilemma first hand during one of my data collection visits. In the half hour before pupils began to arrive, she received multiple unplanned visits from various staff members. Among these visitors, who attended individually, were two teachers and several teaching assistants. Consequently, our planned meeting was delayed. It was also brief as I was keen to avoid

further imposition. I later learned, from the teacher, that interruptions of this nature were commonplace and were not confined to the start of the school day.

Pressures on the teacher's time directly impacted upon pupil learning for it meant that they regularly had to leave the classroom to attend individual reading or support interventions led by teaching assistants. Owing to the availability of teaching support, these sessions usually took place in the morning when core curriculum subjects were generally timetabled. Consequently, it was not unusual for pupils who required reading support to be absent from routine reading sessions, necessitating that the teacher then find ways of *"trying to plug gaps"* in learning (noted by the class teacher).

The teacher referred directly to the pressures of time across the entire curriculum, noting that within sessions, *"Everything is ten minutes here, five minutes here… Get this done. Get this done… Oh, right, we've got to change lessons now. Get this done. Plenary…"* Routine reading sessions, which occupied a thirty-minute slot on the timetable, were not exempt from this structure. Usually, they began with a teacher-led pass of the text. In addition to facilitating pace, this may also have been intended as a way of supporting less confident readers (who may have been large in number as a

consequence of the high percentage of EAL pupils in the class, which I discussed in Chapter 4). Time prompts often accompanied task instructions, with the teacher giving pupils *"a couple of minutes"* or *"four or five minutes"* to carry out a task. Peer-led talk activities tended to last no longer than five-minutes. This was mirrored in my class-based findings, despite my intention of offering pupils extended opportunities for talk.

My observations also suggested that teacher intervention (such as the direction offered at five-minute intervals across session one) actively appeared to work against transfer of agency from teacher to pupil. Consequently, the teacher remained in control of session talk (as discussed in the previous section). Furthermore, the amount of peer talk time in comparison to that led by the teacher, combined with the dominance of pedagogies that promoted it (such as the teacher-led questioning discussed in Chapter 6), led me to question the degree to which peer-led talk was perceived to be of value in the classroom. The English Lead's references to classroom talk focussed exclusively on what the teacher should be saying. During our interview for example, she recounted that in the last internal training activity she had advised teachers that *"These are the sentence stems that you should be using to question the*

children". This focus could signify that peer talk is perceived to lack value in an educational context.

With the many pressures around time, it is unsurprising that I identified many direct references to it across both settings. However, I also noted a sense of urgency in the way that pupils responded to activities. Initial passes of texts, for example, tended to be completed very quickly.

Extract 7.4: Completing a first pass of a text (pupil talk, session two)

P?:	*{whispered}* have you read…?
P?:	nearly
P?:	xxx reading
P?:	Done.
P?:	sh
P?:	*{whispered}* I'm nearly done.
P?:	Yeah. Done now.
P?:	N:::o. you…
P?:	ok what shall we talk about?

This sense of urgency is conveyed in extract 7.4 above. Timings, from the audio data from session two, revealed that the first pass of the text was completed in barely two minutes. It is questionable, however, whether many of the peer group members gained much understanding beyond the text's surface level. As the extract shows, there were multiple interruptions from peers as they enquired about whether or not others had completed their pass. This may have led to

individuals skimming the text (similar to King's (2001) notion of speedy word reading), or abandoning reading in order to avoid being perceived as slow readers. There could, therefore, be implications for reader identity.

The group's transition directly from reading to talking also raises questions about routine pedagogy, and whether actively thinking about texts and re-reading of them are included. The teacher's invitation to pupils to *"…go back. Have another little skim and scan"* (session one), together with my direct pupil observations, indicated that subsequent passes of texts were generally brief and incomplete. Pupils also tended to re-read parts of texts, rather than complete texts. Their focus also seemed to be word or phrase retrieval (in relation to meaning or supporting evidence for ideas, for example), and identification of writing features (such as when highlighting punctuation). Together with session two instruction advising pupils that, *"Once you've read it [text] through once. You can start talking about it…"*, I concluded that re-reading was not routine practice. Findings also led me to conclude that active thinking around reading did not routinely feature. Both have consequences for skill development as re-reading has been shown to support development of thinking (Barak and Lefstein, 2021; Rodriguez Leon and Payler, 2021; and Arizpe, 2001.

The transition described above also reflected the group's tendency to focus on the end-goal of activities. On occasion this also appeared to be at the expense of reading, for where group members took turns at reading in session three, the initial pass of the text was never fully completed. Even after the issue had been brought to the group's attention, their focus remained the same. The printed prompt provided to accompany session four (see figure 5.4, Chapter 5), also did not appear to influence the group's behaviour towards the activity. I did not, for example, find any evidence to suggest that they had taken "*…a few minutes to think about how you understand the text"*. Yet, the children directly referred to the prompt's content during the session.

Extract 7.5: Talking about time (pupil talk, session three)

P1: We've already had 5 minutes
P5: oh my god
P?: xx was 20 minutes. We've only got 15
P?: we need to start xxx
.
.
.
P1: we've got 12 minutes left
P?: do you think. No you *{names p1}* do you think that this whole paper's gonna enough?
P?: no we haven't actually. We've got um um. 8 minutes left
P?: just shut up
P2: quick stop. Look. So…

A mounting pressure in relation to time, or rather the loss of time, might account for the group's goal-oriented focus. I observed one such incident in session three (extract 7.5 above) where the pressure appeared to intensify as the session unfolded. Whilst some members seemed fixated on time itself, others seemed desperate to get on. The growing terseness in pupils' utterances, creating the sense of rising tension within the group, could be connected to the responsibilities of working independently, heightened by the apparent novelty of the experience.

With the likelihood that pupils wished to be viewed positively by their peers, and by the teacher, the generation of ideas for later sharing would certainly have helped. However, the peer group's decision to proceed quickly to the final stages of activities might also have been influenced by a competitive undercurrent that seemed to be present throughout the study. This was evident in both the collective and individual sense. Collectively, this concerned the comparison of output from sessions three and four, where it was felt that *"Last time it was a bit worse"*. Individually, members commented on their own contributions; remarking on the number, and perceived quality, of ideas they had shared. Like the teacher, who evaluated pupil contributions as *"brilliant"* and *"fabulous"* regardless of the level of detail

provided or nature of understanding conveyed, pupils declared their own ideas to be *"very, very good"* or *"weird"*. I was reminded of the performative culture of education (Ball, 2012) as it appeared that the act of contributing through recognised or validated conventions was perceived to be of greater importance than contribution content. This finding might also be a consequence of the increased value that I perceived to be attached to activities of a written nature (which I discuss in the following section).

This goal-focussed approach to learning has several implications for reading skill development as there is seemingly little motivation to engage in reflective or explorative endeavours. Combined with the tendency for participants to view time as a precious resource and, I argue, dominant pedagogies around teaching and learning (such as those I discussed in Chapter 6), the priority for talk during reading sessions appeared to be about producing more ideas. This is a further example of performativity. Moreover, the focus on output appears contradictory to approaches likely to deepen pupils' understanding around textual content. I expand upon this issue within my concluding chapter (Chapter 8).

There also appear to be consequences for the adoption of unfamiliar pedagogical concepts, as I noted during the 'text

connections' activity in session two. I had hoped that different types of connections would stimulate content-related discussion and exploration. Whilst a variety of different connections were shared during the activity, I found little evidence to suggest that pupils explored the text to improve their understanding of it, particularly in view of the absence of elaboration, reasoning, or whole text focus (discussed earlier in Chapter 5). Rather, the reliance on the single phrase of *"it reminds me…"*, seemed to suggest a weak grasp of the concept despite examples and supporting documentation, within which were a range of sentence stems to aid discussion. Unsurprisingly, this phrase was later echoed within pupil talk. Given my observations of the numerous pressures on the teacher's time, this finding is understandable. It does, however, emphasise the challenge of attempting to incorporate new pedagogy within an already packed curriculum. It is also possible, as noted earlier in this chapter, that this phrase may have been deliberately selected to support the children for whom English was an additional language.

Main findings:

- owing to numerous demands on time, the teacher was unable to deliver all aspects of the reading curriculum, necessitating that teaching assistants manage interventions and hear individual readers;
- pupils in receipt of reading interventions often missed out on formal (teacher-led) reading experiences;
- thirty-minute reading sessions were apportioned into activities of five- or ten-minute durations;
- repeated references to time occurred within teacher and pupils' talk, and seemed to create a sense of urgency across sessions.

Consequences and implications:

- observations indicated that only one full pass at reading appeared to be attempted, the speed of which suggested that reading had occurred at a superficial surface level of texts;
- observations suggested that thinking time had not taken place and that exploration of the text was likely to have been inhibited as a result;
- transition from reading to the end-goal of activities is also likely to have discouraged exploration of texts; as is the brevity of time usually awarded to peer-led talk activities (five-minutes);
- with so many demands and pressures on both teacher and curriculum time, the absorption and adoption of new pedagogical concepts is likely to necessitate much on-going support.

The brevity of peer-led talk activities raised questions about its perceived value as a tool for learning in the classroom, a notion that I explore further in the following section.

7.3 Theme: thinking around texts - writing versus talking

Written activities featured heavily in conversations with teachers and in the sessions I observed. Their popularity appeared to be for two reasons: they enabled pupils *"to show"* what had been *"found"* (noted by the class teacher), and they facilitated school-level evaluation of text-related talk. In the latter, children's work was sometimes viewed outside of the lesson in which it was created. Regardless, it was used to inform perceptions about the quality of talk believed to have taken place. Specifically, whether the talk was believed to have been *"deep and valuable enough"* and *"rich enough to get what the child needs"* (noted by the English Lead responsible for monitoring and evaluating teaching and learning in reading). Aside from the subjectiveness of these judgements and lack of surrounding contextual information (other than planning documentation), there are also issues of validity. Writing and speaking, for example, are different communicative modes, yet the quality of one is being judged through the other. It might also be argued that as 'novices' (see discussion of Vygotsky's principles in Chapter 2), the children's notes may not capture sufficient detail to accurately reflect the learning that took

place through talk during a session. The ephemeral nature of talk could also pose a problem, particularly for younger children.

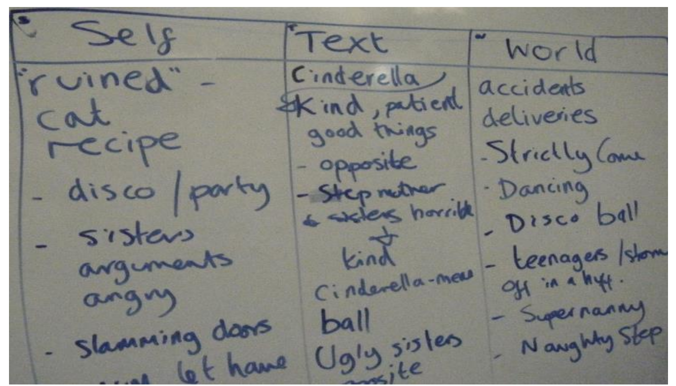
The class teacher explained about the types of written activities that had been carried out in year four prior to the main phase of my study. Chiefly, these comprised of highlighting and annotating unfamiliar words and phrases within texts, and providing written responses to SATs style comprehension activities. I also knew, from my contextual study of the school's reading curriculum (described in Chapter 4), that the *TfR* programme included a range of graphic organisers (shown in Appendix J). From my findings, I noted that the '4-sharings' grid seemed particularly popular for it appeared several times during the observed sessions and during conversations with teachers. My interpretation was reinforced by the English Lead, who declared that *"every teacher loves…"* it. Within my study, the '4-sharings' grid was:

- used to facilitate peer group comparison of two image-only texts (pilot phase activity, figure 7.1 below and Appendix K);

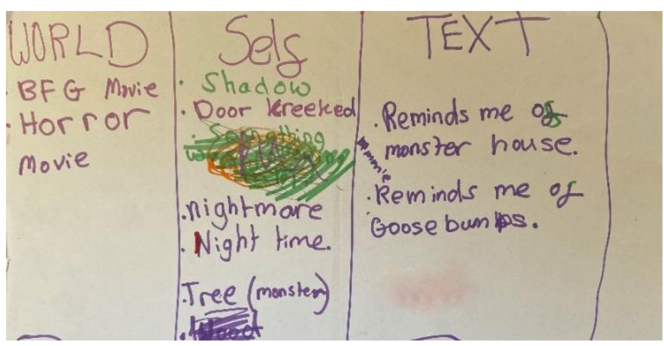
- used by the teacher for recording ideas about a range of different types of 'text connections' (main phase, figure 4.3 below, reproduced from Chapter 4);
- used by the peer group for recording ideas about a text, replication of the teacher's grid from above (main phase, figure 4.5 below, also reproduced from Chapter 4);
- described, by the English Lead, as a way of exploring a character through headings such as, "*What can you see? What do you like?*" (main phase)*;*
- proposed, by the class teacher, as a way for pupils to capture ideas about texts prior to whole class discussion during routine *TfR* sessions (main phase).

Same	Different	Questions	I noticed...

Figure 7.1: Example of a '4-sharings' grid (pilot phase)



Reproduction of Figure 4.3: Teacher and pupil ideas about 'text connections' ('think-aloud activity, session two)



Reproduction of Figure 4.5: Children's ideas about 'text connections' (session four)

The versatility of the grid was undoubtedly part of its appeal, for it could be easily adapted to meet different curriculum objectives. It was, for example, also used within mathematics sessions. The English Lead also drew attention to its simplicity when noting that *"the children just know what to do when they see it"*. The children's familiarity with the format implied that it saved valuable session time (discussed

in the previous section), and potentially also freed up the teacher to provide support where needed.

Pupils also seemed to respond positively to the grids, for they appeared actively engaged in recording ideas under the various headings, even when working independently of adult support. The peer group's resolve to capture a range of different ideas was evident in their talk. I observed pupils commenting that they had *"…already wrote that"* and asking about *"What else?"*. I noted, however, that issues around the process of physically recording ideas seemed to receive more attention from the peer group than the actual ideas being shared. These were mainly centred upon the accuracy of recording and peers' writing presentation. Ideas, as I discussed earlier in this study, were rarely explored. The grids appeared to support learning by providing a means through which pupils could collectively generate, document, and share ideas when called upon by the teacher. This seemed to be the extent of their purpose during sessions, as no explorative or inquiry-based talk evolved through their use.

Extract 7.6: Talking about peer talk (meeting dated 26th April 2018)

T: …it would appear that they can't do it naturally. What I mean by that is if I've given them the task right off you go talk to each other on your tables. Have a discussion. There's a response here – oh, we have talk on our table. But they talk all the time but when you tell them right you need to discuss this amongst yourselves. I mean they do 'talk to your partner' all the time…

A meeting with the class teacher revealed that talking with a partner (talk partners) was *"commonplace"* indicating that it was a routine component of reading sessions. Class rules for this style of talking seemed to centre upon the mechanics of verbal interactions (how to perform talking) such as listening, looking at their partner, and speaking clearly. I also learned, from the class teacher, that text-based discussion skills were not explicitly taught, but were expected to arise *"naturally"* through peer interaction (as indicated in extract 7.6 above). These findings reinforced my earlier interpretation that performing in talk seemed to be valued over the content or quality of talk contributions. Furthermore, the apparent interchangeability of terminology such as 'talk' and 'discussion' (same extract) implied that the teacher perceived little difference between these talk types. This

could be an indication that any type of talk between peers may be perceived to constitute discussion.

The current emphasis on written activities seemed to suggest that talk-based activities were perceived to be of less value to children's learning. However, factors such as pupil engagement in written activities, time saving, and the 'evidence' of work that resulted through them were likely to have influenced their widespread use. Peer group pupils, on the other hand, professed their enthusiasm for talk activities when declaring them to be *"…better than worksheets"*. The further finding that pupils believed that talk-based activities can help them to *"…understand the story even more"* strengthens the argument for greater use of talk around texts as part of formal learning. My findings, which show that talk of a discussion type (as defined by Wolfe and Alexander, 2008) rarely occurred among pupils, suggests that both the teacher and the pupils would benefit from further support in order that the right type of talk be promoted. In addition to the need for greater clarity in policy documentation of concepts such as 'discussion' (discussed in Chapter 2), it would be helpful for schools to be provided with guidance around what it might look like when used productively to discuss texts. This would be vital in the event that 'quality' or

‘productive’ discussion around reading differs from that in other curriculum subjects.

Main findings:

- activities are weighted to those of a written type and appeared to actively engage pupils;
- written activities serve as a permanent record of children’s work and are used within the monitoring process to make judgements about text-based talk;
- the ‘4-sharings’ grid, which is used across the curriculum, appears to dominate reading sessions;
- the peer group pupils expressed a preference for talk-based activities.

Consequences and implications:

- the purpose of activities may be perceived by both teacher and pupils as one of documenting ideas;
- opportunities to explore texts may be few and high-risk, particularly if peer-talk activities are brief;
- pupils are likely to lack discussion skills if they are not explicitly taught and promoted, more so where teacher-led practices dominate reading experiences;
- there is a potential risk that all verbal interactions may be perceived as constituting discussion, giving rise to issues around the quality of talk.

7.4 Summary

The three distinct themes presented earlier are also connected through their relationship with performance and accountability. This is a central issue within the culture of education and is one that I discuss elsewhere in this study. It is therefore of little surprise that these themes are embedded within practice across the curriculum, as the opening quotations to this chapter demonstrate. Consequently, there are important implications for advanced reading skill development.

Prescribed pedagogies, which are determined and closely monitored by the school (mainly by the English Lead), are predominantly teacher-led (discussed in Chapter 6), thereby perpetuating an authority-subordinate (or compliant) teacher-pupil classroom hierarchy. This has the effect of placing agency for activities, including reading, with the teacher. In addition to observations, my conversations with pupils revealed that they are heavily reliant on the teacher for motivation, guidance, and support. Contrastingly, there appeared to be few opportunities in which pupils worked together for extended periods of time. The apparent novelty of working away from the teacher during the study suggested that children rarely had opportunities to work fully

independently. Through being so unaccustomed to taking responsibility for their learning, there is a risk that pupils may be resistant to attempts to transfer agency to them. Subsequently, learning may be predominantly transmissive, with texts viewed mainly from the teacher's perspective. Reading is therefore likely to be a passive endeavour and there would be little motivation to think at depth about textual content.

Prescriptive pedagogy appeared to extend to the structuring of sessions and the type of activities conducted within them. Planning documentation and pupils' written work were scrutinised as part of the monitoring process. With planning submitted in advance of sessions, there is a risk that teachers may feel compelled to follow them as closely as possible. This would be facilitated through tight management of time, such as that observed in the study. In view of the role of written work, it is also unsurprising that work of this type regularly featured within activities. The brevity of activities in particular, however, seemed to adversely impact upon the way that pupils engaged with texts.

Within my study, pupils appeared to read texts extremely quickly, regardless of whether this took place independently or with a partner. This usually comprised of one full pass of the text, with any subsequent passes

involving skimming and scanning to locate specific words or phrases, or to identify evidence to support an idea. Re-reading of entire texts did not appear to feature in routine practices around reading. The teacher's statement that she usually read aloud during this pass suggested that routine reading was also carried out at speed. With no discernible up-take of 'thinking time', indicated by the children's tendency to transition directly from reading to the final part of activities, it appeared as though reading took place only at the text's surface level. It also appeared as though the teacher bore the majority of the cognitive load during whole class activities, usually through direct questioning. In addition to the pressure of time, accountability issues might also be behind the pupils', and arguably also the teacher's, propensity to adopt a goal-oriented approach to activities, particularly as the emphasis on written work led to participants having something tangible *"to show"* that learning had taken place (noted by the class teacher).

In contrast to written activities, spoken activities could be challenging to document, for they may also require parental permission, dependent on the method of recording. However, the five-minute intervals allotted to peer-talk is unlikely to be conducive to talk of an exploratory nature or, arguably, enough time for pupils to share their ideas about

texts, especially in relation to understanding at the level of the whole text. Consequently, pupils miss out on viewing texts from multiple perspectives. This might explain the popularity of the '4-sharing' grid from the school's perspective, since it can be used to focus pupils' attention on micro level features of texts, such as a particular character, event, or setting. There is also the possibility that teachers may be reluctant to take up naturally occurring opportunities to explore children's understanding at depth given the pressures of accountability and time.

The peer group children's positive attitude towards talk-based activities is promising. However, my findings indicate that, through no fault of their own, pupils seem to lack the skills to discuss texts, or use talk in ways that open up conversations about their reading. They also experience limited opportunities to develop these skills. Their use of talk and the class rules around its use, seemed to be concerned with how to participate (perform) in verbal interactions, as opposed to collaborative development of ideas and understandings through talk. Further, without the appropriate skills, pupils may feel that peer talk activities lack value, especially when so much of the talk is teacher-led. This could potentially lead to a reluctance to participate in collaborative endeavours with peers, perhaps more so where pupils have

little or no say in the peers that they work with. Pupils' motivation and engagement towards both talk and reading also appeared to be influenced by gender-related factors, however this is an avenue for future research as it falls beyond the scope of my current study. Physical organisation of the classroom, including the group size and seating arrangement (which I discussed earlier in Chapter 5), might also have a constraining effect on pupil engagement (Blatchford, Galton, Kutnick and Baines in Blatchford *et al.*, 2010).

Given the immense pressure on teachers to adhere to prescribed pedagogies and be held accountable for pupils' progress, moving towards a more discussion-based approach is likely to require approval and support from the English Lead within this school context. It would also necessitate that curriculum time be set aside to facilitate skill development for both teachers and pupils, and to facilitate regular extended opportunities for text-based talk. With the need to have easily recordable evidence of learning, a balanced approach to the types of activities conducted is likely to be fruitful. The success of such a move would also be down to the willingness, of individual teachers, to relinquish a degree of control to pupils for agency to pass to them. Given the continual demands on teachers to plug gaps in knowledge in this school

context, a problem exacerbated by pupils being absent from core learning to attend interventions, there may be some reluctance.

I draw from the findings discussed here, together with those presented in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, when discussing the bigger picture around children's reading skill development at Paver Primary School. I conclude this study in the next chapter.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

8.0 Introduction

This study originated from my observations of a decline in children's reading motivation. Whilst I gained some insight into the possible causes of this issue, my study is concerned with critical reading. In addition to developing essential skills for reading the diverse range of texts available today, I believe that critical reading can have a positive impact on children's attitudes towards, and motivations for, reading in school.

Classroom talk, including text-based talk, has garnered much attention over recent years (as I discussed in Chapter 2). This study contributes to the growing body of research through an examination, not only of the talk taking place within year four reading sessions, but also of the practices behind it and how they are influenced by the school's wider reading curriculum. The micro analysis afforded through small scale case study enabled me to observe how these practices constrain the way that children engage with reading, with texts, and with each other. My findings, which are relevant to teachers of reading and those interested in

classroom talk, provide insight into why the type of talk taking place around texts appears to have changed little over the past decade or so, despite attempts to promote exploratory and dialogic talk by the likes of Mercer (1995, 2000) and Alexander (2018), respectively.

Importantly, the findings from my study highlight the complexity of the problem, for they indicate that the pedagogies and practices underpinning routine sessions must also change in order to facilitate changes in the way that texts are talked about. The adoption of whole school approaches to reading, in the drive to improve performance, means that there are implications for the entire primary age phase. There might also be implications for secondary education. A cultural shift is required so that schools can transition from traditional closed pedagogies to those that promote conversations of an open and exploratory nature.

In this chapter, I discuss the limitations of my research. I suggest that, despite these limitations, my findings demonstrate the embeddedness of several dominant pedagogies and practices, and how they impact on children's engagement with texts during shared reading experiences. I follow with discussion of the key interactional and pedagogical issues, and the implications they have for children's reading development. I then discuss how change can be bought about

in both the long and the short term, and in a way that supports schools to deliver the *National Curriculum* (DfE, 2013).

8.1 Study limitations

Research limitations were associated with data, participant access, the possible effects of performativity, and the roles that I occupied during the study. The flexibility afforded through case study methodology, together with the small scale of my study, enabled me to address these limitations in beneficial ways. In the following sections I describe these limitations and my response to them.

8.1.1 Data

My study is based on the premise that although it is not possible to directly observe reading skills, they are made visible when teachers and pupils talk about texts during shared reading activities. I anticipated that these skills would be apparent in the way that study participants engaged with texts (including the manner in which the act of reading was conducted), in addition to their references to textual content.

The personal subjectivity involved in interpreting skill type is a potential drawback for this type of study, as textual references may be implicit as well as explicit. This posed little problem for my study as content references were few and rarely extended to meaning beyond individual words. These findings prompted me to look closely at the structure of participants' talk exchanges, drawing my attention to the constraining effect of various interactional techniques used repeatedly by both teacher and pupils. In view of the dominance of some of these techniques (such as turn-taking), which was still evident in data from sessions following the modelled 'think-aloud' activity, I broadened my study to explore the extent of these together with the rationale for their use. This afforded insight into the school's values and beliefs about pedagogical techniques, such as teacher-led questioning, and the depth of their embeddedness within teaching and learning. I was then able to consider the implications for skill advancement.

8.1.2 Participant access

As a busy and pressurised environment, my visits to the school needed to be kept to a minimum, remain

purposeful, and be as brief as possible. In order to maximise opportunities for data gathering, I prepared for each visit as fully as I could by creating agendas for meetings and activities, which I shared with the class teacher. I created schedules for semi-structured interviews (shown in Appendix H) to ensure that I asked the important questions, but retained the flexibility to respond to interesting points raised by study participants during our conversations. This turned out to be particularly useful for managing data collection when time or location became an issue, or it was no longer possible for me to digitally record audio.

Ethical considerations meant that I needed to renegotiate access to the school following a change in the primary gatekeeper (the headteacher) during my data collection period. With the risk that I could be refused further access to the classroom, I used this opportunity to request a meeting with the English Lead. This enabled me to gain further contextual information for the reading activities already conducted, and to directly 'collect' the school's response to my findings from them.

Limited access to the school meant that a post analysis follow-up visit was not practical. I therefore took advantage of information in the public domain in an attempt to address some of the ideas and issues that arose towards the end of

my study. An online search for contextually relevant information provided a wealth of data (listed in table 3.4, Chapter 3) and afforded insight into the aims and intentions of schemes and resources adopted by the school. I was then able to examine whether, and how, these were reflected in the way that the plans and materials were used in school.

8.1.3 Performativity

Through my own teaching practice, I was cognisant of the effects of the continual monitoring and accountability measures placed upon teachers and their pupils. It is not unreasonable to assume that the two teacher participants unintentionally 'performed' elements of their roles within the study, or expressed views aligned with those of the school in order to be perceived in a positive light. The latter is equally applicable to the peer group pupils, particularly as the limited duration of my study prevented me from establishing a strong bond of trust with them, and their knowledge of the various roles I occupied (discussed further in section 3.9, Chapter 3). A longitudinal study, in which interviews may be repeated over an extended period of time (Lee cited in Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), may help to counteract this issue. Through my friendship with the class teacher however (which

I discuss further in the next section), I was able to raise any concerns that I had in this regard and was subsequently able to identify routine behaviours and practices, and authentic responses to the questions that I asked during pupil interviews. These discussions also benefitted the class teacher, as I was able to share fresh insight about pupil interactions and peer group working. Empowered with the knowledge of issues affecting peer interactions, such as the boys' dominance during peer group interactions, the teacher was afforded with opportunities to improve pupil engagement in reading activities without the need for major changes in pedagogy.

8.1.4 Positionality

The complexity of my positionality posed several challenges for my research, since I occupied multiple roles throughout the duration of the study. Although I tried hard to distance these roles (which included my friendship with the year four class teacher, my day-to-day role as a 'supply' teacher, and my role as a parent), they sometimes made it difficult for me to view my study objectively.

To minimise the impact of my personal friendship, I ensured that the majority of meetings with the class teacher took place within the school setting, where restrictions on time and space ensured that research activities remained brief, focussed and purposeful. A similar 'business-like' approach to meetings outside of school helped to keep the research separate from our friendship, as far as was possible. Viewing the study as 'work' also helped me to separate it from my home life. This was vital since, living at a distance to the university, the two often occupied the same physical space.

I found it more of a challenge to distance my teacher role from the research, particularly during the early stages of the study. However, this became easier as my confidence as a researcher grew. I learned to be more reflexive, and also to look beyond participants' words and actions, to the reasons behind them. In doing so, I established connections between my classroom observations, whole school pedagogies and policy for reading, and national policy. The cross-referencing of my findings benefitted the internal validity of the study (discussed in section 3.8, Chapter 3).

As a consequence of these limitations, the breadth of my study evolved to enable me to gain a deep understanding of the contextual factors influencing the use of talk during

routine reading sessions. The magnitude of the constraining effect of current practices then became apparent, as I illustrate in the following sections.

8.2 The key issues for children's reading development

I argue that the fundamental obstacle to advanced skills development is in the conceptualisation of reading itself. Without detailed description and clarity in key policy documentation, schools appear to draw from the limited range of skills criteria set out in the national testing framework (SATs). This is hardly surprising in view of the high-stakes nature of these tests. There are considerable implications however, for the pedagogy and practices that are then employed to deliver the reading curriculum and thus, the talk that takes place in relation to it.

Current SATs-centred practices	as opposed to ➡	**Practices likely to support critical reading**
Centralised decision-making, prescriptive highly structured school-wide pedagogies, several brief activities per session		greater teacher autonomy, pupil autonomy *(Barnes and Todd in Mercer and Littleton, 2007)*, and opportunities for extended social interactions around texts.
Printed "quality" texts (mainly books)		diversity of type and quality found in real-world texts.
A single full pass of texts with subsequent skimming and scanning of sections		multiple re-readings of entire texts *(Barak and Lefstein, 2021).*
Abstract reading experiences (and with texts viewed in 'chunks')		connection to pupils' own lives and knowledges (including other texts) *(Keene and Zimmerman, 1997; Tennent, 2021).*
Meaning at word and sentence level		development of whole text understanding *(Burgoyne* et al*, 2009; Tennent, 2021*).
Generation of ideas (mainly explicit text-based)		exploration of texts for depth of understanding.
Transmissive and teacher-led learning (including 'IRE/IRF' questioning and prompting) with pupils reliant on teacher support		active reading and thinking *(see Luke and Freebody's (1999) 'family of practices')* with shared exploration of texts in which all participants are viewed as equals.
Understanding derived mainly from the teacher's viewpoint		consideration of interpretations from multiple perspectives *(see McLaughlin and DeVoogd, 2004).*
Cooperative skills development supported through cumulative talk		collective thinking through exploratory talk and dialogue *(peer groups: Blatchford et al., 2009 & 2010; Baines et al., 2009).*

Table 8.1: Comparing pedagogy: SATs versus critical reading

The list of practices on the left of table 8.1 (above) are derived from my case study findings. Teaching and learning is principally concerned with the demands of the SATs. It is also largely centralised to facilitate consistency in approach and ease of monitoring across the school. These practices offer little opportunity for children to read at depth or undertake authentic exploration of texts. I argue that they do not merely have a constraining effect on children's reading development, but that their restrictive nature also creates barriers to skill development, as I discuss further below. These practices contrast widely to the altogether more explorative and reflective ones that I depict on the right of the table 8.1, drawn broadly from empirical studies (discussed in Chapter 2). In addition to supporting schools to meet the current *National Curriculum* requirements, these practices have the potential to further advance children's reading development and can support critical reading.

8.2.1 Barriers of an interactional nature

Through my study, I found that there is an emphasis on pupil cooperation and compliance rather than collaboration, mirroring traditional teacher-pupil classroom

hierarchy. Pupils learn how to speak clearly, take turns, and listen to one another, but are not explicitly taught the skills for 'discussion'. Nor are they in receipt of opportunities to develop these skills owing to the highly structured format of sessions. Children are therefore inexperienced in using talk productively (through elaboration, reasoning and challenge, for example) to support idea development for co-construction of meaning to occur. Consequently, the agency for reading and talking about reading permanently resides with the class teacher, and is maintained through dominant pedagogies such as teacher-led questioning. Potentially, this could lead to pupil disenchantment and disengagement with school reading activities over the long term. It might also account for the initial issue, that I observed, of a growing trend in low motivation towards reading.

The dominance of teacher-led questioning mirrors the style of SATs. This is problematic as few of these questions require extended responses (Tennent, 2021). If the SATs style is closely followed, then there is no real need to move away from the traditional 'IRE/IRF' exchange structure, despite there being little evidence to suggest that it promotes pupils' thinking (Alexander, 2013 and 2006; Almasi, 1995). Skill development is likely to be impeded if the cognitive load for reading activities remains with the teacher.

A more pressing problem however, is whether there is sufficient clarity or guidance, for schools, as to what constitutes 'discussion' for learning. Education policy content is particularly vague in this respect. The finding that schools seem to perceive 'discussion' and 'talk' as interchangeable terms implies that there is little distinction in meaning. This is not entirely surprising in view of the heavily scripted guidance that supported previous revisions of the curriculum. Teachers may, as a consequence, also lack expertise in teaching or using 'discussion' in this way. The general reluctance towards changing interactional strategies, which Alvermann and Hayes (1989) attribute to teachers believing themselves under pressure to manage pupil behaviour, strengthens the case for further guidance. This is likely to include resources to help schools to establish and maintain discussion in the classroom. This, I argue, should also exemplify how the teacher's role might change as pupils gain confidence in talking productively with others, so that teachers can also gain the confidence to hand over control of the talk.

8.2.2 Barriers of a pedagogical nature

To support open 'discussions' about texts in the classroom, the dominant pedagogies and practices associated with reading sessions should promote active and reflective reading. Thinking is a central condition for *Learning talk* (Alexander, 2018).

Reading curriculums built around SATs criteria are centred on knowledge reproduction, for the focus of learning is on individual elements and features of texts, such as words and writing techniques, which are appropriated for reuse in children's own writing. Little more than superficial surface level reading is required to accommodate this, resulting in the practice of speedy reading, which tends to be completed through just one full pass of a text. Skills such as these may be valued within the classroom in view of the pressures of time and a loaded curriculum. They do not, however, promote active or reflective reading. Other dominant practices, such as teacher-led questioning, also inhibit thinking owing to the pace and brevity of questions, particularly in relation to 'IRE/IRF' structured exchanges. Transmissive learning similarly fails to promote thinking. Instead, children should be encouraged to undertake multiple readings of texts and to reflect on how thinking evolves in light of new information,

and how different viewpoints or issues may be reflected (see table 8.1 above).

A curriculum centred on the reproduction of knowledge has further implications. Of those I found (listed below), it is the way that readers and reading are positioned which is likely to have a lasting impact on how children choose to engage, or not to, with texts throughout their lifetime.

- Primary aged readers are positioned as language decoders or *code breakers* (a term used by Luke *et al.* (2011:156-7) and discussed in Chapter 2), negating the need for whole text consideration. It can be argued that this is the view promoted in education policy, since the Simple View of Reading refers only to the dimensions of **word** recognition and **language** comprehension. The conceptualisation of inference, which is focussed on reasoning, is similarly narrow.

- The dominance of vocabulary-related talk and activities, that are used to support decoding, may obscure perceptions about the purpose and value of reading in and beyond the school setting. The collection of words and ideas may receive more attention than the understanding of them.

- The societal role of texts is overlooked as their content is not considered within the context of their production (audience and purpose). Nor are readers encouraged to use the knowledge they already possess (particularly in reference to knowledge of self and the wider world) to aid construction of meaning. Reading in school therefore seems disconnected from pupils' own lives.

- Text selection is confined to 'model' texts which are perceived as quality or well-written texts. These are generally fictional works. Reading is positioned exclusively as an academic activity.

- The talk around texts focusses on the number of ideas produced (output) rather than idea development and understanding around textual content.

Equally problematic, is the depth to which the practices listed on the left of table 8.1 (above) are embedded within reading sessions. Where there is a prescriptive whole school approach to the delivery of reading, similar practices are employed across the majority of the primary age phase. This has implications for the way in which new concepts and

approaches are absorbed and implemented, as the continued dominance of existing practices impacts upon the school's ability to remain faithful to them. This represents a considerable barrier for change and also risks compromising the effectiveness of reading programmes designed to support schools.

I argue that practices must change. Currently, the way in which children engage with texts is heavily constrained, and their potential for reading development is restricted. Children's reading experiences also lack the richness that can be acquired through accessing the wealth of contextual information that surrounds them (within texts and through the formation of personal connections to them), and also through sharing ideas with others. For some groups of pupils, whose cultural experiences differ from those which are promoted and dominant in schools, this information has both academic and personal value, for it affords access to particular models of cultural knowledge.

In light of my findings, it is unsurprising that children's motivation towards reading in school appears to be in decline, for agency for reading, and the cognitive load for thinking about texts, resides with the teacher during routine reading sessions. Moreover, the SATs-centred pedagogies and practices, which dominate these sessions, impact on the way

children engage with texts to the extent that depth of reading is discouraged. Essentially, there appears to be a performance-related trade off.

There are considerable implications for critical reading. SATs-centred practices, which are primarily concerned with skills associated with decoding at the micro level of words and phrases, do little to prepare children for interrogating textual content. Therefore, children are ill-prepared to make informed decisions about text credibility, ideology and bias, and, subsequently, for the type of texts they will encounter beyond formal education. Critical evaluation is vital in order to expose and understand the hidden messages conveyed through these texts.

8.3 Recommendations for change: long and short term

The cultural shift required to move from the practices on the left of table 8.1 (above) to those on the right, is not one that can be taken by schools alone. Given the significant disparity between these sets of practices, widespread and on-going discussion needs to take place across the literacy community to determine how current practices can evolve to

meet the present requirements set by education policy, whilst also providing opportunities for pupils to extend their reading skill development beyond this. Fundamentally, these conversations should involve the coming together of teachers, literacy trusts and charities, literacy associations, academics, and policy-makers, to determine what critical reading should look like within primary classrooms, and to what extent it may differ across the key stages. A proposed model of support for schools is presented in figure 8.1 below.

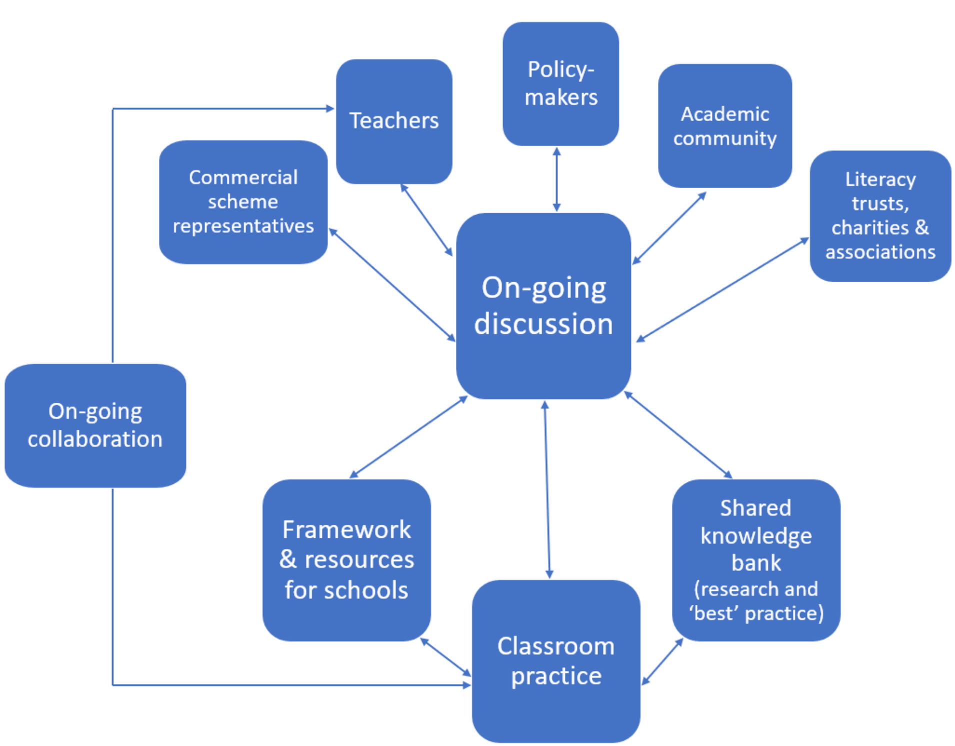


Figure 8.1: A proposed model of support for schools

The bi-directional arrows in the above model represent the flow of information as it passes back and forth between

the various participants, subsequently feeding into classroom practice. The flow of information does not end at this point however as classroom practice, which is also informed through collaborative endeavours between teachers, feeds back into the wider discussion. For long-term impact, this needs to be a continuous process.

Teachers' participation in this discussion should not be confined to consultation in the early stages, but must be part of the on-going dialogue. They are best placed to understand the interests and needs of *their* pupils and local communities, and need to be empowered to respond to opportunities for pupils to take 'real' action for social justice. They should also have access to important theoretical and conceptual information, so that they can make informed decisions about the best ways to support *their* pupils.

It is also imperative that developers of commercial programmes are involved, to ensure that the text resources designed to support these programmes are not dominated by fiction. Further, they should provide plentiful opportunities for children to engage in critical reading.

The wider discussion should include the following:

- Ways to share, among the literacy community, key theoretical and conceptual information about reading,

and empirical research for related pedagogies (including text-related discussion and critical reading). This should be regularly updated, include clear definitions and description, including underpinning rationale, presented succinctly for ease of access by a range of different literacy stakeholders. Future curriculum policy documentation should also reflect this.

- The creation of a framework to help schools incorporate critical reading activities into their curriculum, and to inspire them to take advantage of opportunities for 'real' social action as they arise, both nationally and within their local community.

- Ways to ensure that schools have easy and affordable access to a wide range of suitable texts and ancillary resources (texts and video exemplars of text-based discussions, for example) to support critical reading within the classroom.

- Opportunities for teachers to share their existing expertise in text exploration and critical pedagogies,

and the types of conversations that promote them, and collaborate with others.

- On-going opportunities to share experiences of critical reading among the wider literacy community to establish a portfolio of best practice, together with a bank of resources to support teaching and learning, and for teachers to develop their own practice.

In the interim, there is much that schools can do to promote active reading and thinking without overhauling their current reading curriculum.

8.3.1 Adapting current practices

First and foremost, the thinking around texts must be made more visible. Its value must also be promoted to children in order to circumvent the current practice of speedy reading and move the onus away from written output. This can be accomplished through the explicit use of 'thinking time', and conversations where children share how their thinking evolves as they engage further with textual content.

This can occur through conversation with others and through supporting reading practices, chiefly:

- Multiple readings of texts.
- Reflection of whole texts.
- The contrasting of content with pupils' own knowledges and experiences, which might also include reference to familiar social inequalities such as gender-related differences.

Children also need opportunities to talk freely and extensively about their reading. Text exploration activities in small peer groups provides a safe environment for sharing early ideas and learning from others. To be effective, children's repertoires for talking (Alexander, 2018, 2020) must also be expanded, for talk of an exploratory type is unlikely to be encountered outside of the school setting (Mercer and Littleton, 2007). It is possible that teachers may themselves lack confidence or experience in using a range of techniques for talking. Further training or supporting guidance focussed on talking about texts would be beneficial.

Perhaps one of the largest challenges for schools, in view of the tradition and embeddedness of teacher-led learning, is to raise the profile of peer collaboration. Peer-led

talk must be seen to be valued by teachers if pupils are to be persuaded to participate in activities fully and as equals, in order to learn through them.

8.4 Concluding remarks

Through exploration of the practices behind reading session talk, I build on findings from previous empirical studies of classroom talk and reading, and highlight the significant impact that national testing has on the school reading curriculum. The pedagogies and practices used to deliver it have a detrimental effect on children's skill development, for they constrain the way in which children engage with texts, and restrict the type of reading skills that they are able to develop. At present, there is little opportunity for deep and active reading. There is also little freedom for children to express their own ideas or views owing to the dominance of teacher-led exchanges, which are often of the 'IRE/IRF' variety. More confident readers may experience a motivational decline towards engagement in school-based reading activities as a consequence.

The advocation of 'discussion' based learning in the revised *National Curriculum* provides a means of opening up

conversations about texts, however children need to be empowered with the skills to be able to do this effectively. There also needs to be greater emphasis, than currently, on the development of children's thinking skills, particularly in relation to reading. Critical reading offers a way to address these issues, and is vital for the development of skills that enable children to determine the credibility and authenticity of the diverse range and modes of texts that are available to them today.

I argue that these principles also apply to many schools that operate outside of the *National Curriculum*, such as academies, in view of the pervasiveness of the assessment-driven, performative culture that exists within the field of education.

Whilst there is no 'quick fix' to address these issues so long as SATs continue to remain high-stakes, there are practices that schools can incorporate into their current curriculum to foster deeper reading and skill advancement. In the longer term, discussion and debate is needed among the various members of the literacy community at a national level, with a view to determining what critical reading activities should look like, and how best to support them through classroom pedagogies, practices and resources.

Essentially, the wider conversation about the future of children's shared reading experiences should mirror the collaborative, exploratory and dialogic conversations that should be taking place within the classroom.

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Appendices

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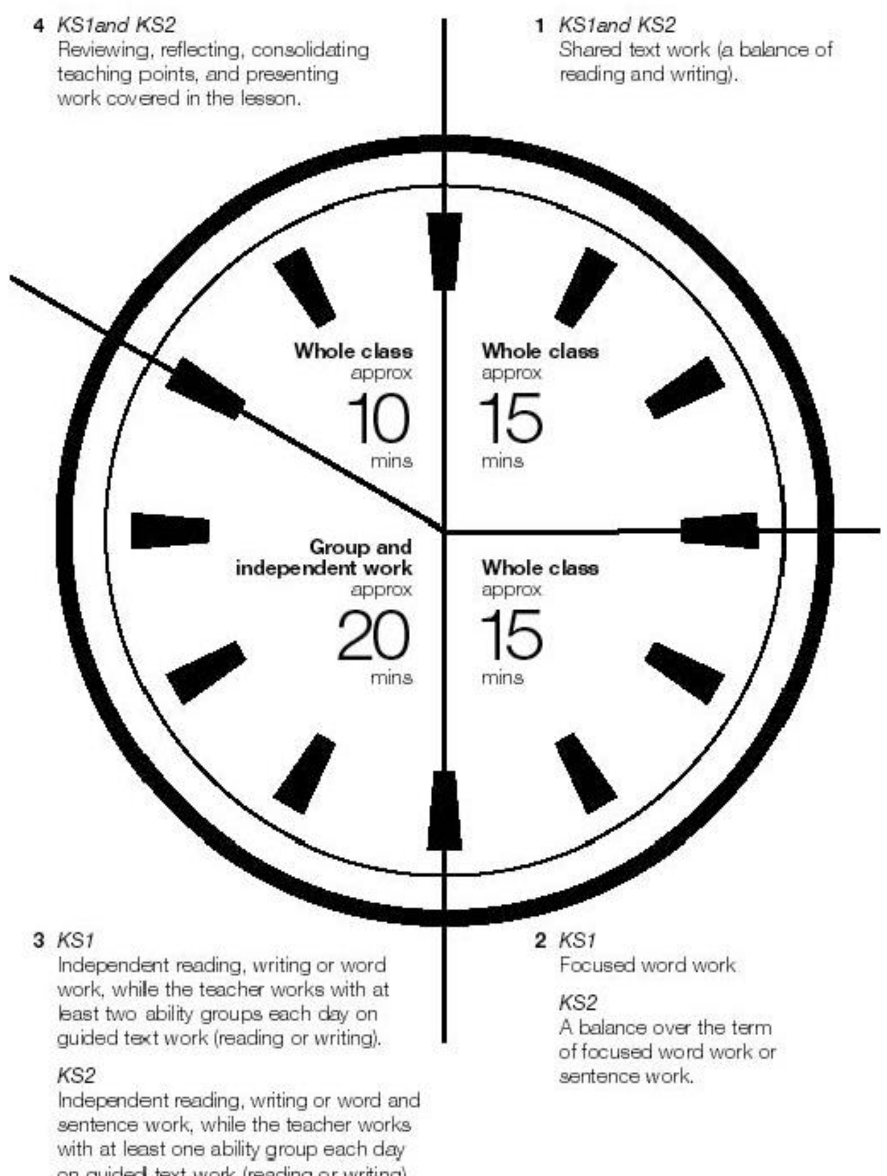
	Session four: *A Monster Calls* (Ness, 2015)

Appendix A: The 'Literacy Hour'

(extracted from the National Literacy Strategy, DfEE, 1998:9)



Appendix B: 2014 National Curriculum reading comprehension objectives (year 3&4)

Pupils should be taught to:

- develop positive attitudes to reading, and an understanding of what they read, by:
    - listening to and discussing a wide range of fiction, poetry, plays, non-fiction and reference books or textbooks
    - reading books that are structured in different ways and reading for a range of purposes
    - using dictionaries to check the meaning of words that they have read
    - increasing their familiarity with a wide range of books, including fairy stories, myths and legends, and retelling some of these orally
    - identifying themes and conventions in a wide range of books
    - preparing poems and play scripts to read aloud and to perform, showing understanding through intonation, tone, volume and action
    - discussing words and phrases that capture the reader's interest and imagination
    - recognising some different forms of poetry [for example, free verse, narrative poetry]
- understand what they read, in books they can read independently, by:
    - checking that the text makes sense to them, discussing their understanding, and explaining the meaning of words in context
    - asking questions to improve their understanding of a text
    - drawing inferences such as inferring characters' feelings, thoughts and motives from their actions, and justifying inferences with evidence
    - predicting what might happen from details stated and implied
    - identifying main ideas drawn from more than 1 paragraph and summarising these
    - identifying how language, structure, and presentation contribute to meaning
- retrieve and record information from non-fiction
- participate in discussion about both books that are read to them and those they can read for themselves, taking turns and listening to what others say

(extracted from DfE, 2014)

Appendix C: Transcription coding conventions

The following symbols were used during the transcription process and have been referred to elsewhere within this document to preserve participant anonymity:

Speakers:

P1,2,3…	individual pupil speaking (number or letter refer to particular individual)
P+	more than one pupil speaking at the same time
M	pupil unknown, identified as male
F	pupil unknown, identified as female
P?	pupil unknown, no gender assigned
T	teacher
R	researcher

Speech:

Xxx	utterance inaudible
[	multiple utterances overlap at this point
{}	description of children's actions or contextual information
.	pauses between utterances
…	utterance incomplete
=	utterances latch on to one another without pause
:	utterance contains lengthening of vowel sound
Red font	audio unclear, nearest approximation provided
Bold font	direct quotation from the textual content

Appendix D: School access and consent documentation

School of Education
The University of Nottingham
Jubilee
Campus, Wollaton Road

Nottingham NG8 1BB
Email: Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk

21st November 2017

xxx
Head Teacher
xxx
xxx
xxxxxxxx xxxxxx

Dear xxx

I write in connection with my PhD study exploring children's comprehension skills at key stage two through talk, and would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude for your previous support. Having completed the initial investigative phase of the research, I would now like to ask for permission to conduct further research at xxx Primary School with xxx class.

The main phase of my research is concerned with exploring peer group interaction during discussions about reading and will require a number of visits over the academic year. Please be assured that I will remain in continual consultation with the class teacher to ensure that research activities fulfil xxx Primary School's criteria for teaching and learning, and that any burden on participants (teacher and pupils) as a result of taking part in the research is minimal. Visits will also be kept to a minimum and busy times in the school calendar will be avoided.

As previously, the research would take place during routine reading comprehension sessions and my role will predominantly be observational. I would also like to conduct follow-up interviews with various group members collectively and individually directly after the sessions (or as close as possible) at intervals throughout the study.

Digital audio recordings will be transcribed and analysed in terms of structure and content, a summary of which will be made available to you upon request. Some written work arising from research activities may also be incorporated within the study. Any personal data will be destroyed upon completion of the study whilst group talk related data will be stored securely, with digital data held on virus and password protected encrypted devices, and retained for a period of at least seven years following completion of the PhD study. Participant data will remain anonymous. Participants have the right to request access to the data kept on them.

The exploratory nature of this study means that there will be significant gaps between visits to allow detailed analysis to inform future activities. The possibility exists that the study may require additional time and further permission will be sought as early as possible.

Please be assured that I have satisfied the research conduct and ethical requirements of the University of Nottingham. Should any child protection or safeguarding concerns arise during the research or at the analysis stage, I will contact the school immediately.

Your permission would be greatly appreciated and I very much look forward to continuing to work with xxx Primary School in a research capacity.

Yours sincerely

Wendy Sall

PhD Researcher, University of Nottingham (School of Education)
& Primary/Secondary School Teacher

For information or complaints regarding ethics:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Telephone: 0115 951 5559.

From: Wendy Sall <Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk>
Sent: 13 March 2019 10:09:56
To: Head of xxx Primary School
Subject: Reading comprehension: research update

Dear xxx,

You may already be aware that I worked with xxx last year to explore children's comprehension skills through talk as part of my PhD study, having first obtained permission from xxx. Now that I have completed analysis, I am keen to share my findings with you and would like to arrange an appointment to meet with you to this end.

In order to situate my findings within the broader context of a whole school approach to reading, I would also be extremely grateful for the opportunity to talk briefly with you about xxx Primary's policy on reading and the rationale behind it.

I envisage that the meeting need take no longer than an hour, at a day and time to suit you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Wendy Sall

PhD Researcher, University of Nottingham (School of Education)
& Primary/Secondary Teacher

Invitation to Participate in a Postgraduate Research Project: Information Sheet

Title: Developing Critical Readers through Talk
Researcher: Wendy Sall – MA, BA Hons. (Primary Ed.), Teacher (KS1-4)

You are invited to take part in a research project being conducted as part of a PhD degree in accordance with the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. Background information for the study is presented below. For further information please contact either myself at Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk, or my supervisors at the university (see details overleaf).

Why is the study taking place?

- The study aims to explore pupil and teacher talk during reading comprehension sessions.

What does the study involve?

- Ongoing consultation in respect of the nature of research activities and timings.
- Observation and digital audio recordings of peer group discussion in timetabled sessions during the 2017/18 academic year. May also include samples of written work resulting from discussion activities.
- Semi-structured interviews with group members, collectively and individually, subject to individual consent.

What are the risks associated with the study?

- There are no foreseeable risks and daily routines will be unaffected.
- Any concerns about audio recording will be addressed on an individual basis.
- Matters arising from issues related to child protection or safeguarding identified during the recording or analysis processes will be passed immediately to the school.
- The exploratory nature of study may necessitate that access to the school is required beyond the current academic year. This will only take place with agreement from the school.

What benefits are there to taking part in the study?

- Participating staff will receive a summary of the findings.
- There is an opportunity to participate in innovative approaches to text talk tailored to meet your class' curriculum needs during later stages of research.
- Case study participants will also receive a final summary of research findings.

What are my rights as a participant?

- All participant data will remain anonymous for the purposes of the final report and will be stored securely and retained for a period of at least seven years following completion of the PhD study. Any personal information, such as questionnaires and interviews, will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the study.
- Participants have the right to withdraw "for any or no reason, and at any time" during the project whereupon an individual's data will be withdrawn from the study.
- Participants have the right to request access to the data kept on them.

It is also possible that the results of this project may be presented at academic conferences or within academic journals.

Should you require further information or advice, please contact the following at the University of Nottingham:

Supervisors: xxx

For information or complaints regarding ethics:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Telephone: 0115 951 5559.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Project title: Developing Critical Readers through Talk

Researcher's name: Wendy Sall

Supervisor's names: xxx

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part in this stage of the research.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, neither I nor my pupils will be identified and personal results will remain confidential. Participants may request access to the data kept on them.
- I understand that I and my pupils will be audio recorded during the interview unless a request to withdraw has been submitted.
- I understand that personal data will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the PhD study and that any other data will be stored securely, with digital data held on virus and password protected encrypted devices, and retained for a period of at least seven years following completion of the study.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisors if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

Signed: .... **Date: ....**

Print name: .... **Role: ....**

Contact details

Researcher:	Wendy Sall (Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk)
Supervisors:	xxx

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator:

educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix E: Information for parents

School of Education
The University of Nottingham
Jubilee
Campus, Wollaton Road

Nottingham NG8 1BB
Email: Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk

December 2017

Parents/Carers of Year Four Children

Dear Parents/Carers

I have received permission to undertake research within xxxx class at xxxx Primary School as part of a PhD research project in conjunction with the School of Education at the University of Nottingham. The project is concerned with exploring how key stage two children talk about reading in small groups. I will be working closely with xxxx on an on-going basis over the academic year to ensure that there will **not be any disruption to routine teaching and learning.**

During the research, I will be audio recording teacher and pupil talk whilst the class participates in reading comprehension sessions over a number of sessions. This will involve discrete use of a voice recorder and microphone, however **no video recording** will take place and **no full names** will be used to ensure confidentiality. As my interest lies in the way that groups work together to develop comprehension of texts, I will **not be exploring or assessing individual reading skills or abilities**. As the research evolves, your child(ren) may be invited to take part in a follow up interview however this **will not take place without their consent** and content will be treated confidentially. Some of your child(ren)'s reading-related work may also be used. Any personal data collected will be destroyed immediately upon completion of the study. All other data will be stored securely, with digital data virus and password protected and will be retained for a period of at least seven years following completion of the PhD. Please also be assured that the study has satisfied the research and ethical requirements of the University of Nottingham.

Your child's participation is in the study will be invaluable since it will enable me to gain insight into how talk can support comprehension development. **Participation is voluntary** however, and you do have the right to withdraw your child(ren) from the study at any time without giving a reason. If you wish to do so, please email me (Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk) or send a message (FAO: Wendy Sall) via your child's class teacher in the normal manner. This will ensure that any data captured directly from your child(ren) will be withdrawn from the project. You may also, at any time, request to access to the data held on your child(ren) using the contact methods above.

Please do not hesitate to contact me (as above) if you have any queries or require further information.

Yours faithfully

PhD Researcher, University of Nottingham (School of Education)
& Primary/Secondary School Teacher

For information or complaints regarding ethics:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Telephone: 0115 951 5559.

Appendix F: Pupil consent documentation

PUPIL PERMISSION FORM

Project title: Developing Critical Readers through Talk
Researcher's name: Wendy Sall, University of Nottingham

I will be coming to some of your reading comprehension sessions to find out how the class talks about reading.

In these sessions:

- Your voice may be recorded as part of a group, unless your parent/carer has asked that you do not take part.

- You may be invited to take part in a short interview. This will be recorded and you will be asked for your permission first.

- A voice recorder and microphone will be placed on the table.

- You can ask questions about the voice recorder or what is happening if you are not sure.

- Only your first name and first initial of your surname will be used whilst information is collected. Your name will not appear in the final report and no other personal information will be used.

- Your reading skills are not being assessed. The study will be looking at how groups work together.

- You can decide not to take part in the study at any time.

- You can ask to look at the information that is kept about you at any time.

- Any personal information (such as collected in questionnaires and interviews) will be destroyed as soon as the research project is finished.

- Other notes, recordings of reading talk and written work will be kept safely with a password or locked away. It will be kept for at least seven years.

Your permission to be part of these sessions will be very helpful. It will help me to learn how children work together to understand the texts that they have read.

Thank you.

Name: ………………………………….……………………… **Date:** ………………………

Contact details:

Researcher: Wendy Sall
Email: Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk

For information or complaints regarding ethics:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Telephone: 0115 951 5559.

PUPIL PERMISSION FORM FOR INTERVIEW

Project title: Developing Critical Readers through Talk
Researcher's name: Wendy Sall, University of Nottingham

I agree to take part in an interview with Ms Sall and that my parent/carer is content for me to do so.

I understand that the interview will be recorded and that a voice recorder and microphone will be placed on the table.

I understand that my comments during the interview will be treated confidentially.

I understand that I can decide not to take part in the study at any time.

I can ask to look at the information that is kept about me at any time.

My personal information (such as collected in questionnaires and interviews) will be destroyed as soon as the research project is finished.

Other notes, recordings of reading talk and written work will be kept safely with a password or locked away. It will be kept for at least seven years.

Name: ………………………………..……………………… **Date:** ………………………

Contact details:

Researcher: Wendy Sall
Email: Wendy.Sall@nottingham.ac.uk

For information or complaints regarding ethics:
educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Nottingham, Jubilee Campus, Wollaton Road, Nottingham NG8 1BB. Telephone: 0115 951 5559.

Appendix G: Pupil questionnaire

Talking about Reading at Home

The purpose of this questionnaire is to explore your reading habits and how you talk about reading outside of school hours. Your answers will help me to find out what children talk about and why, and what they enjoy talking about.

Please answer the questions honestly – your answers are valued. All of the information that you provide will be treated respectfully. Your name will not be used.

Q1. How often do you choose to spend time reading outside of school hours?
*(select **one** and draw a tick (√) inside the relevant box or write your own answer in 'other')*

every day	every other day	two times a week	once a week	other ....

Q2. Roughly how long do you spend reading during these home reading sessions?
*(select **one** and draw a tick (√) inside the relevant box or write your own answer in 'other')*

45 minutes or more	30 minutes	20 minutes	10 minutes or less	it varies each time	other ....

Q3. Where do you read?
*(select **all that apply** - tick (√) inside the relevant boxes. You may add to the selection in 'other')*

in the car	in a room where there are other people (such as kitchen, dining or main room)	in your own bedroom	in a library	at a friend's house	other ....

Q4. How often do you talk about reading outside of school?
*NOTE: 'Talk' includes **spoken and digital** (e.g., text and internet) communication.*
*(select **one** and draw a tick (√) inside the relevant box)*

never	rarely	sometimes	most of the time	always

*****If you answered 'never' to Q4, please jump straight to Q9 over the page*****

Q5. Thinking about your answer to Q4, who do you talk with?
*(select **all that apply** - tick (√) inside the relevant boxes. You may add to the selection in 'other')*

parent or carer	brother or sister	grand parent	other family member(s)	friend or friends	a reading or book group	an online group *(please give the website name)*:	other(s) ....

Q6. Why do you talk about reading?

*(select **all that apply** - tick (√) inside the relevant boxes. You may add to the selection in 'other')*

Someone asks questions about the text	Someone asks me about what I think	to share things that interest me in the text (without being asked)	to share what I think about the text (without being asked)	to ask questions about vocabulary or ideas within the text	to get other people's points of view about the text	other ....

Q7. What sort of things do you talk about?

*(select **all that apply** - tick (√) inside the relevant boxes. You may add to the selection in 'other')*

what happens (plot / events)	characters (appearance, attitude, behaviour)	where the events take place (setting)	how the text is relevant to 'real' life	what you enjoyed or disliked	what puzzled you	what you could do about issues in the text	new learning or inform-ation	other ....

Q8. What do you most enjoy talking about?

*(select **all that apply** - tick (√) inside the relevant boxes. You may add to the selection in 'other')*

what you enjoyed or disliked	what puzzled you	how the text is relevant to 'real' life	what you could do about issues in the text	characters (appearance, attitude, behaviour)	what happens (plot / events)	new learning or inform-ation	where the events take place (setting)	other ....

Q9. Do you think that talking helps you to add to your understanding of a text? YES / NO

(circle your choice)

Look at your answer to Q9. If you answered 'YES' go to Q10a. If you answered 'NO' go to Q10b.

Q10a. If **'YES'** to Q9 - how **do you think** talking helps to improve your understanding?

....

or ....

Q10b. If **'NO'** to Q9 - how **do you think** talking might help to improve understanding?

....

....

Q11. Do you choose to talk at home about reading that you do in school? YES / NO

(circle your choice)

Q12. Please answer **only if you answered 'YES' to Q11**. What sort of information do you share? *(in case you are stuck for ideas, look at the suggestions in Q8)*

....

Name: .... *(only first name and the first letter of your surname e.g., John S, Sammy D)*

Appendix H: Interview schedules and raw data extracts

Pupil interview schedules

Setting the Scene

- This activity involves answering around 6 questions about reading talk tasks in school.
- Your answers will help me to understand how you and your classmates use talk during reading sessions.
- Your answers will also help me (and your teacher) to develop other opportunities for you to explore texts. As well as finding these activities interesting, I hope that you will also enjoy them.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Even the most obvious things may not be so obvious to me, so please answer as fully as possible.
- Please ask me to repeat or explain anything if you need to. Thank you for agreeing to take part.

PEER GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Reflection of research activity

Prompt: Today's activity enabled you to decide 'what' you were going to talk about and 'how' to go about it.

How did you decide on the topics that you wanted to talk about?

Probe:

How did you decide on the order (what was most important/first, next, etc.)?
Why did you choose those particular topics?
How did you know when to move on to another topic?
Did you move away from your plan much? Why? (links between topics, relevancy…)

Prompt: **How well did you all work together throughout the discussion?** *(children's perspective)*

Probe:

Did the discussion flow or was it often stilted/stop?
Was teacher support required? How?
Did all members have regular opportunities to take a turn?
Did certain members dominate? How frequently?
Were comments treated respectfully?

Did responses build on previous responses to develop topics?

Prompt: **If you were to take part in a similar activity in the future, what might you do differently to make the discussion more useful? (*explain that this is about gaining a deeper understanding of the text than might be obtained alone*)**

Probe:

How could group talk improve understanding of the text?
How might working together be improved?
How could you support each other better?

Prompt: **What could a teacher do to help you make the discussion more useful (deepening understanding)?**

Probe:

What might they do before your discussion takes place?
What might they do whilst you are discussing the text?
What might they do after the discussion?

2. Usual in-class talk about reading

Prompt: **What do you usually do when you talk about reading in the classroom?**

Probe:

What happens?
Why do you do this?
What do you find useful?

Prompt: **What do you think about learning about texts in this way**?

Probe:

Explore likes, dislikes, helpfulness.
Why – elicit reasons behind the opinions?

3. Finishing Off

Prompt: **Is there anything that you would like to add?**
(*Research activity or usual in-class text talk)*

Thank you for taking part.

QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL MEMBERS OF PEER GROUP

1. Reflection of research activity

Prompt: **What were your first thoughts about the text (before the discussion)?**

Probe:

What topics or experiences did you think about whilst reading the text?
Did the text remind you of anything that you know about or have experienced? What?
What parts of the text interested you the most? Why did they interest you?
What questions did you ask of the text?
Which parts of the text did you want to explore further? Why?

Prompt: **Try to explain your thinking journey during the discussion.**

Probe:

As it began, then, afterwards I thought that…
How did your understanding of the text change from your first thoughts? If not, why?
Did your understanding change a little or a lot?
Did this happen gradually through the talk, or suddenly? Why?

Prompt: **How did, or didn't, the group talk help you to develop your understanding of the text?**

Probe:

Did it help? If so, how? If not, why?
Were you able to express your ideas?
How did others help you to explore those ideas?

Prompt: **How did you feel about taking part in the activity?**

Probe:

What did you find useful *(in terms of deepening understanding),* enjoyable?
What was not so useful, enjoyable?
Confidence in sharing thoughts with others?
How could the rest of the group help you?
What help could a teacher provide to support your learning?

2. Usual in-class talk about reading

(Refer to group response prior to individual interviews)

Prompt: **How do you feel about talking about reading in this way**?

Probe:

What do you enjoy about talking in this way?
What helped you to understand better?
What do you dislike about talking in this way?
What left you feeling confused or frustrated?

Prompt: **How could this type of talk be improved to help <u>your</u> deepen your understanding of a text?**

Probe:

What could you do?
What could the teacher do?
What could other group members do?

Prompt: **What could you do to <u>help others</u> improve their understanding of a text?**

Probe:

How might you use talk?
What other things could you use? (such as written methods – graphic organisers etc)
How might you use them (see above)?

4. Finishing off

Prompt: **Is there anything that you would like to add?**
(about own experiences, or thoughts, on talking about reading)

Thank you for taking part.

Peer group interview raw data extract

R: …how did you decide what you were going to talk about? So like what was most important to do first? Were there any particular topics or things?

P2: We listened to each other.

R: listened to each other. Ok

P?: =Took turns.

R: ok.

P2: =And then we made up a subject. By all of the

R: by all of the

P2: by all of the answers. To do it on

R: What do you mean by answers?

P2: so umm so people's opinions on which subject to debate it on

R: so where do these ideas come from?

P2: so we took turns[ ] to ask questions and then when we got the answers we gathered it up and the made an opinion

R: [yep

P1?: [yep

R: so a bit like asking and answering? {*agreement from pupils*}…

English Lead (EL) interview schedule

Intro: Thank EL for time, introduce self (and relationship to class teacher) and proposed format of meeting (eg, overview, findings, questions) and request consent to audio record meeting. Discuss consent (rights & data)

Overview:

- Reasons for selection: size of school, location, diversity of pupil intake, quality of teaching & learning.
- Exploration of talk from four reading sessions, comprising both teacher-pupil and peer-to-peer talk, both in and out of the classroom, where the children were awarded the freedom to decide for themselves what they talked about and how they went about it. Observations and audio recordings featured a focus group of six year four children.

Findings:

- Present and run through summary of observations (see second sheet). **Invite discussion** from EL; thoughts and comments about observations.

Follow-up questions for EL:

- **Were there any findings that surprised you?** (prompts: Why? In what ways did it depart from expectations?)

- It was interesting to note the many references *to vocabulary* during the reading sessions. **Is this a key feature of the school's policy for reading? What can you tell me about the origins of this idea?** (prompts: Where has it come from? How does the it aid children's reading of texts? Is this a short term or long-term focus for the school? Has it been identified as a local need - how?)

- **Thinking more widely about reading in general, what are the schools' aims and objectives for this year and beyond?** (prompts: Whole school? Individual pupil interventions? Home-school? In-school promotions (book fairs, reading competitions…)

- **In what ways will/is the school monitoring their achievement or effectiveness?** (prompts: school level, individual class level, pupil level)

- I know that the school has been seeking to convert to an academy, **do you foresee any changes in the way that decisions are made about the school's policy on**

reading? (prompts: Who are the main decision makers at the moment? What information is drawn on when determining future policy? How is the effect of policy measured? And when? (eg, at intervals, end of year) – might this change? How? (**copy of the document?)**

- It was also interesting to note the repeated use of *questioning* through the sessions by both teacher and pupils. **Does this form part of the school's policy? What is the rationale behind it?** (If relevant refer to inclusion of KS2 *Reading Vipers* at beginning of previous academic year which is underpinned by t-led questioning).

- For a deeper contextual understanding of reading, and only after consent has been sought from xxx, it would be extremely helpful to speak briefly with other members of staff involved in resourcing, delivering and promoting reading across the school (or within KS2 specifically). **Which members of staff do you recommend that I approach?** (prompts: Roles in relation to reading? eg, Librarian, teaching staff, HLTAs…).

  Mention possibility of speaking to a focus group of children for their ideas about reading in school and at home. Are you aware of **an existing policy for conducting research within xxx re: parental consent?**

Close: Thank you very much for your time today, I have enjoyed speaking with you. Your responses are greatly valued as they enable me to contextualise my findings from the children's talk. Please be assured that the content of today's discussion will be treated confidentially and kept securely as per the GDPR.

English Lead interview raw data extract

R: …did that surprise you?

I: no no especially with that age group as well. I think you'd see less of that maybe as you went further up the school. But I think you would still see some of that. Definitely *{I continues reading through findings}* Yes. We've done a lot of work around questioning as a school for deeper understanding

R: is that part of the school policy or. Where has that come from?

I: the school as a journey really. So. The school development plan a few years ago was writing and now reading is the main focus on the school development plan. I can't actually remember if questioning is a focus on the actual policy but I identified it through monitoring as an area that the teachers needed to develop and so I observed a lot of teachers doing there... And also I introduced talk for reading a few years ago across the school. So I'm doing sort of constant re-evaluation and amendment to that so there should be… I've done a significant amount of training with the teachers

R: did you do the training or did anyone come in?

I: so the first talk for reading training was led by xxx also I then had external training through various agencies though I lead most of the training here. I've done some work on metacognition to questioning

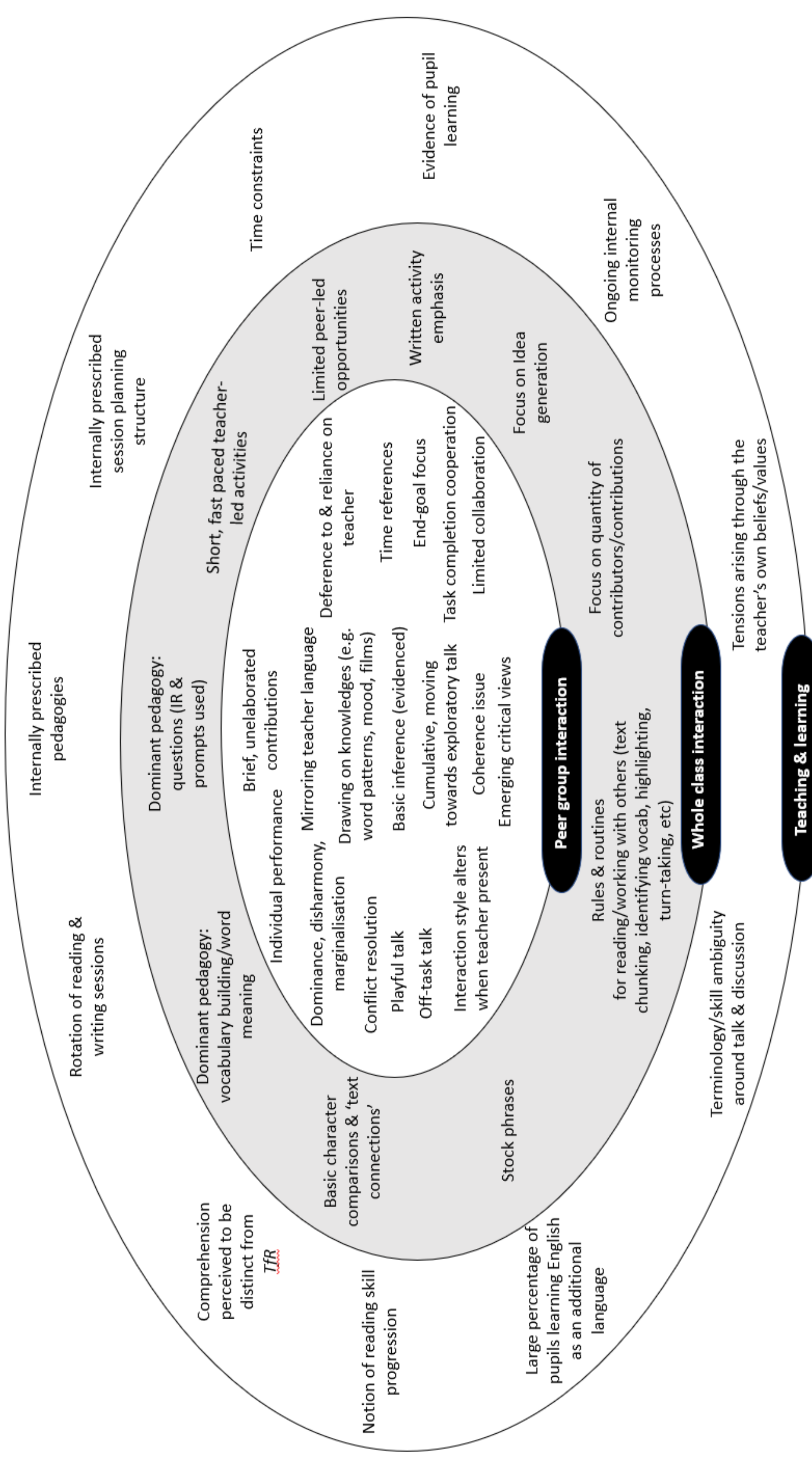
R: so that again was training that you've received through CPD?

I: CPD that I've or sought and using the Research Rich Pedagogies and attending love of reading conferences and talks and things like that so I've been going away and learning, reading, doing and that's my role as English Lead development…*{referred to Twitter as a source for ideas/events}*. I then filter it down and I am very lucky…

{at 9:50mins into the interview we are temporarily interrupted by member of staff who later needs the room}

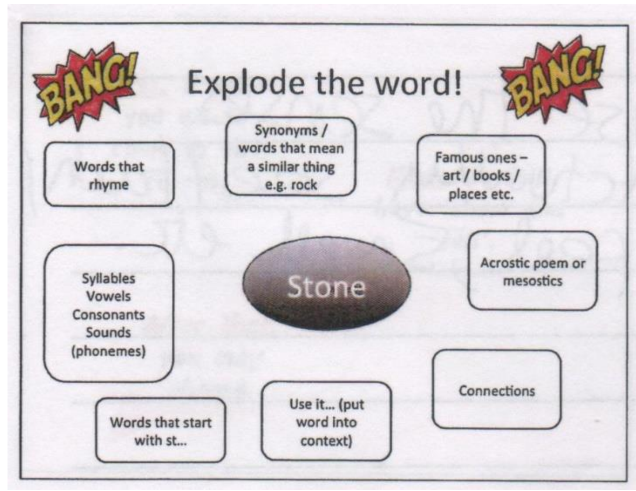
…So I'm very lucky in terms of English Lead that I've got a lot of trust from up above so I'm just. I am left to…

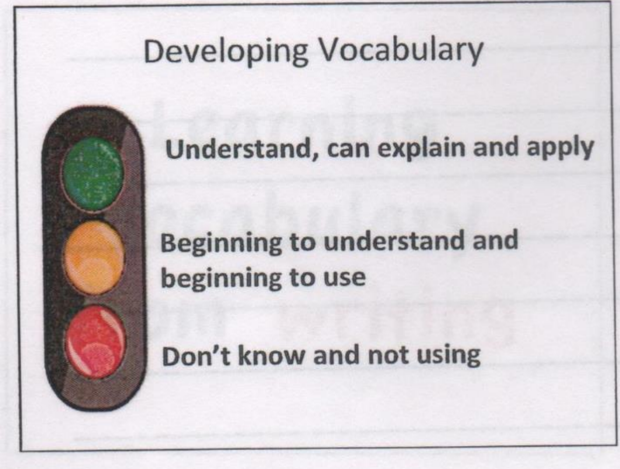
Appendix I: Multi-layered mapping of themes



Appendix J: Assortment of graphic organisers to support *Talk for Reading*

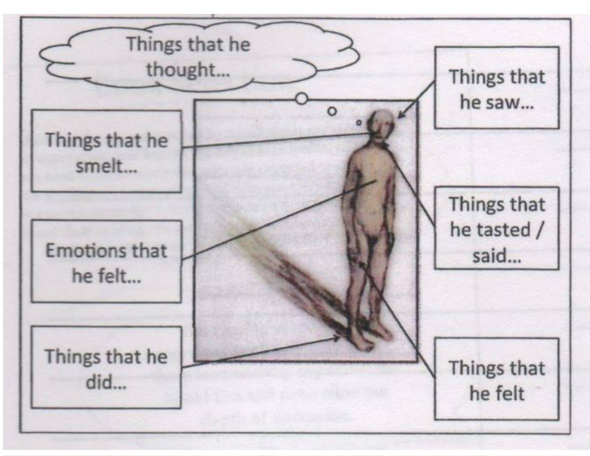
(extracted from Pennington, 2016)

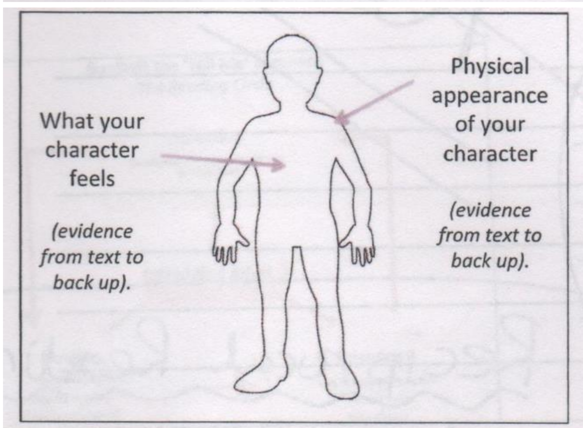


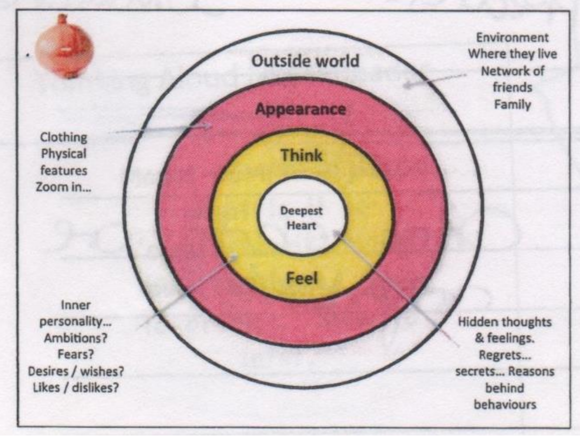


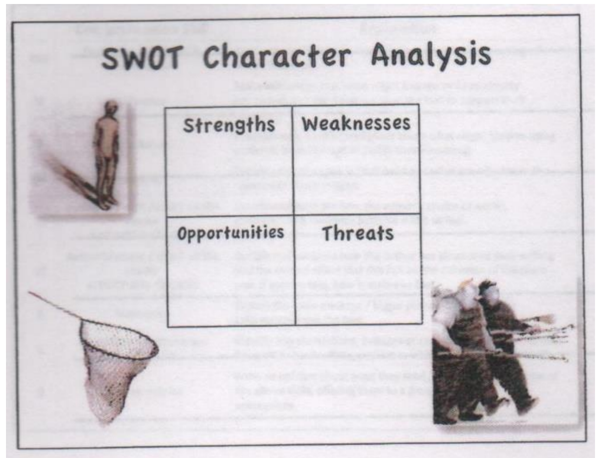
Never Heard the Word Grids

GRAMMAR	Never Heard Before x	Heard – but not sure of the meaning	Know what it means and can explain it to others
verb			
pronoun			
determiner			
capital letter			
noun phrase			
preposition			
past progressive			
subjunctive			
full stop			


Things that he thought...
Things that he saw...
Things that he smelt...
Things that he tasted / said...
Emotions that he felt...
Things that he did...
Things that he felt


What your character feels
(evidence from text to back up).
Physical appearance of your character
(evidence from text to back up).


Outside world
Appearance
Think
Deepest Heart
Feel
Environment Where they live Network of friends Family
Clothing Physical features Zoom in...
Inner personality... Ambitions? Fears? Desires / wishes? Likes / dislikes?
Hidden thoughts & feelings. Regrets... secrets... Reasons behind behaviours


SWOT Character Analysis
Strengths
Weaknesses
Opportunities
Threats

Appendix K: **Recording children's ideas with the '4-sharings' grid** (images extracted from *Window*, Baker, 2002)

Appendix L: Study texts (as presented to pupils)

"What did you do!?" The shriek came from behind. We all looked around, seeing Cinderella with her eyes wide open in horror. "That was my dress, you ruined it!" "It wasn't us, the tailor has done something, they made a mistake or had an accident," Mother said, trying to calm the girl down. "You did this," Cinderella pointed directly at Mother, making it clear who she was accusing. "You didn't want me to go to the ball and take the attention away from your little ugly princesses. Now I can't even go! How could you do this to me?" "I didn't, I-" She was cut off as Cinderella stormed for the door. "I hate you all. I hope you all die in a nasty and horrible way." The door slammed closed behind her.

I felt bad about her dress, but she didn't have to overreact like that. "She can have my dress, Mother," I offered. "I'm sure she'll have a better time than I will." "Nonsense, you will do no such thing. There are a hundred dresses in her wardrobe that her father bought for her. She can wear any of them if she chooses." "Should I go calm her down?" Zelly asked. "No, let her cool off." With a shadow now cast over our preparations, we continued to put the finishing touches on our outfits. Mother put a jewel in my hair, which I thought was completely unnecessary.

* * *

The grand ballroom was even nicer than outside. The chandeliers twinkled with the light of a thousand suns and the orchestra played a song that could only make feet feel like dancing. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad, I was actually glad to be there. Unfortunately, it only lasted for a mere second. "Anna? You really think the prince will even look at you?" The voice belonged to Lady Lilybeth, a girl I had known nearly my entire life. "I'm just here to dance," I replied, finding it difficult to look her in the eyes. I knew she would be smirking at my gall for believing I was good enough to be in the presence of Prince Charming. "As if he'd want to dance with you," she giggled as if it was the funniest thing in the world. It wasn't, but I never expected anything else from her. I turned away, trying not to let her get to me. All the girls around her – Lilybeth's gaggle of girls – were laughing so hard it was difficult. I knew that would happen, I tried to tell Mother they teased me so but she never listened to me.

The Mermaids' Lagoon

The children often spent long summer days on this lagoon, swimming or floating most of the time, playing the mermaid games in the water, and so forth. You must not think from this that the mermaids were on friendly terms with them: on the contrary, it was among Wendy's lasting regrets that all the time she was on the island she never had a civil word from one of them. When she stole softly to the edge of the lagoon she might see them by the score, especially on Marooners' Rock, where they loved to bask, combing out their hair in a lazy way that quite irritated her; or she might even swim, on tiptoe as it were, to within a yard of them, but then they saw her and dived, probably splashing her with their tails, not by accident, but intentionally. They treated all the boys in the same way, except of course Peter, who chatted with them on Marooners' Rock by the hour, and sat on their tails when they got cheeky. He gave Wendy one of their combs.

The most haunting time at which to see them is at the turn of the moon, when they utter strange wailing cries; but the lagoon is dangerous for mortals then, and until the evening of which we have now to tell, Wendy had never seen the lagoon by moonlight, less from fear, for of course Peter would have accompanied her, than because she had strict rules about every one being in bed by seven. She was often at the lagoon, however, on sunny days after rain, when the mermaids come up in extraordinary numbers to play with their bubbles. The bubbles of many colours made in rainbow water they treat as balls, hitting them gaily from one to another with their tails, and trying to keep them in the rainbow till they burst. The goals are at each end of the rainbow, and the keepers only are allowed to use their hands. Sometimes a dozen of these games will be going on in the lagoon at a time, and it is quite a pretty sight.

An extract from Peter Pan and Wendy by J.M. Barrie

www.literacyshedplus.com

The Demon Headmaster

GILLIAN CROSS

Dinah Glass is the new girl at a very strange school. It's her first day and she has a letter for the headmaster.

As she stepped through, Dinah glanced quickly round the room. It was the tidiest office she had ever seen. There were no papers, no files, no pictures on the walls. Just a large, empty-topped desk, a filing cabinet and a bookcase with a neat row of books.

She took it all in in one second and then forgot it as her eyes fell on the man standing by the window. He was tall and thin, dressed in an immaculate black suit. From his shoulders, a long, black teacher's gown hung in heavy folds, like wings, giving him the appearance of a huge crow. Only his head was startlingly white. Fair hair, almost as colourless as snow, lay round a face with paper-white skin and pallid lips. His eyes were hidden behind dark glasses, like two black holes in the middle of all the whiteness.

She cleared her throat. 'Hallo. I'm Dinah Glass and I –'

He raised a long, ivory-coloured hand. 'Please do not speak until you are asked. Idle chatter is an inefficient waste of energy.'

Unnervingly, he went on staring at her for a moment or two without saying anything else. Dinah wished she could see the eyes behind the dark lenses. With his eyes hidden, his expression was unreadable.

Finally, he waved a hand towards an upright chair, pulled round to face the desk. 'Sit down.' He sat down himself, facing her, and pulled a sheet of paper out of a drawer.

'Dinah Glass,' he said crisply, writing it down in neat, precise script. 'You are being fostered by Mrs. Hunter?'

Dinah nodded.

'Answer properly, please.'

A Monster Calls by Patrick Ness

The monster showed up just after midnight. As they do. Conor was awake when it came. He'd had a nightmare. Well, not a nightmare. The nightmare. The one he'd been having a lot lately. The one with the darkness and the wind and the screaming. The one with the hands slipping from his grasp, no matter how hard he tried to hold on. The one that always ended with–

"Go away," Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. "Go away," Conor whispered into the darkness of his bedroom, trying to push the nightmare back, not let it follow him into the world of waking. "Go away now." He glanced over at the clock his mum had put on his bedside table. 12.07. Seven minutes past midnight. Which was late for a school night, late for a Sunday, certainly. He'd told no one about the nightmare. Not his mum, obviously, but no one else either, not his dad in their fortnightly (or so) phone call, definitely not his grandma, and no one at school. Absolutely not.

What happened in the nightmare was something no one else ever needed to know. Conor blinked groggily at his room, then he frowned. There was something he was missing. He sat up in his bed, waking a bit more. The nightmare was slipping from him, but there was something he couldn't put his finger on, something different, something– He listened, straining against the silence, but all he could hear was the quiet house around him, the occasional tick from the empty downstairs or a rustle of bedding from his mum's room next door.

Nothing.

And then something. Something he realized was the thing that had woken him.

Someone was calling his name. Conor.

He felt a rush of panic, his guts twisting. Had it followed him? Had it somehow stepped out of the nightmare and–? "Don't be stupid," he told himself. "You're too old for monsters." And he was. He'd turned thirteen just last month. Monsters were for babies. Monsters were for bedwetters. Monsters were for– Conor.

There it was again. Conor swallowed. It had been an unusually warm October, and his window was still open. Maybe the curtains shushing each other in the small breeze could have sounded like– Conor.

All right, it wasn't the wind. It was definitely a voice, but not one he recognized. It wasn't his mother's, that was for sure. It wasn't a woman's voice at all, and he wondered for a crazy moment if his dad had somehow made a surprise trip from America and arrived too late to phone and– He heard the creaking and cracking of wood again, groaning like a living thing, like the hungry stomach of the world growling for a meal. Conor. No. Not his dad. This voice had a quality to it, a monstrous quality, wild and untamed. Then he heard a heavy creak of wood outside, as if something gigantic was stepping across a timber floor. He didn't want to go and look. But at the same time, a part of him wanted to look more than anything.