

Grade Four Students' Perceptions of Oral Language Activities:
A Teacher's Inquiry into the Importance of Talk in the Language Arts Classroom

by

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B.A., Thompson Rivers University, 2002

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A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

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Abstract

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The purpose of this research was to consider the role of language in learning and to investigate whether or not students ascribe any value to the opportunities they are given to share purposeful structured conversations around literature. A social constructivist theoretical framework was used as the guiding structure for the research procedures and methodology. The research included students participating in a language arts unit that centred on structured oral language activities. Students worked in both partners and small group settings to discuss literature and to develop opinions about and connections to the literature.

The study included ten grade four students (six girls and four boys) from one classroom setting. The participants represented a full range of abilities. The researcher was the classroom teacher. Data were collected once at the beginning of the language arts unit with a Likert survey and then again at the end of the unit of instruction. Data was also collected from two focus group sessions and students' responses to short answer questions. Data were analysed according to a set of categories that students' opinions and perceptions tended to fall within. These categories were related to ground rules for working together in groups, the ability to build onto one's own ideas while listening to the ideas of others, the usefulness of talking with peers and the potential talking with a peer has for making learning engaging and enjoyable.

The results of this study concurred with a very limited number of similar studies that have also investigated how students feel about group work. Grade four students stated that they prefer to work with classmates they know and that talking with peers helps them develop their thinking. This research contributes to the very limited research that considers students' perceptions of classroom practice.

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Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge and thank my supervisor, Dr. Roy Graham, for his guidance throughout this research study. His time spent offering thoughtful suggestions and insightful guidance has resulted in this project being both purposeful and meaningful to me as a teacher-researcher. I would also like to thank Dr. Alison Preece for guiding me through a directed studies course where her passion for the process of student learning helped me develop a strong interest in the importance of oracy in learning. I am grateful for a University of Victoria Fellowship which provided generous financial support.

A great deal of support and help was given by my children Sophie and Adrian over the last two and a half years while I taught school and worked on my master's program. My sisters Rosalind, Marigold, and especially Holly who has experienced the workload a M.Ed. degree carries, also provided encouragement. My parents have always supported all the educational endeavours their children and grandchildren have undertaken. For their support, which has always included a great deal of care, listening, and genuine interest, I am grateful.

I certainly have not been without support from my colleagues within the schools I have taught and within the district itself. Thank you to all of them for their encouragement and for their creative ideas for instruction in the language arts classroom.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my mother who has always taken the time to engage in conversations about education whether political or day-to-day situational. It is also dedicated to the memories of my father and grandmother who valued time engaged in conversations about books.

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

A great deal of research on literacy instruction has focused on the ways students use language for sharing and constructing knowledge. When students are given the time to talk to one another to share personal connections and experiences, then opportunities for engagement with, and accountability for, learning can be sustained. The ability to talk together purposefully in structured activities provides opportunities for students to share ideas, ask clarifying questions of peers, and negotiate meaning together. It would be naïve to expect that simply given opportunities to work together, students will talk and work together effectively (Webb, 2009). In their study of primary classrooms, Littleton, Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, Rowe and Sams (2005) found that students are rarely ever taught how to speak and listen together. Despite this evidence-based acknowledgment that students should be using language for sharing, co-constructing and negotiating meaning, researchers maintain that even when students do have opportunities for collaboration, they rarely show any insight as to the purpose of their participation (Mercer, Wegerif, & Dawes, 1999). There is little current research that considers students' perceptions about instructional strategies used in the language arts classroom. Insight gained from seeking students' opinions could provide the incentive to become more explicit with the language used with students and to use literacy strategies that get students talking more purposefully.

British Columbia's current curriculum document for kindergarten to grade seven reflects a greater understanding of the role that oral language should take within the language arts classroom and across the curriculum (British Columbia, Ministry of

Education [BC Min. of Ed.], 2006). Importantly, the curriculum also identifies the role of metacognition, an awareness of one's own cognitive processes (thinking), that enables students to become more aware, purposeful and reflective in the strategies they use to develop their own learning (BC Min. of Ed., 2006). Within group discussions, students need to develop comprehension strategies that ensure that they are developing an understanding of the topic and the perspectives of the other participants. Knowing how to ask clarifying questions as well as challenge the perspectives of others puts the onus on the student to become engaged in his or her learning (Herrenkohl & Guerra, 1998).

Webb (2009) reviewed research that focused on the teacher's role in a wide variety of small group learning approaches. From the research reviewed she was able to extract the ways in which teachers prepare students for, support students during, and promote learning within small groups. Cohen (1994) and Gillies (2003a) each reviewed several research studies to try to determine the effectiveness of small-group work in developing both social and cognitive skills. These reviews of discussion-based group work project social constructivist perspectives that peer interactions, through dialogue, facilitate learning. This current project is also based, in part, on principles that align with a social constructivist framework, particularly with the sociocultural approach of Vygotsky (1978) and with those who continue to theorize about the role of language in cognition (Cole, 1985; Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Rogoff, 1990, 1994; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988; Tudge, 1990; Wells, 1999; Wertsch, 1990, 1991).

Educators might have a range of beliefs or even evidence-informed understandings of the effectiveness of structured partner activities and small-group work in their own classrooms (Webb, 2009). These beliefs can be shaped or altered by factors

such as classroom dynamics, teacher control of the learning process, concerns for students' status or abilities within the partnership or group (Meloth & Deering, 1994), or the demands that the curriculum places on classroom time. Additionally, there is the long-held myth that learning is a silent process. We still cling to the notion that the classrooms that are the most productive are those where students are quiet and involved in their own work (Kasten, 1997; Mercer, 1995). Another misconception is that a noisy classroom has little structure, organization, or accountability for learning. From a social constructivist perspective, classroom activities, interactions, and dialogue are unique to the participants, their previous experiences and the contexts in which they are situated; however, these learning situations can be structured, supported and monitored to allow focused collaborative problem solving that includes engagement and co-construction of understanding through dialogue, all directed toward specific learning objectives.

O'Keefe (1995) stated that "[each] teacher needs to become his or her own theorist as well as practitioner through personal research in the classroom" (pp. xv-xvi). The aims of this project, then, are to uncover the potential benefits of dialogue in the language arts classroom, to understand the role of the teacher in facilitating this dialogue, and to argue that students' perceptions of structured talk activities should then have an effect on future instructional practice.

During the past few years of my teaching practice in elementary classrooms, I became curious about how to develop purposeful dialogue in the classroom and how to get students more actively engaged in learning. I also began to wonder whether or not students ascribe any value to classroom environments that provide opportunities to explore, share, seek and construct knowledge. I wondered if students were content with

whole-class discussions. Were teachers still content with the idea that meaning comes from the words in a text or the authority of the teacher rather than acknowledging that the learning occurs when students actively build new understanding on the foundation of previous experiences (Von Glasersfeld, 2007)? Further, was it possible that educators still considered oral language strategies and assessment in relation to oral “performance” as Oliver, Haig and Rochecouste (2005) argued? These researchers found that teachers relied on oral presentations for assessment purposes because they were more expedient and less complex than the language students used for interaction, learning and day-to-day communication across subject areas.

Cazden (2001), Hadjioannou (2007), and Mercer and Littleton (2007) assert that a transmission model of teaching still exists in classrooms despite the well-established value that thinking together through shared activity and dialogue has shown. This study investigates students’ opinions of their participation in specific structured oral language group and partner activities within a language arts setting. The notion of students’ perceptions implies that students will need to be thinking about how they learn best. The study takes its shape, in part, from the prerequisite that students undertake some thinking about their own thinking, or metacognitive thought. If students are to determine if structured talk activities benefit their learning, then instruction must be explicit and students must be able to name the talk strategy and the ways in which it helps them (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, & Stevens, 1991; Herrenkohl & Guerra, 1998; Preece, 1995; Smith, Rook, & Smith, 2007).

An understanding about current theories of cognition as well as teachers’ assumptions or beliefs about whether or not all learners have the prerequisite skills or

capacity to engage fully in the curriculum guide this study as they provide a foundation for practice and the underpinnings for the choice of instructional strategies.

The classroom climate as well as group and partner dynamics are other important considerations for a study that focuses on classroom interactions. Each school year requires explicit teaching and practice of the ground rules for working together as a community of learners. Expectations for participation in small group activities and partner work must also be clarified and made explicit to ensure that classroom time is used effectively, giving students opportunities for purposeful interaction.

Background to the Problem

There is an increased emphasis on speaking and listening competencies within British Columbia's language arts curriculum. This has summoned an adjustment of teaching practices both within the language arts program and across the curriculum. Oral language competencies have long been considered important processes for learning in all subject areas (Cazden, 2001; MacLure, 1988; O'Keefe, 1995). In fact, studies that do consider the importance of dialogue to learning in elementary grades often focus on science and mathematics curriculum (Herrenkohl & Guerra, 1998; Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, & Sams, 2004; Yakel, Cobb, & Wood, 1991).

Research that has considered the role of dialogue in the language arts classroom from a social constructivist perspective has included a focus on a range of small group interactions. This study looks at structured partner talk activities as well as structured small group activities such as literature circles. Valuing and providing time for dialogue with a partner suggests that a conversation about literature has more to it than just a retelling of the main events or description about characters. As Langer (1992) suggests,

understanding literature from a response perspective invites personal meaning, reflection, and “moving between public and private selves” as students’ ideas develop (1995a, p. 84). Mercer (1995) agreed, stating that in spite of schools being places with their own ways of using language, they are “part of a wider society” (p. 47). In addition, he argued that both “teachers and students do not leave their personal and social identities outside the classroom door” and the dialogue that is practised in the classroom is a way to discover and redefine identities (p. 47). Hynds (1990) argued that students are often focused on providing the right answer, reciting facts or demonstrating surface understanding as determined by the teachers rather than building understanding as well as a bridge “between life and literature” (p. 177). Increasing the time spent in purposeful dialogue in the language arts classroom is an authentic task in the exploration of literature. This is in contrast to full-class questioning where teachers ask questions that elicit a predetermined response.

Statement of the Problem

Although learning outcomes for oral language processes are equivalent in number to either the reading or the writing learning outcomes in British Columbia’s (2006) language arts curriculum, students are often not spending the outlined “[twenty-five to thirty-five per cent]” of grade four and five’s language arts learning time engaged in purposeful structured oral language activities (BC Min. of Ed., p. 8). Even when teachers are knowledgeable about current models of learning, a recitation format of instruction still dominates in today’s classrooms (Chinn, Anderson, & Waggoner, 2001; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). In a recitation style of instruction, teachers control turn taking and often ask questions that elicit already known answers as a means to check for understanding

(Cazden, 2001; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). This initiation-response-evaluation (I-R-E) pattern is documented as a traditional format for full-class interaction (Beck, McKeown, Sandora, Kucan, & Worthy, 1996; Cazden, 2001; Seedhouse, 2004). Cazden argues that when an I-R-E sequence is heard it is recognized as a traditional lesson where the teacher initiates a topic, the students respond and the teacher provides evaluation and sometimes feedback (I-R-E/F) of the students' comments. Chinn, et al. (2001) state that when teachers accept only the answers which are believed to be right then students' interpretation of and response to literature is not seen as an important outcome.

Purpose of the study

There is new attention in educational research on the perceptions that students have about a variety of classroom activities and experiences (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). There are a range of studies that consider educational practices from the perspective of the students; however, the majority of these studies are situated in university level classes where it is common to survey students on a range of classroom experiences. Studies that concern the perspectives of elementary school students are few. In this study, I ask grade four students their perceptions of structured talk activities in a language arts classroom. Students' perceptions about how learning unfolds for them in small-group and partner work should influence a teacher's future practice and increase his or her understanding of how to best structure activities for learning. The primary purpose of this study is to explore students' perspectives about specific instructional strategies that include peer interaction in the language arts classroom.

This investigation features lessons that develop students' practice of interacting with peers to enhance an understanding and enjoyment of literature. Structured partner

activities, such as A/B partner talk and walk-to-talk are designed to use dialogue to draw out connections, opinions or feelings, in response to literature, for example, through explicit prompts and questions. This partner talk might help develop a student's thoughts prior to writing a response. It might also help other students recall and value their own experiences, connections and feelings towards literature. Through the provision of frameworks, or guidelines for group and pair work, as well as the modeling of what the group work should look and sound like, the value of dialogue in the classroom should be heightened. Students should be seeing peer discussions and interactions as a positive investment of their time for greater learning opportunities. To feel that one's contributions have an effect on one's own learning and the understanding of others should help cultivate self esteem and greater motivation to fully participate in learning opportunities. The small group structured activities included in this study are literature circles and carousel brainstorm.

Design of the Study

A series of lessons within the language arts classroom was developed to build foundational listening and speaking skills. This qualitative research study considers both partner talk and small group talk specifically in language arts where reading responses or writing is often a final process and product. Explicit teaching of the listening and speaking skills was a component of the lessons as was the naming of the activity and the purpose of the activity. This study took place in the researcher's grade four classroom and students were interviewed in focus groups.

An inventory that used a Likert rating scale was given prior to the introduction of structured talk activities and towards the end of the series of lessons to provide insight

into whether or not students value time to talk in the language arts classroom and to see if there was any change in their opinions over the unit of instruction. This project looks at students' thoughts and feelings about talk in the classroom. While it does consider students' thinking about the effectiveness about their teacher's use of strategies, it does not look at their written responses to literature.

As educators increase their use of instructional strategies that support students constructing understanding and become explicit about these approaches to learning, students should become better able to see a strategy as having some purpose or benefit to their own learning. The curriculum advocates a more metacognitive approach to a range of language art processes. This project assumes that students' increased use of metacognitive strategies, such as talking about their learning, will help them monitor their learning and set goals for improvement.

Definition of Terms

A/B Partner Talk is a structured talk activity where partners elicit information from each other. Students must be prepared to restate either what their partner has shared about a topic or what they themselves think about a topic (Close, 2005).

Walk-to-Talk is similar to A/B Partner Talk, but in this classroom it is used as an opportunity to refine understanding of a topic with a partner prior to responding in writing.

Literature Circles are small group conversations where four to six students read and discuss novels, primarily, but they can read poetry, short fiction and non-fiction. Students often choose passages from their novels that they would like to focus on and share with their group (Brownlie, 2005). The comprehension strategies that will be used

within group conversations are discussed and modeled by the teacher prior to the groups undertaking the activities.

Carousel Brainstorm allows students to work in small groups to write down all their ideas on a topic or answers to one question on a shared piece of chart paper. After a short time, all groups rotate to another table and students begin adding on to the work left by the previous group. Each group can use a specific colour of marker and take it as they move around or the chart paper, instead, can be circulated. There are many ways in which this activity can take place (Jones, 2006).

The Research Questions

The research questions that guide this qualitative study are connected to my interest in increasing opportunities for students to talk in the classroom. The process of reflecting critically on the literature related to this study and permitting the ideas generated in this research to influence the direction of the study has challenged me to be flexible about the research design (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). At the same time, as the classroom teacher, the research problem needed to be kept manageable, relevant to my practice and purposeful to the students. The following questions were generated early in the research process:

- 1) Can the role of talk in learning be understood by students at both a practical level and an appreciative level?
- 2) When students are provided with opportunities to state their opinions about an instructional practice (partner and small-group dialogue) will they be able to say how it affects their learning?

- 3) Does the gender of the student play a role in the perceptions of dialogue as a component of a pre-writing or pre-responding activity? If so, how?

Underlying Assumptions

Following a social constructivist perspective, that our understanding is co-constructed, and given the diversity of the students within this grade-four classroom, it is acknowledged that there are many interpretations that could possibly come from the data.

Summary

This study is both an exploration of the development of the role of oral language in classrooms and a preliminary investigation of the perceptions students have about the inclusion of talk in the language arts classroom. The research will be of use to educators and researchers who value students' perspectives in the process of schooling.

Overview of the Study

This research study has been organized in the following way. Chapter One identifies the purpose of the study. The background to the problem and the problem statement provide an indication of what factors are important around the topic of students' perceptions of instructional strategies that focus on dialogue in the language arts classroom. Chapter Two begins by acknowledging the theoretical and conceptual frameworks in which this research is situated. The review then includes research that has focused on, or has included, the perceptions of the students that have participated in these learning communities. The connection between metacognition, motivation, engagement as related to the instructional strategy of including more structured conversations in the classroom is discussed. Finally, the review looks briefly at the importance of ground rules and group dynamics, including those related to gender.

Chapter Three includes an explanation of the qualitative research methodologies used. Descriptions of the lessons within a language arts unit are outlined. The context of the study, which includes a description of the community, school, and participants, is outlined. Data collection and analysis are described as well as the strengths and limitations of the research study. The research findings of the qualitative data analysis are also outlined in Chapter Three.

Chapter Four presents conclusions and a discussion of the significance of the study in relation to the literature review in Chapter Two. Recommendations for further research and the implications for practice are also included in Chapter Four.

Chapter Two

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chapter Two provides the theoretical framework which both informs this study and guides the research design. An acknowledgment of the philosophical assumptions about talk and learning and the capacity that each child has to learn is included. A belief in the ability of all children to learn guides practice and informs decisions for day-to-day teaching. Literature where students' perceptions of classroom practice were either a consideration or the focus of a study is reviewed. The ability for students to share their perceptions of a learning strategy indicates that they must be thoughtful about which classroom practices are helpful to their learning. A review of research related to students becoming more metacognitive about their learning is included. Effective implementation of group work has been associated with an investment of time in setting ground rules for interaction. Further, research has indicated that group dynamics can be influenced by factors such as gender and academic status, and these dynamics can affect learning for some students. Review of these topics is necessary to consider the role and value of oral language in the classroom as well as to establish a link between theory and practice.

Theoretical Framework

This study has been influenced by both sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning. Constructivism as a worldview asserts that learning "is a continuous process of updating one's sense of the world as prompted by new experiences" (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2008, p. 100). As a theory of learning, constructivism holds that knowledge cannot be seen as undisputable truths or standards that can be either transmitted from or discovered in the world. Cognition is far removed from merely the

gathering of pre-given properties or meanings that exist independent of the learner (Schwandt, 2000). Rather, understanding emerges through the “active construction and co-creation of knowledge” (Lincoln & Guba, 2000, p. 176). The construction of meaning is adaptive in nature in that it requires self-reorganization by the learner (Fosnot & Perry, 2005). This reorganization or adaptation occurs when a learner is confronted with a source of perturbation such as a trigger of new information or a change in a once familiar pattern (Maturana & Varela, 1987). Theorists contend that learning is a process of actively constructing one’s own subjective reality as new information is linked to background knowledge. This construction occurs as adaptations that have emerged within cognitive structures through a process of meaning making (Fosnot, 2005; Spivey, 1997) or as Piaget and Inhelder (1969) argued, through equilibration.

Theories of constructivism acknowledge that meaning is different for each person as knowing and learning are based on individual interpretations or adaptations. Learning is seen as the ongoing negotiation and restructuring of meaning through experience and interaction. Since new information is negotiated in ways specific to the constructs or schema that a learner already has, one’s background knowledge provides a foundation for new learning. In other words, the conceptual constructs or mental representations of the learner must be viable within the range of experiences that the individual is confronted with (von Glasersfeld, 1989). Knowledge is constructed based on current understanding or the range of prior experiences that a learner has at a given time that then makes new experiences viable. Given this notion of learning, an educator, interviewer, or experimenter must consider conceptual constructs from the perspective of the student and be constantly aware that a model of learning can never be presumed to be viable within

the student's range of experiences (von Glasersfeld, 1989, 2007). Educators can only generate models of a student's current understanding based on known concepts and skills, or as von Glasersfeld (2007) asserts, by the processes through which the learner arrives at a particular point of view.

This research study is guided by the epistemology of Piaget (1959), Vygotsky (1986/1934, 1978), Bruner (1990) and von Glasersfeld (1989, 2007) who investigated how learners construct understanding that is comprised of both prior knowledge and new information through communication and protracted interaction. Vygotsky's (1978) theory is centred on his idea that all thought, which includes language and literacy learning, occurs first on the social plane, or the interpsychological, and then later on the individual plane, or the intrapsychological where it is internalized. In reviewing the literature for this study, attention has been given to Vygotsky's belief that dialogue or discussion plays an important role in learning. Mercer (1995, 1996), whose ideas extend Vygotsky's, considered the role of language in the sharing of knowledge and the construction of understanding in the classroom. Both sociocultural and constructivist perspectives hold that discussion with peers, either in partnerships or small groups, provides opportunities for students to explain, justify and adjust their thinking as they transform their understanding from a social level to an individual level.

This study considers the role of language within the construction of meaning in the language arts classroom. In order to understand how students learn, educators need to situate their teaching practice within a theory of cognition. Constructivism can inform teaching practice; however, it cannot be translated into a theory of teaching as has often been apparent in literature that talks about the constructivist classroom or the strategies,

approaches or training that meet constructivist guidelines (Davis & Sumara, 2002; Fosnot & Perry, 2005). Teaching practices that are compatible with constructivist theories of learning are ones where there are opportunities for meaning making through interaction, where creative and critical engagement are valued (Langer, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Sumara, 2002) and when teachers realize that students might perceive learning situations, resources, and the environment in “ways that may be very different from those intended by the educators” (von Glasersfeld, 2005, p. 7).

Philosophical Assumptions of Language and Learning in the Classroom

One purpose of this study is to look at current research where students’ interactions, either through partner or group work, factor prominently in a study’s inquiry into student literacy learning. Classrooms are comprised of students from diverse backgrounds, both culturally and socially, and meeting the learning needs of all students is an important goal. Selecting instructional strategies and establishing a positive classroom environment are two areas within the classroom teacher’s autonomy. Since students arrive in classrooms with very different ways of using language, both oral and written, teachers need to ensure that the strategies they use do engage and support the learning needs of all students. Those students whose use of language aligns more neatly with the patterns of language used in schools perform better in school (Heath, 1983). Finding ways for all students to be successful learners is important, regardless of their language skills upon arrival at school.

Au (1998) stated that the literacy of students of diverse backgrounds will be improved when educators place “students’ ownership of literacy as the overarching goal of the language arts curriculum” (p. 309). She also drew attention to some of the themes

of a social constructivist framework such as the belief that a student's background knowledge is varied due to the situations, social or cultural, that students are positioned in and that background knowledge provides the foundation for learning. She also believed in the importance of "active engagement in processes of meaning-making" (p. 299). Au strongly believed that a social constructivist perspective would provide students from non-mainstream environments with a better range of scaffolds to help them achieve success with literacy tasks.

Learning that is aligned with constructivist theory is distinguished by a belief in the co-construction of knowledge, meaning making, problem solving, shared inquiry, and authenticity of activities (Almasi, 1995; Applebee, Langer, Nystrand, & Gamoran, 2003; Gould, 2005; Langer, 1992, 1995a, 1995b; Maloch, 2002). Much of the literature review that follows is centred on research, practices and beliefs that are epistemologically and pedagogically different than teacher-centred instructional designs or classrooms where the teacher's voice is most prominent. Vygotsky's influence on many theorists has resulted in a more social approach to learning rather than a focus on the individual in learning (Pallincsar & Brown, 1984; Rogoff, 1990). Teacher assumptions about students' abilities to participate and learn in the classroom do guide their choice of instructional strategies.

Students' Perceptions of Talk as a Tool for Learning

Studies in the United Kingdom indicate that asking for students' perceptions of educational practices does not necessarily mean that it will result in increased student voice in the day-to-day events of schooling. Rudduck and Flutter (2000) state that incidental comments from students about particular lessons can give insight into the

curriculum; however, for the most part students do not have an understanding of how instruction might be either designed or structured differently to better meet their learning needs. Fielding (2001) adds that adults, such as teachers and researchers, often misunderstand what students say about education. While the opportunity to tell of their experiences and what they think might help them engage with learning, Fielding cautions that students can end up being betrayed through the misrepresentation of their ideas or the application of their suggestions to accommodate the status quo. The school improvement movement in the United Kingdom has inspired some researchers to consider student voice and student participation in discussions regarding education. Opportunities for students to share their perspectives need to be sought out in order to demonstrate that students are active participants in their own education (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000; Watkins, 2005).

When Rudduck and Flutter (2000) asked primary students aged six to eleven directly about the conditions of learning in the classroom some of things these students were able to tell the researchers was who they could work well with and who they found difficult to work with. Rudduck and Flutter assert that this information is rarely elicited from students nor is it systematically applied within classrooms. When boys, characterized as under-performing in the classroom, were asked what would improve their learning, they revealed that they much preferred to read technical journals. They also preferred hands-on relevant learning needed for day-to-day living, such as map reading for outings. These same boys preferred to be active in class and they wanted oral contributions to be counted rather than having teachers always depend on written work for performance measures (Rudduck & Flutter).

Fielding (2001) acknowledges the “current vogue” for talking with students about different aspects of their school experiences. He argues that student voice is addressed primarily within a system of accountability rather than as a method of taking students’ preferences and putting them into action. Building on Barnes’ work from the late 1980s, Fielding (2001) looked at the levels of student engagement in the classroom based on a program called “Students as Researchers” (p. 124). When students are in the role of researcher, they collect data on the perspectives of other students regarding a variety of school issues. They also analyze the results and make recommendations, taking into consideration the teacher’s perspectives as well. While Fielding argues that the process of having students very involved in the discussions and decisions of the learning community is very creative as well as important, it is a demanding process to undertake.

Alvermann, Young, Weaver, Hinchman, Moore, Phelps, et al. (1996) argue that including students’ opinions is nothing new, but making it the centre of research is. From the perspective of both researchers and literacy teachers, they wanted to consider students’ experiences in a more systematic manner. They looked at the perspectives of middle and high school students from the United States and their focus was on the text-based discussions that occur around assigned readings.

Alvermann et al. (1996) used a multi-case study of five classrooms all from different sites. Within focal group interviews, which were held at the beginning, middle and end of their case study, students viewed segments of discussions in which they had just participated. Focus group questions were centred on how students’ participation in the group discussion motivated or encouraged them to read about, talk about and persist with the group work topic. Their findings showed that students preferred small-group

discussions, which were led by peers rather than full-class discussions. They prefer these small-group discussions when they feel that they have something in common with the other students, when the topic engages them and when everyone in the group contributes to the shared decision making.

Another opinion students shared was that it was beneficial being with people you know or important to have at least some friends in the group. One student stated that “...being with people you know well can motivate you to participate” (Alvermann et al., 1996, p. 255). These middle- and high-school students shared perceptions and ideas of group work that were insightful regarding fairness around the distribution of the workload in the group. Students felt that all should be participating and reasoning together with no one person carrying the load. At the same time, these students suggested that it was their responsibility to ensure that everyone was involved and this could be achieved by asking questions to encourage engagement and sharing. Alvermann et al. acknowledge that in addition to the extended effort to elicit students’ perspectives, the study is limited by the researchers’ interpretations of the students’ perspectives.

In another study that explored students’ perceptions of what helps them learn, Carnell (2005) asked 58 students from four secondary schools in the United Kingdom for their perspectives on issues about learning. Her findings showed that students wanted their classroom experiences to include more activity in learning, learner responsibility and collaboration. Students responded that when they were given responsibility for their own learning, such as projects that required interdependence, they were able to see themselves as learners with capabilities. Carnell’s interviews with students about learning

provided corroboration for Watkins' (2003, as cited in Carnell) findings that led him to view classroom learning as typically falling into one of three models of learning.

Carnell asked students "What is learning?" and the most dominant view was that "the teacher is more knowledgeable and in control" of the learning that occurs in the classroom (p. 272). The concern with this view, which Watkins labeled as the "Instruction" model of learning, is that learners then develop a fixed concept of learning and their role in the classroom. In this model, learning is centred on facts and skills, is most often associated with a transmission of knowledge and comes with a view that knowledge comes from an external source, for example the teacher.

When Carnell (2005) interviewed students she found students' descriptions of experiences also demonstrated the "Construction" model of learning. Students explained the importance of constructing one's own understanding and that learning occurred during open-ended learning experiences or through discovery. Students could see their role within learning; however, they were still dependent on the teacher. The "Co-construction" model of learning, which holds that interaction and collaboration with others, particularly through dialogue, is where students learn flexibility in their thinking. Further, it is through this interaction and negotiation that students can become explicit about what it takes to learn something new and how they learn best. One student commented that "you can learn a lot of things communicating with friends" (p. 273).

Elbaum, Schumm and Vaughn (1997) studied how 549 grade three, four and five students from three urban schools felt about different grouping formats for reading instruction. There was an emphasis, in this study, on the inclusion of classrooms that had students with learning disabilities and the researchers chose to determine, from student

reports, how frequently group, pair and whole-class instruction occurred as well as students' perceptions about mixed-ability groups and same-ability groups. Students reported that teachers used whole-class instruction more frequently than group or pair structures. From the perspective of students diagnosed with learning disabilities, the format of groups is a concern. Elbaum et al. (1997) found that having homogeneous groups for students with learning disabilities, who are often non-readers, kept the group focus on decoding skills and these groups can be stigmatized based on their abilities or status in the class. The researchers state that the students in the study perceived group work or partner work to be beneficial only when the abilities of the group members are varied. They also believed that helping another person improve his or her reading led to more cooperative relationships. More students voiced concerns about how lower-ability students would keep up with the group and no group member was concerned that a good reader could possibly spend more time helping a peer rather than invest that same time developing his or her own skills (Elbaum et al.).

Elbaum et al.'s (1997) study also showed that most students believed that the way for students with low reading ability to be taught how to read is to put them in a group with better readers. They also believed that if they needed help they would get it quickly from a peer. Students diagnosed with learning disabilities who did struggle with reading said they would prefer to have some instructional time in the resource room. Only those students with low ability in reading, but without a learning disability designation, preferred to be in a same-ability group where all members used the same text (Elbaum et al.).

In California, Samway, Whang, Cade, Gamil, Lubandina and Phommachanh (1991) studied the influence of literature circles on grade five and six students. The findings corroborated Langer's (1995a) socio-constructivist belief that participation in literature circles, where there is engagement and dialogue can lead "students [to] understand themselves and others better" (Samway et al., 1991, p. 199). Students were able to express opinions, raise sensitive issues and share perspectives about literature circles. Students gave their opinions about what would be an adequate amount of time for literature circle groups and how much time should be spent reading and discussing. One student stated that she preferred literature circles compared to being in a full-class discussion where she was always being asked "those questions" (Samway et al., p. 202). One student felt that a beneficial feature of literature circles was that they provide a glimpse into classmates' feelings, ideas and concerns that arise from the literature being discussed. Another student commented that she "...wanted to see if [others] have the same feeling as I do" about the books being read (p. 203).

In Gillies' (2003b) Australian study, groups that were from schools where cooperative learning occurred weekly in math, English or science were called the structured cooperative groups. In these groups, cooperative learning involved learning activities that were dependent on task interdependence. Students needed to help each other, share ideas and respect other points of view. Groups that were from schools that did not implement cooperative learning experiences more than once a month were the unstructured groups. Gillies' nine-month study showed that the structured group kept a focus on the goals and helped each other obtain them. Students' perceptions of small-group learning were obtained through a questionnaire. Students in the structured

cooperative learning group reported significantly higher scores on the measure of motivation, participation and attitude. They stated that “group work is fun” and “group work gives students the opportunity to do quality work” (p. 146). Two components that are necessary for successful cooperative learning are structuring task interdependence in groups and ensuring that students are trained with social skills that support dialogue and interaction (Gillies).

Students who do agree that learning with peers is better than learning on their own state that there is a sense of responsibility to participate fully as others rely on you to contribute (Carnell, 2005). Students also feel as though they are an important part of the classroom community. Working on group tasks allows them to take ownership for their learning. Importantly, Carnell found that opportunities for students to engage in conversations about their learning enabled them to become more aware of their own thinking and learning. The studies that do focus on students’ perceptions of their learning experiences acknowledge that research within this topic is currently inadequate.

Developing Metacognition in Group Work

An inquiry into students’ perceptions of classroom practices implies that students are given opportunities to be reflective on how they learn best. Most students are motivated to take responsibility for their own learning when they are able to attribute success or failure to their effort (Wittrock, 1987). Developing a reflective stance of one’s participation, effort, actions and contributions within group or partner work can make students aware of their learning. Bandura (1986) stated that, “If there is any characteristic that is distinctively human, it is the capability for reflective self-consciousness” (p. 21).

Further, it is through the self-perception of efficacy that students determine what to act upon and what kind of effort is necessary in certain activities (Bandura).

Watkins (2005) uses the term “meta-learning” to stress the importance of students thinking about how they learn or “learning about learning” (p. 39). We strive to have our students become more metacognitive in their day-to-day learning, but we often forget that they need support as well as something authentic or worthwhile to become metacognitive about (Brown, 1987). We talk about reflecting on one’s own thinking, or metacognition, as one of the strongest strategies we can give students, and as such this thinking needs to be developed through explicit teaching over time. Carnell’s (2005) research showed that in general there was a lack of opportunity for students to talk about their learning. She stressed that meta-learning, or the reflection on the effectiveness of actions and strategies and the ongoing planning, monitoring and thinking about one’s own thinking was missing when students spoke about their perceptions of learning. When students were given the opportunity to talk about their learning they were able to feel more engaged and involved in the process of learning.

Herrenkohl and Guerra (1998) argue that student engagement is comprised of “constructing, monitoring, clarifying, and challenging perspectives” in a classroom community (p. 433). These verbs, which depict engagement, are a match with the key strategies for participating in dialogue as outlined for oral language in British Columbia’s curriculum (BC Min. of Ed., 2006). It is necessary to be explicit with students about both the processes of engaging in small group discussions as well as the ground rules for getting along and using time effectively (Barnes, 1992/1975; Edwards & Mercer, 1987; Mercer, 1996; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). When teachers are explicit about the qualities

of learning, such as teaching exactly how strategies such as monitoring, clarifying or challenging unfold in a learning sequence, then students can assess their progress towards attaining these skills as they begin to think about, reflect and evaluate their own learning (Preece, 1995). Observing others, including the teacher and other students modeling the same strategies reinforces the thinking language that surrounds reflective thought.

Mercer and Littleton (2007) argue that asking students to develop the skills necessary for working together such as considering other perspectives, providing evidence and weighing the evidence that others provide ... “requires children to become more meta-cognitive, aware of how they go about their learning and thinking” (p. 69). It is through conversations that reflect on the effectiveness of their experiences working together that students can set goals and make changes for future group work.

When the many steps involved in developing effective communication are considered, including the body posture, the positive gestures that encourage further interest in the topic, the questions that stimulate clarification, the cumulative contributions that add to the topic respectfully or simply the request for an increase in volume from the speaker, it is unlikely that students will enter school with these skills fully developed. Moreover, we cannot assume that students will pick these skills up incidentally. Baines, Blatchford, and Kutnick (2009) argue that the teaching of these skills needs to be systematic and explicit so that students can consider the specific effort they can invest in group work that will improve their learning.

A lesson where students need to give directions to a classmate on how to draw a picture that is only visible to the one giving directions opens students' thinking to the clarity required in talking with others. Baines et al. (2009) have devised a systematic

approach to developing attitudes, relationships, and thinking skills in the classroom prior to even beginning group work. Although a lot of these tasks foster fun, trust and cooperation in group work, they also work on developing speaking skills, self-awareness and perspective taking, all necessary in students becoming more aware of their own thinking and thinking together. Preece (1995) corroborates this stance by stating that explicit talk around the behaviours that contribute to learning are conversations that need to be shared with students on a regular basis. Further, Preece adds that students need to be routinely reflecting on and setting goals about their use of strategies in their learning.

Understanding the factors that contribute to students' positive or negative opinions about group work has been a focus for Cantwell and Andrews' (2002) Australian research. They found that students with higher levels of metacognitive awareness state that they prefer group work. Cantwell and Andrews argue that those students who have greater awareness of their thinking processes are better able to self-regulate and attain some control over learning experiences. These students are focused on mastery and are willing to expend the effort to achieve success with tasks. Cantwell and Andrews presume that those students with lower metacognitive awareness have less self-regulatory functioning and experience greater frustration or discomfort in group learning situations. These factors need to be considered along with group composition and task interdependence.

In the present study, interest has been centred on the ways in which learning opportunities can be structured to increase the engagement and learning potential of a diverse range of students. In the United Kingdom, Smith et al. (2007) found that research, including that from North America, showed that students who are at risk for school

dropout are those whose academic achievements are fixed with their belief in their ability to achieve academic goals. Smith et al. (2007) assert that it is normal for students to work hard at tasks where they feel confidence and it is equally common for students to avoid work in areas where they do not feel a sense of competence. They argue that increasing students' sense of efficacy facilitates greater effort and persistence. Smith et al. suggest that helping students monitor what they have learned helps them interpret and make sense of the information as well as better able to monitor their strengths and weaknesses. Students acquire metacognitive regulation through teachers explicitly labeling the strategies that help students become critical thinkers and reflectors who are open to the ideas of others.

Ground Rules and Group or Pair Dynamics

When Elbaum et al. (1997) investigated students' perceptions of the types of formats they preferred for reading instruction, students made numerous comments about receiving help from classmates. It was the lack of student reference to teachers as a source of help that led Elbaum et al. to infer that teachers rarely take a role in students' small-group activities. They state that the teacher, during small-group activity is typically monitoring the progress of the groups, working one-on-one with a student or doing lesson preparation or marking. These come as a contrast to the research that states that “[getting] children to work together is not easy and requires perseverance, reflection, problem-solving and a host of other skills” (Baines et al., 2009, p. 3). For example, Almasi, O’Flahavan and Arya (2001) clarify that peer discussions are not times when the teacher accomplishes other unrelated tasks. Researchers observed that teachers found it necessary to use the time to monitor group discussions and determine when a scaffold was required

(Blatchford et al., 2003). Further, small-group work does not prevent the teacher from sitting in with a group and participating on a rotating basis within all groups (Brownlie, 2005).

Simply assigning students to groups will not provide the structure necessary for students to construct rich understandings (Allen, Möller, & Stroup, 2003; Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Webb, 2009). Students need some choice in the books that will be discussed so that their engagement supports learning. Educators can provide supportive structures that promote talk in the classroom as well as consider ways to enhance discussions and stretch students' thinking. Teachers help facilitate discussions by asking students to share their own understandings and they model how to explore ideas, how to be open to possibilities and how to use effective questioning to draw these perspectives and opinions from their peers (Langer, 1992; King, 2002; Lloyd, 2004). Often these strategies, directed at small-group work, are initially taught to the full class as a focused mini-lesson.

One of the factors which might cause teachers to use group work infrequently is the sense of a loss of control over the learning situation. Pell, Galton, Steward, Page and Hargreaves (2007) argue that it is sometimes difficult to determine if students are on task and being productive. Educators as well as students have been all too familiar with the students who shirk the responsibilities of group work. They take a passive approach and have no difficulty allowing other members of the group to take on the work to complete the task (Pell et al., 2007). Using a strategy called "snowballing," Baines et al. (2009) argue that tasks can be broken down into smaller units or "sub-activities" (p. 28). The process begins with students working individually, then moves to dyads and finally to

groups of three or four. They argue that snowballing is good for discouraging “free riding.” Another method that Baines et al. use to encourage effective group work is to have the group working together on a single output task. Only a single sheet of paper should be given to each group on which they record their combined work. They also suggest that offering only one copy of the directions will keep the group focused while negotiations on how to accomplish the task take place.

King (2002) argues that purposeful interaction is not something that just spontaneously occurs. It is through the careful structuring of group and partner work that higher thinking is facilitated. According to King, higher cognitive thinking occurs when activities are structured to include students generating “thought-provoking questions, explanations, speculations, justifications, inferences, hypotheses, and conclusions” (p. 34). In other words, the nature of the dialogue that occurs in group work is determined by how the teacher guides the pattern of talk in the group. When group work must follow a set pattern of interaction, the quality of discussion as well as the quality of learning can be influenced.

Almasi et al. (2001) argue that the purpose in understanding the factors that influence whether group discussions will be successful or less successful is so that students can enjoy the benefits of participating in them. They stress that students might take a while before they attain the cognitive, affective and social benefits of peer discussions. Designing tasks that develop proficiency in peer discussions takes careful consideration and Almasi et al. stress that teachers are often anxious to abandon group work because of initial unsuccessful attempts. In their research of student group work, Almasi et al. (2001) established and reviewed with students discussion reminders that

encouraged sticking to the topic, how to enrich the discussions, and ways to maintain a conversation. They stress that it takes persistence over time to have students working together effectively. This is achieved by repeated use of the language and strategies, which then become internalized thereby giving the students new tools to discuss literature (Almasi et al., 2001; Applebee et al., 2003; Tabak & Baumgartner, 2004).

Research continues to show that students are not explicitly taught how to talk to one another nor do they receive assistance in understanding and valuing ground rules when engaging in group discussions (Corden, 2001; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). When Gillies (2003a) undertook a study that looked at structuring group work, she met with schools to discuss the assignment of students to groups and to determine what kind of training the students would need to work successfully together. She considered a) task interdependence; b) individual accountability; c) students actively promoting each other's learning; and d) students being trained in the interpersonal and small-group skills needed to facilitate group work. The skills that Gillies wanted students to have were the ability to actively listen to members, provide feedback on ideas, encourage contributions from everyone, share tasks and resources, monitor the group's progress, and, try to understand group members' perspectives.

Edwards and Mercer (1987) firmly believed that the functional ways of using language were not being explicitly taught in schools. They argued that increasing opportunities for students to participate in group work requires that general pragmatic rules for speaking and listening be at the core of conversations. Additionally, Rojas-Drummond and Mercer (2003) argue that students are not taught ways of talking together in order to develop strategies for thinking together. This dictates that group work requires

explicit teaching of oracy. Students need both the functional ways of using language in discussions as well as the thinking tools specific to the task. Webb and Mastergeorge (2003) argue that students need to develop their communication skills to ensure that they know how to take one another's feedback seriously and learn how to develop mutual control of conversations. Wegerif, Mercer, and Dawes (1999) found that the intervention that is required to get students talking together has its most dramatic and positive effects on students of lower socio-economic groups. They inferred that the middle-class students also in the study were already familiar with the ground rules of exploratory talk than those of lower-income families.

Evans (2002) observed how students sometimes expressed their desire to work in same-gender groups but that this had no direct effect on teachers' ultimate actions to alter the eventual group composition. Students remained in the same mixed-gender groups after being queried about their preferences. Evans found that in same-gender groups no one complained about one particular person being bossy; however, in mixed-gender groups it was mainly boys who were labeled as being bossy within the group. One boy in particular was perceived to be bossy by the girls and they objected to his attempts to wield leadership within the group.

Evans (2002) recorded the conditions that the students thought were most important to discussions in literature circle groups. They felt that issues around respect, being with people you can work with, the type of task assigned to the group and the text being read were the most important conditions. To the students, respect meant listening and not interrupting and cooperating with one another. One student said that it was hard when someone interrupted you when you were right in the middle of saying something.

Students had mixed opinions about whether or not it would be wise to work with friends. They thought that they might talk too much or fool around. They thought that the opposite would happen if they were with people that are not your close friends. According to the majority, more work would be accomplished when you were not with your friends (Evans).

A study that looked at creating equity within classrooms investigated the way in which academic status can manifest itself in small group work. In an American study, Cohen and Lotan (1995) found that status orders that were based on perceived academic abilities led to varied interaction within groups and therefore different learning outcomes for the members who participate confidently. Students with high status are seen to be more competent and able to complete work even if the task is not dependent on the academic ability of the group members. These researchers proposed that on a collective task that required spatial problem solving, creativity and reasoning they would be able to alter the expectations that students had for one another and themselves based on assigning competence to low-status students.

The task that Cohen and Lotan (1995) chose required a range of intellectual abilities including reading, writing, computing, observing, reasoning, hypothesizing, precision in work and interpersonal skills. Teacher development for the task included classroom management that ensured student engagement in talking and learning together. While engaged in the task, teachers modified status inequalities by: 1) discussing and reinforcing that many different intellectual abilities are required to complete the tasks; 2) stating that each one of the members has some of the abilities but certainly not all of the abilities necessary to complete the task; and 3) utilizing the teacher's high-status position

in the class to alter a student's perception of him- or herself by overtly evaluating a specific task completed competently. Cohen and Lotan assert that using the status treatments can significantly lessen the effects of status on small-group interactions. Although positively evaluating a student in front of the group does affect the low-status student positively, there was no effect on the rate of participation of high-status students. It was observed that teachers did not use status treatments often; however, research has indicated that it is not so much the number of times that a treatment is used but rather that a particular group or individual receives a treatment that is important (Cohen and Lotan).

In the United Kingdom, Sauntson (2007) studied students' use of *acknowledging moves* in single-sex group discussions. Acknowledging moves are the feedback that is given in response to another speaker's verbal communication. These acknowledging moves can be positive or negative. In Sauntson's study, girls' acknowledging moves were used to facilitate a more cooperative dialogue and boys' use of the moves was directed less to consensus and more often towards protests. Sauntson argues that investigating acknowledging moves is a way of examining the structure of discourse that contributes to the competition that is found often in all-male dialogue and the collaboration that is often found in all-female groups. When compared to boys, girls' use of protests is low relative to other forms of acknowledging moves such as react, endorse, repeat or receive. Cohen and Lotan assert that status based on gender does not appear to function as a status characteristic until middle school years.

Group work can be undertaken for a variety of learning purposes such as literature discussion circles or for tasks designed to promote group interdependence. There are

many factors, such as gender, academic ability (status), social skills, and oral language skills that can interfere with learning in group settings.

Summary

In the present study, which strives to clarify the research-based reasons for increasing purposeful collaboration and dialogue in the classroom, the literature review has centred on a range of topics with each one being a rich area for further inquiry. Mercer and Littleton (2007) argue that our perception of curriculum needs to include more than the factual knowledge that a curriculum embodies. It needs to also include ways for students to handle knowledge and to know what to do with it. Students also need to be able to understand and use the cultural tools that allow them to think together and learn. When we consider how oracy has increased in prominence over the past few decades it is worth considering how our views of speaking and listening in the classroom have evolved. It now rests with our movement away from students merely working in groups to working together in groups. Rather than just interacting, students need to be “interthinking” (Mercer & Littleton). The new foci, they argue, should be on the nature of group composition and how this influences collaborative learning and on the types of task design that allow students to work intellectually together.

Chapter Three

METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was twofold. One aspect of this study was to get a broad overview of the role of talk in learning. The other purpose of this study was to get an initial understanding of students' perceptions of how dialogue with peers in structured talk activities, either in partnerships or in small groups, might help them construct their understanding. Chapter Three includes a discussion of the qualitative research methodologies used and an explanation of how this study followed this approach. The context of the research project including the community, the school and the participants is outlined. A description of the unit of instruction which focused on oral language strategies is also included. Chapter Three also includes the findings from the study and the subsequent qualitative analysis.

Qualitative Research

This study followed investigative procedures that align with qualitative research methodology. According to Creswell (2007) it is important to follow “the *process* of research” [author’s emphasis] that moves from philosophical assumptions through to procedures and data analysis (p. 37). Regardless of the form of qualitative research, the framework of investigation remains common (Creswell). In this study the investigation focused on the meaning that students hold about talking with peers in the language arts classroom. In qualitative research, a researcher’s intention is to interpret the meaning that others have about their personal and social experiences (Creswell). As an interpretive inquiry, this qualitative research aims to gain awareness of and reflect on students’ perceptions of their learning experiences. With this interpretation comes the

acknowledgment that each researcher positions him- or herself within the research and this occurs because of points of view or biases which have developed over time from cultural, social and personal experiences. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) call this a “personal biography” or set of ideas about the world that leads the researcher to approach an inquiry with a particular frame of reference (p. 18).

It is important to develop an awareness of one’s own point of reference and consider how this might influence the research process. I believe that providing opportunities for students to talk about their learning with teachers and peers in all curriculum areas is a valuable process in learning. This bias extends to a belief in structuring opportunities to talk so that students are engaged in purposeful learning activities. While the instructional strategies are perhaps situation specific to this classroom they are also a valid reference for other educators and researchers. As Allen et al. (2003) argue it is important for others to see that literacy development can be achieved through a variety of learning experiences provided there is ongoing assessment of student engagement and learning within these experiences.

Stake (1995) argues that given the researcher’s interactions with participants and the constructivist orientation to meaning making, a researcher ultimately comes to offer a personal view. This personal view or interpretive role of a researcher is a characteristic of qualitative research studies. The questions guiding this study suggest that a qualitative inquiry would be an appropriate investigation. Further, in developing and asking the focus group questions, there was flexibility for students to consider and respond to the statements of all participants. Just as the researcher enters an investigation with a frame of reference, the student-participants each come with a set of experiences

and their own knowledge or understanding about the world. Students interpret what their peers are stating in response to focus group questions, for example, and the researcher must then interpret these conversations often through inferred meanings. When knowledge is constructed from social interaction such as dialogue between students and researcher, such as this inquiry into students' perceptions of talk in learning, then this suggests a qualitative inquiry (Schwandt, 2000). The manner in which understanding of students' perceptions of classroom practice is sought aligns with a social constructivist framework.

Research Context

Setting

This research project focused on the researcher's classroom in a public elementary school on Vancouver Island. The school, which is one of fifteen elementary schools in the district, has approximately 315 students in grades kindergarten to seven. The school is located within a city with a population of approximately 22 000. The school is located in a residential neighbourhood and the children who attend it are from middle to lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is the researcher-teacher's first year teaching at this school. Permission to undertake this project was first granted by the university and then by the school district superintendent and the principal.

Participants

The participants in the study were ten grade four students, six females and four males. Not all participants participated in all components of the data collection. For example, nine students completed the Likert survey. This class, which was comprised of thirteen girls and eleven boys, had a wide spectrum of abilities, backgrounds, learning

and behaviour designations and personalities represented. The age of the students in the class ranged from nine to eleven. Of the participants in the study, two had severe behaviour designations, one had a moderate behaviour designation, one had a medical designation and one attended the district's challenge program once a week. The wide range of academic and social abilities apparent in this class provided diverse dynamics for the interaction necessary for group and partner work which focused on structured oral language strategies.

All twenty-four students were asked if they would like to participate in this study and ten students volunteered to participate in the study. Because of the possibility of a power-over situation, as I was both the researcher and the classroom teacher, the school's library assistant took on the role of recruiter by describing the study and asking students if they would like to participate. I felt that this person had an established and positive rapport with the students and that the students would be comfortable stating to her whether they would like to or would not like to participate in the study. I outlined the purpose of the library assistant's planned conversation with the class prior to the students entering the library so that they would know the purpose of the last few minutes of the library session. The conversation between the school's library assistant and the students occurred during a scheduled library session when I was able to step into the hall and allow the library assistant to read a script. Students were to place the forms in their backpacks upon returning to the class. Students were asked to discuss the student copy of the forms with their parents and to fill in their own consent form with a parent. All forms, including the parent consent form were within an envelope and were to be returned to the

library assistant if participation was confirmed. The script is in Appendix A, the parent consent form is in Appendix B and the participant consent form is in Appendix C.

Anonymity of the subjects was maintained throughout the study to protect the privacy of the students and the school involved. Students were designated as either F or M, female or male, and assigned a number (e.g., F1, F2 and M1, M2).

Data Sources

The primary method of data collection was focus group interviews. As this study is situated within a social constructivist framework, the questions were open-ended and this allowed the students to construct the meaning of experiences they have shared together (Creswell, 2007; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). A qualitative research methodology is focused on the participants' views of experiences. As Creswell (2007) argues, we cannot separate what people say from the context in which they say it. Qualitative research allows for a view of the context in which an issue is investigated. In-depth understanding of the instructional practices that were undertaken as well as knowledge of the students' participation during the unit of instruction allowed interpretive understanding of conversations and responses shared during focus group interviews. Focus group interviews were audio-taped allowing for the accurate use of students' quotes in the analysis of data. Students were able to consider the role of dialogue within the structured activities they participated in within the classroom.

Data were also collected from a pre and post Likert survey which aimed to have students accurately rank their opinions of classroom activities (BC Min. of Ed, 1988; Cantwell & Andrews, 2002; Warrender, 2008). Busch (1993) states that Likert-type scales are often used by researchers who want to survey students' beliefs, opinions and

perceptions of language learning. He does acknowledge that having a five-category scale which includes a neutral category can lead to indecisive data by providing the opportunity for participants to choose an indirect response.

Data collection also included students' completion of short-answer questions. Students independently reflected on their participation in oral language activities in language arts and responded to questions that were drawn from the research questions. Responses were handwritten. The Likert survey is found in Appendix D, the focus group questions are in Appendix E and the short-answer questions are in Appendix F.

The project took place over six weeks during the winter of 2009. It began with participants completing an initial Likert questionnaire prior to a unit of instruction in the language arts classroom focused on structured oral language strategies. The focus of instruction was within the language arts classroom. Very similar strategies, such as A/B partner talk and small group learning strategies occurred in mathematics, science and social studies because of my bias towards instructional strategies that generate dialogue and because of an understanding of the role of talk in learning.

Procedure

At the beginning of February, participants completed two surveys that would introduce the format of Likert surveys within the context of activities students like to do in their free time. It was believed that the students' initial exposure to interpreting and using the Likert scale of *strongly disagree, disagree, undecided, agree and strongly agree* would be better achieved within a familiar context rather than directly within the context of the study. It was felt that greater accuracy in selecting the scale might be

achieved. Students completed two Likert surveys to familiarize themselves with the scale of agreeing or disagreeing with a statement.

All students participated in the instructional unit focused on structured oral language activities. The instructional strategies within the language arts classroom centred on A/B partner talk, turn and share, literature circles, carousel brainstorm, and walk-to-talk. Often activities were followed by independent writing activities which were either personal response to literature, writing in role, or shared writing within a group. Students were required to, and in the habit of, reflecting on their learning, setting goals for next class and self-assessing their participation or assessing their partner's or group's participation. This written work is not included as data within this project. Additionally, the researcher was participating in a Network of Performance Based Schools (NPBS) inquiry which focused on British Columbia's performance standards in reading. This year-long focus meant that students were already responding to literature through opinions and personal connections as well as self-assessing and setting goals for literary responses. This was the researcher's second year using this NPBS focus with grade four students although the first year of the inquiry occurred in a different school setting.

Unit of Study

The language arts unit focused on opportunities for structured talk activities within a variety of partner and group activities. Group work took the form of literature study circles, which occurred two and often three times a week and carousel brainstorm, which occurred two times during the study. Partner work included A/B partners, turn and share, and walk-to-talk. Including both student-directed group work and full-class, teacher-led partner work in this unit on oral language stems from research that states that

we can no longer view full-class and group approaches as a one versus the other or an “either or” approach to classroom practice. Rather, there are necessary components within both group work and direct instruction (Allen et al., 2003). As Bloome and Katz (1997) argued, whole-class discussions that stem from shared readings and student-led literature discussions both contribute to children’s literacy development. Further, they state that both are necessary to ensure students become effective readers and writers across a wide variety of literacy contexts.

This unit of study began with two requirements for effective communication. We reviewed and established ground rules for working with others in the classroom. At the same time as students began participating in activities that included a large focus on talk for learning, the class generated ground rules that would create a classroom that supports talking and listening to one another. We revisited this list and it was used as a reference for students’ self-reflections and self- and peer-assessments of group talk. The following suggestions for working together were generated and they were posted on chart paper in the room entitled “Our class’s rules for group discussions:”

- include everybody; be an active listener; listen without interrupting;
- let others know when you disagree; be constructive when you disagree;
- support your ideas with evidence; know that group members will have different ideas (perspectives); keep focused on your group’s task/topic;
- use eye contact and gestures that show you are listening and considering the speaker’s ideas; take turns and be respectful.

When a group was stuck and interaction was down to a minimum, the group referred to the chart so that a routine procedure would guide students’ participation.

As well as using the class-generated ground rules we also considered and agreed to use the rules that Mercer et al. (1999) have used in several studies on dialogue in small group learning:

1. all relevant information is shared;
2. the group strives to reach agreement;
3. the group accepts responsibility for its decisions;
4. students are expected to provide reasons for their decisions;
5. students accept challenges to their reasons or ideas;
6. alternative ideas or answers are discussed before a decision is made; and
7. all group members are encouraged to speak by others in the group. (p. 496)

In addition to ground rules for effective group work, we also clarified how we can help others better understand what it is that we are trying to communicate. This required activities where students realize how their directions must be explicit, clear and detailed in order for a peer to follow their thinking. Students also need the modelled structure of how to ask good questions as well as communication strategies of monitoring for understanding.

This unit of instruction includes small group work and partner work based on students working with literature. During the six weeks, both literature circle groups and full-class instruction that involved partner work and student response to literature was occurring at the same time. Further, the instruction included time spent working with partners to explore how skills for talking and listening with peers did require focused effort and practice over time. The unit, outlined below, begins with a description of literature circles which occurred each week of this unit. A description of the literature

used for full-class discussions is outlined in a week-by-week format after the description of literature circle discussions.

Week One to Six: Literature circles that focused on developing student-directed discussions began this first week. Independent group work, within literature circles, often followed full-class mini lessons where strategies for learning were taught. For this school year, this was the first introduction to literature circles. Initially, it was a shared responsibility for both the teacher and the students within the individual groups to manage the group interaction. The teacher's role was to join in on all groups throughout the week, but not to direct the flow of the conversation. Prior to group work, the teacher modeled specific strategies that would be used to initiate group conversations around the book they were reading. This instruction often took the form of mini lessons and was intended to set the learning intention of the lesson and to provide suggested sentence prompts which would help students begin to engage in discussions that would encourage interaction within the group. A student teacher who was in her final practicum joined our class at this time and began providing instruction during literature circles.

Groups were initially developed from the first, second and third choices students had provided to indicate their interests in literature. Students made their choices after listening to a book talk that was presented by the student teacher and the classroom teacher. The district's literacy resource/teacher librarian provided assistance in book selection and suggestions for the book talk. Seven books were introduced by highlighting the characters, setting and genre of each book. It was stated, at this time, that students would be responsible for providing a somewhat similar "book talk" about their book by providing a short drama or poster presentation for the full class. They would not want to

give away crucial information about the book and the format of the presentation was a group decision which must be completed by all members. Content was dependent on the group generating an idea, preparing for the class and presenting as a group.

Mini lessons included modeling a strategy that was based on the teacher's current knowledge and understanding of a novel and also clearly stating the areas in which she currently had little information or understanding of the book. For the information unknown, the teacher modeled the questions she developed around her interest in the book. This included modeling the thinking that she goes through as she used a cognitive strategy to focus on a certain aspect of the book. This might be questioning aspects of the book, connecting the book to other literature or text she had read or simply responding personally to what has been read using a set of sentence prompts that the students have in reading response notebooks and displayed in the classroom on chart paper. Two examples of sentence prompts are, "This chapter reminded me of ..." and "When the character ...it made me think about..." Within this unit, there is a focus on both literary analysis of characters and story retellings, but our main focus is on personal connections and the meaning that is created as we read and connect to what we have previously read. Both the teacher and the student teacher shared responsibilities for mini lessons with the student teacher taking greater responsibility throughout mid February.

Students used response logs, where they simply respond to literature, but also set goals for increasing their ability to form opinions, make connections and think about their enjoyment of literature as well as reflect on their participation in literature circles. They wrote questions they had about the text read and formed predictions for the next sessions reading. They wrote thick and thin questions which they then posed to the group. Their

“ticket out the door” was often a self reflection or self assessment of their participation in literature circles. The focus of the reflections was often around Almasi’s (2001) ideas about the speaker and the listener having “certain rights, obligations, and expectations” within group work and how they showed, on that specific day, that they were developing as a participant in literature circles (p. 100).

Literature circle strategies were based on Brownlie’s (2005) *Grand Conversations, Thoughtful Responses* and Daniels and Steineke’s (2004) *Mini-lessons for Literature Circles*. As students completed their books they joined in other groups or formed new ones. The continual shifting of dynamics within groups allowed students to define the tasks and goals with a new set of personalities. As stated above, literature circles, which occurred over the six weeks of the unit, are outlined here separate from other literature-based oral language strategies which also occurred during this study.

During the week prior to implementing the unit of study, which included the literature circles as outlined above, the full class was given oral directions from the teacher-researcher on how to draw an unknown object (Education Department of Western Australia, 1994). Students are not permitted to ask clarifying questions and the directions were very structured to allow the students to potentially be able to draw a tiger. This type of activity is known as a barrier activity as the person listening and following the directions to draw a picture cannot see the picture. At the same time, the person giving directions cannot see what his/her partner is drawing. If the partner giving directions were able to see the attempted drawing, directions might be altered or adjusted in a manner that would correct any errors that had been made. For this initial time listening to directions,

the intent is for students to see how the clarity of details provides the ability to complete the task successfully.

Week One: On day one, working with a partner, one student gave directions to his or her partner on how to draw a specific picture, which was hidden from the partner who was drawing. The partner who gave directions was the only one speaking and the partner who was drawing could ask no clarifying questions. Roles were then reversed so that each participant could experience the two perspectives. A full-class discussion took place to discuss the advantages one might have if they had a partner who understood that directions must be detailed, sequential and clearly given. Students completed both self- and peer-assessments on abilities to give directions and suggestions for what might be helpful in the future.

The book, *The Jupiter Stone* (Lewis, 2004), was read to students in three sections, with part remaining for the following day (S. Close, personal communication, August 19, 2005). There is very little text on each page and students must make inferences about the characters and the story. This was an opportunity for students to discuss in A/B partners what a reasonable inference would be based on the information given. Students responded by making predictions according to inferences made about the pictures and using ideas from A/B partners. The teacher modeled a possible response and students shared ideas. Time was taken to clarify what reasonable predictions should look like if they are based on the text that has been read. The next day the second and third sections of *The Jupiter Stone* were read and students wrote a letter in role based on the inferences made. Students participated in a walk-to-talk where partners explored the ideas they would like to place in their letters.

Day two was similar to day one, with another opportunity to practise developing directions for giving instructions to a partner. This time the partner who was drawing could ask clarifying questions about size, shape, and direction if he or she felt the directions had not been explicit enough to be able to draw the picture. Again, roles were reversed so that each student could experience both giving and receiving directions. The class was given time to discuss what was problematic and what was easy about either giving or receiving directions to draw a picture.

On day three, students were given another opportunity to practise giving clear directions to a classmate. Students who gave instructions chose the picture they would like to describe to their partners. They also had a short period of time (about seven to ten minutes) prior to giving instructions to their partner, to record a series of steps that might improve clarity in the directions they would give to their partners. In a group, with the half of the class who would be giving directions, we thought about which directions would be important and how the sequence of directions and information about size, space used for the picture and sequence could improve the end results of their partner's drawing.

Week Two: Partner work – “Escape from Wotu Island” (Baines et al., 2009). In this activity, one partner became a pilot and the other became the flight controller. Each partner had a map which outlined similar information that would help with the successful navigation of the plane. In addition, each of the two maps contained further information which was unique to that role. The flight controller must guide the pilot across the island while dangerous obstacles must be avoided. There is a need to find a systematic way of communicating the obstacles as the maps differ in the way they convey the inherent

dangers on the island. The flight controller's map contained updated information which must be clearly transmitted to the pilot. In A/B partners, the students discussed which strategies they found most successful in describing the obstacles to partners.

While also being inherently appealing lessons for students to engage in, these language-dependent tasks made it very clear that being understood depended on directions, the language used and on engaged and focused participation. These lessons showed how the types of details you provide allowed others to consider another perspective that they themselves cannot see or had not seen at that point. Some researchers believe that barrier strategies are too far removed from real life contexts and serve only to prepare students for learning how to ask for specific information such as rehearsing how to ask for information on the telephone (Hewitt & Inghilleri, 1993). Now researchers are finding that they serve as an engaging way to prepare students for group work (Baines et al., 2009).

During the second week, we read *Marianthe's Story: Painted Words/Spoken Memories* (Aliko, 1998; S. Close, personal communication, 2005). This occurred over three days during the second week. It included using A/B partners to speak in role as two of the characters in the story. Written responses included taking the perspective of one of the characters and writing in role based on inferences and predictions about what was going to happen next in the story for a particular character. In partners, students used the walk-to-talk strategy to discuss the role they intended to use and what it would sound like. Students left the classroom for their partner discussion knowing that they would need to share their ideas about what their writing in role would sound like. Students got

to hear their partner's ideas and then other partners' ideas as we shared back in the classroom.

Week Three: To connect to our social studies unit on First Nations of the Pacific Northwest and a fieldtrip to a nearby museum we used the A/B partner's strategy with the picture book *Eagle Boy* (Vaughn, 2000). Prior to showing the book or its title, students were given a graphic organizer that was divided into quadrants. Each quadrant contained a quote from the story and students were required to visualize what the quote meant to them (A. Rowland, personal communication, February 2008). For example, the first two quotes were: 1) *As the canoes disappeared over the waves, Eagle Boy stood alone on the windswept beach*; and 2) *That night he dreamed of eagles. Eagles soaring in the sunshine*. For support, A/B partners was used to help get students generating a variety of ideas for the first two quotes. Students told each other what they saw when they read the passage and then we shared as a class so that students would have a collection of ideas for their own images. Students added details to and completed their *Four Quadrants* graphic organizer while the teacher read the story. They also completed a response that focused on connections to other First Nations stories we had recently read as well as any other connections to their own lives.

Week Four: We started reading *One Well: The Story of Water on Earth* (Straus, 2007). Students responded to the reading by completing a *Four Quadrants* organizer with the following categories: 1) questions I have; 2) key words; 3) images; and 4) big ideas (F. Brownlie, personal communication, 2009). As the story was read students drew pictures and recorded ideas. The A/B partner's strategy was used to discuss ideas and to provide an opportunity for students to gain additional information from peers who were

able to generate connections to and ideas from the reading. On day three we continued to read from *One Well*, but also read *The Great Kapok Tree* (Cherry, 1990). Students understood that the learning objective was to complete a *Retell, Relate, Respond* graphic organizer (Schwartz & Bone, 1995) and that the respond component needed to be focused on a connection between *The Great Kapok Tree* and *One Well* and any other literature from which they can make a connection. In A/B partners, students shared their ideas about how the stories were connected. Students completed a *Retell, Relate, Respond* graphic organizer.

Week Five: We read the story *Charlie Anderson* (Abercrombie, 1995) and students discussed, in A/B partners, what they thought the possible main ideas were in the story. Since this story focuses on a cat that wandered between two homes where he was appreciated and loved by both families, we contrasted it to a *Times Colonist* article, *Trespassing cat released in park* (August 17, 2007) where we got an opposing perspective that cats are not always appreciated in a neighbourhood (A. Preece, personal communication, August 2005). Using the carousel brainstorm strategy, students were placed into groups of four and with their group they rotated to six different stations where a poster-sized sheet of paper was placed. Each poster sheet had a different scenario about cats in neighbourhoods ranging from situations where neighbours were on good terms to strained relationships because of damage cats caused in neighbours' yards to general safety for cats when outside. Each group of students wrote ideas about what their group felt or believed about the statements, by using a specific colour of felt pen which they took to each sheet of chart paper in the carousel rotation. Students needed to be prepared to answer the question, should cats be kept inside at all times or allowed to roam freely,

at the end of the session. The groups needed consensus as well as reasoning for their opinion.

Week Six: We read *The Secret Shortcut* (Teague, 1999) and students completed the *6 + 1 Writing Traits* (Culham, 2004) strategy for this picture book where students worked together in a group to create a large poster sheet picture of a possible short cut route. We read a small section of *Last Child in the Woods* (Louv, 2008, pp. 9-10) and then completed the carousel brainstorm strategy after an A/B partner's discussion about the last time they played in the woods. The carousel brainstorm included students responding, in groups, to the questions and ideas written on the chart paper. They included, "Why do children no longer play outside like they did before?" (Students were encouraged to challenge the validity of this question based on their experiences) and discussion responses that centred on what students' opinions of the statements such as "It is just as healthy to stay inside after school? If so, explain how?" Independent writing centred on students' own personal relationship with the natural environment near their homes or within their community.

During the final week of the study we established times for focus group sessions. Students wrote notes in their planners about the upcoming sessions and times. Focus group sessions were audio recorded. Students responded to the short-answer questions at the end of the second focus group session. During this final week, students completed the final Likert survey. If a student's responses were unclear, either in the transcription of the focus group sessions or in the written responses, the student was asked to clarify his or her response.

Findings

The two main research questions guiding this study were: 1) Can the role of talk in learning be understood by students at both a practical level and an appreciative level? and 2) When students are provided with opportunities to state their opinions about an instructional practice (structured partner and small-group dialogue) will they be able to say how it affects their learning? The first question focused on our current understanding of the role of talk in cognition as uncovered by recent research. If the importance of talk in learning is not acknowledged by educators and therefore perhaps not explicitly visible within classroom practice then students will not have the opportunity to weigh the relative value of talking with peers. The second question sought to explore whether or not students ascribed any value to classroom activities that focused on opportunities for structured oral language strategies.

The literature review revealed the importance of talk in learning. The findings section of this chapter provides the qualitative analysis of the data that were collected. The findings, based on the student responses, indicate a range of perspectives and views on structured-talk activities. Extracts were taken from student responses to focus group questions, short-answer questions and surveys to highlight students' perceptions. The findings were analysed qualitatively with students' views on learning and talking with peers in partner groups being organized into specific categories. The findings are discussed in terms of how students' thinking relates to current research in cognition.

Qualitative Analysis of the Findings

Grade four students were asked their perceptions about talk and learning in the language arts classroom. The focus-group questions were designed to generate a

conversation about whether talking within a group or partnership affects their thinking and learning. The short-answer questions provided an opportunity for more reflection and a chance to record thoughts not shared during the focus groups. Information gleaned from the Likert surveys, short-answer questions and the focus groups has been reviewed and compiled into categories. With this qualitative analysis, care has been taken not to misuse or enlarge the students' thoughts and perceptions about classroom practice. This analysis, or reflection on the data, is in consideration of what has been already confirmed in other studies. The categories that were chosen reflect the questions asked. The questions asked stem from the literature reviewed in this study. The categories that follow reveal the students' thinking about classroom practice and the learning that occurs there.

Co-Construction of Knowledge

When students were asked whether or not listening to others can have an effect on their own ideas, the Likert survey revealed that four students of the ten were either undecided or believed that the ideas of others would not change the opinions they had about literature. After engaging in a unit of oral language strategies in either dyads or small groups, all participants except one believed that the ideas that others share do affect their own thinking. This one student changed his mind from disagreeing with the statement that talking with others can change one's own ideas to then being undecided on this statement.

Students' comments from either the focus group responses or the individual written responses on this topic were insightful. The following examples suggest that students' have some understanding that learning is not about acquiring a static idea, but

that it is a collection of ideas, generated among students, that can be constructed to fit with what they know at that moment in time.

M1: Sometimes they can come up with ideas and I can come up with ideas. You can put them together and add more ideas to it.

F1: When you talk with your partner you can get their ideas and then you can mix your ideas together. You can make an even bigger idea.

M2: People can share their ideas and mix them so we get a big idea.

F3: Sometimes I don't know about topics or the books we read and other students have better ideas.

F4: You might just use your own ideas, but you can think about the other person's ideas too.

There is a clue from the students' thinking that the ideas that peers are bringing to group discussions are most often within their peers' range of understanding in order for them to consider them and combine them with what they already know. Von Glasersfeld (2007) suggested that the ideas that are brought forth must be viable given the students' previous experiences. These students do not indicate that there has been a cognitive restructuring of understanding, but simply that they like using the ideas that their peers bring to discussions. Watkins (2005) would argue that "ways of knowing are built between" students when they are given the opportunity to toss ideas around and listen to suggestions their partner offers (p. 116).

There was an indication that the practice of, or talk around, using the ideas that others bring to discussions was not fully developed for some students. The idea that abandoning one's own idea for the more appealing idea that a peer has offered might seem to suggest that one was crossing a precarious bridge towards inappropriate student conduct. When students were asked whether they ever took the ideas of others for their

own use, M1 responded, “Sometimes.” M3’s immediate reflection that this was “stealing” implies that any discussions during this year, or previous years, around the positive practice of sharing and using all ideas that one hears in the classroom had not solidified for this student. In our room, we used Johnston’s (2004) strategy of taking a line from a published author that you wish you had been clever enough to write yourself. We extended this to students acknowledging the classmate who wrote the “...line you wish you had written” (Johnston, p. 16). Another student was better able to clarify the thinking around using another student’s idea:

F4: Some people might just think that you’re copying them but it just means that you like their ideas.

In light of the research reviewed on theories of cognition and constructing one’s own understanding, it is evident that this research provides limited understanding on the process of how students do construct knowledge. Rather, this research provides examples of how students articulate their thinking around learning with peers. It is interesting that they naturally utilize the metaphor of *building* understandings or ideas to describe their own thinking. For example, M1 thought that sharing ideas was beneficial because “you can build up ideas.” An indication of how this building of ideas might unfold is provided by the following student:

F6: If you put the ideas together, you can both use the one new idea on your paper. It’s like a web. There are lots of tiny ideas but they all might fit into one big idea. Or there is one big idea and lots of details are added to it.

When asked to clarify about “details” another student readily responded:

M1: You can add your own details like the different books you have read, but maybe your partner hasn’t. Sometimes a partner has more connections to other books and movies and more personal opinions.

F3 and M2 shared some interesting ideas about how learning new and possibly confusing ideas can be represented. F3's ideas about the benefits of listening to a classmate's ideas might help you with your own thinking was challenged by M2 in the following dialogue:

F3: You talk to a partner about something ...like in A/B partners. ...if you don't get a certain thing they can help you straighten it out and then if they don't get a certain thing then you can help them straighten it out. It becomes a circle, not a broken circle, but a smooth circle.

M2: (after stating that F3's idea about the circle doesn't make sense) Wouldn't it be bumpy?

F3: ... if it's bumpy, it means you don't know what you're doing and you don't know what something means. And you don't talk to anyone and you just get stuck and you sit there, but if you talk to a partner they can help you straighten it out...get rid of the bumps. And then, if they don't get something you can help them. First it has bumps and then it becomes smooth.

M2: I think the new ideas would be the bumps. The bumps are good because they show that you are figuring out something together.

These two students were able to provide an understanding of the process through which they struggle with making sense of new ideas. They divulge a view of learning from their perspective of what it is like working with peers. Further, they see themselves as full participants in learning and as such capable of providing insight towards their peers' understanding. Although it might be only two participants sharing this dialogue, and despite the fact that they do disagree on a technicality of what learning together might look like, they do understand the concept of how peers can work together to figure something out without help directly from the teacher.

Ground Rules for Working Together

When asked about their views on working with others in small group or partner situations, the following grade four students were able to state their observations and their perceptions of what group learning could or should look like. Additionally, they were able to identify which types of behaviours and actions are conducive to working effectively together.

F2: I give other kids a chance to talk, but I notice that some people like to be talking a lot of the time. I don't like that.

F3: I think it's okay for one off-topic person to be in a literature circle group, because if there's only one, then a whole bunch of people can help the off-topic person to start reading or discussing...

M1: You could take responsibilities in your own group. Like if someone isn't doing the right thing at the right time...like to tell them. We could correct them on what they are doing wrong.

F3: I would like to pick the people...then if I had to pull the plug on a lot of talking it would be with friends or classmates that I knew well. I would feel I had a better chance of turning their behaviour off.

These perspectives are similar to Carnell's (2005) findings that students are more comfortable working and sharing ideas with peers whom they know. F3 clarifies the reasons she thinks it is better to have peers she knows well as partners. She states that she would have a better chance to bring friends' behaviour in line with the purpose of the group work. This implies that in group work, F3 feels confident and perhaps willing to take on the responsibility to assure that the group is able to function well. These findings align with previous research where students stated that they would be able to remain focused on the task when they are feeling comfortable working within a group (Carnell).

Some comments reflect an understanding that group work depends not only on ground rules but on the ability to understand the roles of listener and speaker. This means

that the speaker's obligation is to speak clearly, link previous ideas with his or her own ideas and to provide justification or evidence for ideas stated. This idea was established in previous research such as that reported by Almasi et al. (2001) where they found that young students were able to assume the role of speaker, but taking on the role of listener proved more difficult. Almasi et al. stated that the roles of speaker and listener come with certain expectations and obligations and that these are not fully understood by young children. M2 felt that working together sometimes helps and sometimes does not. He has a sense of the obligations that a speaker is responsible for and was able to state that his partner was not fulfilling this role in certain areas.

M2: Sometimes partners need to be better for giving more details and to speak more clearly.

Grade four students also see encouragement as a requirement to elicit responses from classmates during discussions. Perhaps they are able to take on another's perspective by understanding how encouragement has worked in the past to get them talking and sharing more.

M2: They could also be nice and give more encouragement.

F2: Well, you need to be encouraging – to give encouragement in order for someone to continue talking. In a discussion, two or more people listen to each other and talk about the same topic.

M2: I already have good ideas but partners can encourage you to say more.

Students were also able to articulate the type of peer responses or reactions that would affect someone's efforts to participate in future discussions. The following statements show that students can feel empathy for a classmate who is not shown encouragement in a group setting:

F6: That when someone is trying to think of an idea, you could just let them think and then finally when they say their idea, you should acknowledge that their thinking is fine no matter what.

F3: If everyone yells and tells them they aren't right, then they would not feel encouraged to participate next time.

F6: Don't yell at them as they might not be as familiar with the topic as you are or your group is.

Carnell (2005) argued that students need the security of knowing that the group of people they work with will be supportive and provide a learning environment that is free from fear and embarrassment. Students' statements about providing support for all students' contributions can be aligned with Watkins' (2005) findings. He argues that the student wants his or her contributions to be valued and recognized.

Students are concerned with making sure everyone is on board with a basic set of ground rules that establish respect within discussions. There is an indication that being able to choose one's own partner or group members, or at least have a say in the matter, is one way to assure that there is cohesiveness in the group and therefore productivity toward a common purpose. All students agreed, on both the before and after Likert surveys, with the statement, "I like to have a choice about whom I work with." While this could be an indication that students simply want to work with their friends, it could be taken more seriously in terms of comfort with the group and motivation to participate fully. There was an indication that students got frustrated quickly when students did not follow common rules of courtesy.

F3: Well, it's a waste of time if someone doesn't take it seriously. That's why I want to choose my partners.

M1: We could have a firm rule that everyone has to take his or her own turn.

M3: ...when someone is talking, you need to be respectful and let one person talk at a time.

F4: There should be rules so that everyone is respectful.

M2: Only one person should be talking at a time or it is confusing.

There is a sense, from these opinions about basic ground rules, that students have reflected on their struggle to work with distractions caused by group members who are either off task or who are disrespectful. Their perceptions reveal frustrations about working in a disruptive environment. They also indicate the potential for students to communicate with one another about what types of environments support learning for them.

Usefulness of Talk in the Classroom

Carnell (2005) found that students were able to provide insight into how they benefited from group work. In this study, the Likert survey revealed that five students still disagreed with the statement, “It is easier to write if I can explain my thinking to a partner” after participating in a unit focused on structured oral language strategies. In the first Likert survey, two selected “strongly disagree” and three chose “disagree.” In the final Likert survey the five students who were in either of the “strongly disagree” or the “disagree” categories were now all in the “disagree” category. Although students believed that talking before writing did not affect their writing positively, their focus group statements contradicted this stance. Some students did find that talking before writing was a beneficial process.

M2: When they get time to tell about their ideas they can write about what they just said.

F5: The most useful is that they share their ideas. If I don't have lots of ideas then I don't like to write.

F4: When you walk together in walk-to-talk you get practice for what you'll write. It's easier and you get lots of information.

When asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement, “Talking helps me think,” all nine students showed agreement in the final Likert survey. It is interesting that when students were asked whether their talk helped with a writing task the majority deemed it as not so useful; however, all students found talking useful to thinking in general. M2, F5, and F4’s statements immediately above imply that there is some benefit in talking before writing.

Students provided some insight into the usefulness of talk as it related to their own purposes for classroom talk. For example, some students revealed that they would like an opportunity to have their voice heard in the classroom. One student was able to compare different types of instructional strategies to the opportunity this activity presented for talk in the classroom.

F4: Well, if you [the teacher] are talking to the whole class, it just depends on who you ask to talk. And if you do a quick turn and share, I still might not get a chance to talk. But with A/B partners you definitely get a turn to talk.

Some students had opinions on whether or not talking with a partner or in a group was valuable to them as a learning strategy. Students were able to consider a variety of classroom practices that included talk and they offered the following perspectives on their own learning style:

F6: I like working on my own.

F5: [Agreeing with F4, that yes, usually talking with a partner gives us more information about something] but sometimes it is just better to work by myself.

F2: I like to just write my ideas down on a piece of paper and get

on with it right away.

F3: *Usually it's helpful, but sometimes it is just better to work by myself.*

M2: [discussions help me] *because we can learn stuff we didn't know.*

F6: [I like working] *by myself. I learn best when there are no interruptions. I can't write when there is noise.*

F4: *The least useful is your partner when she gets off topic. It is a waste of time then.*

F6: *Sometimes it takes too long and a lot of people have the same ideas.*

Having the opportunity to talk in the classroom is seen as having some benefits to some students, but it is also seen as having limitations to its helpfulness. It seems that many students have the desire to get on with work and often this means concentrating in a quiet environment that supports writing. When instruction is full-class, the chance to talk is dependent on whether the teacher calls on you to contribute to the conversation. One participant saw A/B partner talk as a sure way to contribute ideas to the conversation.

Talk as an Enjoyable and Effective way to Learn

In response to the question, *which type of talk activity helped you learn the most*, students provided the following opinions about the strategies used and why they believed this type of activity might support their own learning:

F6: *A/B partners because you get ideas from other people.*

F3: *I like A/B partners because you get to share what you think and then your partner gets to share what she thinks.*

F1: *I think A/B partners helps you learn the most. It is fun to hear what other people think.*

F3: *Getting different ideas from other students is most useful.*

These statements reflect an engagement with the literature being discussed as well as with the process of learning. Two thirds or six out of the nine participants responded that they did like to listen to the ideas of others. While two students were undecided and F1 responded that she did not like to listen to the ideas of others, the comments from both short answer questions and the focus groups corroborate that listening to others is an effective way to develop ideas. When students express that getting either help or ideas from others is useful, it seems to suggest that they might feel that what they share will be seen as possible solutions or new understandings for their peers as well.

Summary

In seeking students' perceptions of learning and certain aspects about how working together affects their learning it is evident that given the opportunity students can be reflective about their own learning. Discussion-based approaches that involve structured talk activities provide students with the processes and strategies that allow them to transfer these new skills and thus become independent in their own literacy tasks and future learning opportunities (Applebee et al., 2003). As students are developing the skills of effective group and partner communication, they are reflecting on their participation and progress in working with others. Explicitly naming the processes and strategies that students and teachers are using enables students to consider using those skills in the future.

Chapter Four

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of how using structured oral language strategies in the language arts classroom might support their learning. The findings, presented in Chapter Three, highlight students' perceptions of the use of instructional methods that include or focus on talking with peers. Students' perceptions, ideas and opinions about classroom activities were categorized according to dominant themes that emerged in their responses. The study centred on focus-group conversations where students' perceptions of structured oral language activities were shared and discussed with the teacher-researcher and a small group of peers. This chapter will provide an interpretation of the study and a discussion about the path between theory and practice for the teacher-researcher. Finally, the implications for both teaching and further research will be discussed in light of students' use of language in learning and incorporating students' perspectives into research and practice.

Interpretation of the Study

This study included an instructional unit that provided opportunities for students to engage in oral discussions about literature. The unit included teaching students the skills and tools to be effective participants in discussions. Research states that students need to be taught what speaking clearly, listening carefully and explaining ideas actually looks and sounds like (Baines et al., 2009; Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Learning how to put ideas out to the group or to develop opinions with a partner as well as how to evaluate the ideas that others are sharing are skills developed over time with support and a lot of contextualized experience. Developing a classroom community where members feel safe

to share their ideas is a component of studies where interaction and dialogue among students are being investigated. This study was situated within a distinct time framework and as such the sequencing and subsequent development of the initial listening and speaking skills occurred with little flexibility to add extra practice developing group-working skills. For example, a series of lessons that focused on students learning how to give clear, explicit directions and how to critically listen to directions took place early in the unit. Although students did reflect on their partner's and their own ability to give clear directions, in a typical classroom these types of lessons can be more effective, in my opinion, if they more gradually develop students' understanding of purposes for talk with the intent to revisit the lessons over the school year.

It is both the clarity through which one's thinking must be conveyed and the actual development of speaking and listening skills that will either support or hinder a peer's ability to follow what is being shared. These thinking and oral language skills are not something that can or should be developed abruptly in the classroom. A student's ability to consider, accept, adjust or reject the opinions and ideas of others develops over time. Encouraging students to keep an open mind and be critical of what they accept as a possible solution or reasonable explanation about a topic reflects that they, too, need to learn how to provide evidence and justification for the ideas they put forth. Equally important is the development of the oral language skills of speaking and listening.

The focus-group questions offered students the opportunity to reflect on their participation in partner or small-group discussions. What students were able to convey during the focus group sessions concurs with what other researchers have found. Students often feel more comfortable working in groups where they know the members and they

believe that listening to others' ideas can help them solidify and build their understanding (Carnell, 2005; Watkins, 2005; Evans, 2002).

It is clear that discussions that are more student-centred provide greater opportunities for dialogue around students' own questions, concerns or ideas. During focus group discussions, students were not just answering the questions put forth by the researcher, they were also considering what their peers had to say, providing direct responses to peers' insights, and clarifying the ideas that were connected to their own thinking on a topic. In this study, the ideas about students learning in groups are in light of both the focus group discussions and conversations that occurred within the unit of study and they also reflect what other researchers have already found (Carnell, 2005; Elbaum et al., 1997; Evans, 2002). Students were developing greater ability to monitor whether or not they were being understood, how to take turns, how to give feedback, how to connect and extend ideas, how to agree and how to disagree. Self- and peer-assessments were used during the unit to provide students with opportunities to reflect on how they were developing the skills necessary for small group or partner work.

For both the teacher and the researcher there was a specific plan, which was research-based, to develop students' abilities and confidence in speaking and thinking together (Baines et al., 2009). It was predominantly within the role of teacher that students' ideas, opinions and suggestions about classroom practices were transferred into actual day-to-day practice as the literature discussion circles continued for the rest of the year. Providing students with time to share their perceptions and then putting their choices and suggestions into action in the classroom sent a message to students that their opinions about classroom practices are important. The foundation of all ethics, as

Maturana and Varela (1987) argue, is to let our day-to-day practices reflect the presence of others. In this study, which considers how students feel about certain practices that ultimately affect their engagement and participation in the language arts classroom their opinions were not only of value to my understanding of the role of language in learning but also to a teacher's sense of how day-to-day classroom literacy initiatives might unfold for students.

Reflections on Theory and Practice

It would stand to reason that the more one can sustain a focus of learning on a particular facet of teaching and learning, the more likely it will be that pedagogical knowledge will be deepened. This is the profit that is garnered by the teacher through conversations and professional development focused on the practical. Similarly, sustained focus on the theoretical should also have an effect on day-to-day classroom practice. For a teacher-researcher, it can often be the relationship between theory and practice that will cause the most tension (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). With a heightened focus on research, the teacher-researcher's role is undertaken with new theoretical understandings, new terminology and enhanced purpose for transforming classroom practice. As a teacher-researcher, both theoretical and practical knowledge have been at the core of this study. In this research project, it is true that there has been a heightened interest, focus and concentration on student learning within the language arts classroom. It is this focus that has allowed me to more clearly reflect on the relationship between theory and practice.

While a researcher might imply, or clearly state as I have, that his or her research is situated within a particular theoretical frame of reference, it is more than likely that a

number of other theories could have provided insight into particular aspects of the study. Understanding curriculum in terms of gender, political, racial, or critical theories would be appropriate lenses to begin viewing the structures and practices we have in classrooms. In 1969, Schwab (2004) argued for the need of the eclectic arts to join theories. The complexity of classrooms dictates that there will be a variety of influences and factors at work at any given time from which a practitioner or researcher might gain knowledge. With greater insight into the many ways a curriculum can be enacted in classrooms comes the responsibility to be critically attuned to the social and intellectual milieu within the classroom. The teacher or researcher's own biases, whether or not he or she is aware of them, will affect decisions about instruction. It is from the teacher's own place in the world that choices about what constitutes appropriate literature for a group of students and what would be an effective way to interpret literature comes into play. Preparing the literature review for this project has brought a renewed awareness that many of the expectations that we place on student learning are derived from a desire to maintain a status quo within society. We only open our students' lives to other perspectives and other possibilities when we ourselves as educators are open to a broad range of social experiences.

A socio-constructivist framework provided the appropriate structure for a study that included a language arts unit focused on dialogue and interaction. Within this unit the teacher-researcher presented strategies that built on students' background knowledge. The teacher modeled what the learning would look like thus providing the scaffolding necessary for students to successfully interact in student-led literature discussion groups (Maloch, 2002). Support continued as the teacher-researcher monitored students'

discussions and provided prompts which encouraged students to interact independently. The data collection for this project included students engaging in conversations in focus group sessions. Students' interactions within these discussions demonstrated both consideration of and the extension of the ideas contributed by peers.

The data were categorized within Chapter Three, yet a particular perspective provided by a student, as insightful and resolute as it was, remained uncategorized. It is in the placing of his opinion here in the discussion that the researcher hopes it will receive the attention it demands. Students were asked to consider the composition of groups and to offer some ideas and perceptions of situations that offer the best conditions for learning. M2 thought that it would be best to work in all male groups. He offered his perspectives of why working with girls is of little value to his learning:

If I'm with girls I don't learn anything. When they say something, I already know it. I would never learn anything new.

When he was asked to clarify, he very seriously justified his thinking by adding:

I'm just saying, I already know most of the stuff, because I am usually the first one done and in a group I am the one who ends up helping people. When girls say something, I do already know it.

While the teacher-researcher could consider these statements and opinions as stemming from messages received in the home, community or through the media, it could just as easily have been the classroom environment, including choice of literature, group structure and composition, and a lack of opportunities for students to appreciate the contributions of all participants, that could be factored into either maintaining or extending gender or status issues in the classroom. Studies such as those by Elbaum et al.

(1997), Sauntson (2007), Evans (2002), and Meloth and Deering (2004) have emphasized the influence and force with which status and gender can dominate in student interactions that were intended for learning. Adding students' perceptions to inquiries would provide teachers with greater understanding of how children describe learning in group situations and might give students like M2 the opportunity to alter this learned perspective.

Additionally important is an awareness of the effects these guiding perspectives and motivators can have on other members of the classroom.

Having an understanding of how learning might look from a social constructivist perspective has added a particular focus on students working together, sharing ideas, and, importantly, developing the skills and attitudes that allow them to interact purposefully and effectively. It is their perceptions of classroom practice that have provided additional ideas of what learning might look like in classrooms. It is here that the practical has meshed with the theoretical. The complexity of classrooms, which includes the role of the practical, or teacher putting programs in action with a diverse group of individuals, makes it necessary to be aware of the broad spectrum of theories that can enlighten practice. Schwab (2004) stated that "any one of the extant theories of behaviour is a pale and incomplete representation of actual behaviour" (p. 111). In reflecting on the relationship between theory and practice, and given the complexity of classrooms, it is the dynamics and unpredictability of classrooms that challenges any one theory as an explanation for how learning takes place.

Implications for Research and Practice

The practice of collecting data through small focus group sessions proved to be a valuable tool from both the perspective of the researcher and the classroom teacher. For

the teacher, there was new insight into the types of thinking and responses that grade four students could offer about their learning. Focus groups allowed students the time to listen to peers and consider their perspectives and then offer their own. Small-group discussions would be an effective tool within the classroom in addition to full-class meeting times. Not all students feel comfortable offering their ideas in a full-class setting.

As a researcher, the skill of developing and asking the right questions that stimulate conversations is something that is important at the very core of the study. In this study, some questions evoked much richer responses and other questions were almost bypassed within the process of focus groups. Rather than having individual written responses (short-answer questions), it might be valuable to interview students one-on-one. Checking for meaning could happen as questions are answered orally rather than collecting papers, reading for meaning and then going back to students for any clarification or member checking. Another option for future research would be to incorporate a reflection journal which would use sentence prompts that would focus students' reflections on topics directly related to the research questions.

Data were collected from the Likert survey, the focus group sessions and from students' responses to short-answer questions. A qualitative analysis of the data resulted in the data being organized into categories or themes about how students felt about learning together through dialogue and interaction. There are other methods of analysis that could have been chosen to represent the data from this study. Placing the findings into themes is the method that was determined to best reflect students' perceptions of specific classroom activities. Additionally, the sample size of this study is quite small. Even if this unit of study and similar data collection were applied to a very similar

classroom, it would be the complexity found within each classroom that would ultimately hinder any conclusive comparisons.

Schwab (2004) stated that students are not only “group interactors” but also “possessors of private lives” (p. 108). The parts of their lives that I have had the privilege of getting to know in the classroom are only some components of their complex identities. The role of both teacher and researcher allowed the context of the study to be a less complicated place than it would be to a researcher stepping into the classroom for a period of time. Focus group sessions and literature discussion groups took place with a group of students and their teacher who had already spent five months getting to know each other. Choosing to look directly at students’ perceptions without interpreting the classroom products that arose from this unit of study allowed greater clarity and focus in finding out what students simply think about their experiences in working and talking with their peers in group and partner settings.

Conclusion

Within a socio-constructivist framework, language arts classrooms are now being seen as communities where diverse individuals come together to share their ideas and perspectives. A teacher’s role is to provide opportunities for collaboration (Au, 1998; Langer, 1995). This means that students need to be given explicit instruction on how to keep an open mind, take on different perspectives, justify ideas, monitor if they understand, give feedback to peers, and connect and extend ideas. It cannot be stressed enough how these demands of thinking together challenge students. These skills are certainly not exclusive to the language arts classroom. Discussion-based approaches that involve structured talk activities provide students with the processes and strategies that

allow them to transfer these skills and strategies and thus become independent in their own literacy tasks in the future (Applebee et al., 2003).

The findings of this study provide evidence that students do have opinions about instructional practices. Further, students state that there are certain activities that they would prefer to participate in over others. When teachers take the time to listen to students' perceptions of classroom practice, and then put their ideas into action, it demonstrates that their opinions matter.

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Appendix A

Information/Recruitment Script for the Research Study: “Students’ Perceptions of Oral Language Activities: A Teacher’s Inquiry Into the Importance of Talk in the Language Arts Classroom”

I want to explain to you about a research study Ms. Clayton is taking at the University of Victoria. The reason I’m telling you this is because since she is your teacher she doesn’t want to put any pressure on you to participate by asking you herself. Please think very carefully before you agree to participate or not participate.

Often the class works on lessons that focus on using discussions or partner talk as a way of understanding books you will read together. Ms. Clayton’s study is about the usefulness of this partner talk. So, if you decide to take part, it’s going to involve about an hour of your time during or after school on maybe two occasions. If you decide to participate, you will be filling in a questionnaire and then talking in a small group with Ms. Clayton about your classroom experiences.

I’m going to give you a letter for you to read with your parents or guardians. Please talk about this letter with them, because if you do decide to participate you will need your parent’s or guardian’s permission. If you decide to participate please bring your permission form back to me. If you decide not to participate please recycle this paper.

Until the unit is completed and you have your grade, Ms. Clayton will not know who is participating in her study. Thank you for listening to me. I am now going to give you the letter to take home and you can put it in your locker on your way back to class.

Appendix B

Parent Consent Form



Jill Clayton



January 26, 2009

“Grade Four Students’ Perceptions of Oral Language Activities: A Teacher’s Inquiry Into the Importance of Talk in the Language Arts Classroom”

Dear Parents,

As a graduate student at the University of Victoria, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master of Education degree. Permission to conduct the study has been given by the principal of the school and the [REDACTED]. Your child is being asked to participate in this study because he/she is a student in my grade four class.

The purpose of this research project is to investigate the effectiveness of talking with classmates prior to students beginning their own writing. My study aims to consider if children value this time, use it appropriately and support their classmates in this task.

What is involved? If you agree to your child’s voluntary participation in this research, this will include your child completing two questionnaires and attending two (possibly) small group conversations where I will ask a set of open-ended questions about their experiences of this teaching strategy. I plan to audiotape the conversations and analyse the information that the students share with me.

Risks: There are no known or anticipated risks to your child by participating in this research. The instructional strategy, of having students share their ideas prior to writing, is an ongoing practice within the grade four classroom. The talk activities that students will be questioned about have already taken place in the classroom as part of the regular curriculum. Participating or not participating in the study will not influence any class marks, as the research does not involve students’ work, specifically their writing.

Voluntary Participation: Please note that your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you or he/she decides to withdraw he/she may do so at any time without consequence or explanation. If your child withdraws from the study, his/her questionnaire will not be used in the analysis of data; however, it will be impossible for me to remove your child’s voice from the audiotapes should you or your child decide to withdraw from the study.

On-going consent: To confirm that you and your child continue to consent to participate in this research, I will contact you when it is time to schedule the second discussion group. The questionnaire and conversations will be conducted in late January or early February, 2009. There may be more than one session of conversations and I will remind you through your child.

Anonymity and confidentiality: The data collected in this study (discussion group tapes and transcripts and written responses) will be kept in a locked filing cabinet while the study is under way. Your child will not have his or her name in the study, nor will the school or the local area be identified; however, I cannot guarantee confidentiality due to the nature of focus group discussions with other students. My research data will not be further analysed for other studies nor will it be submitted for commercial purposes.

Dissemination of Results: The results of this study will be shared with a supervisory committee at the University of Victoria.

Disposal of Data: Data from this study will be destroyed upon completion of the written project for this study. Electronic files will be deleted, audio cassettes will be erased and transcripts will be shredded.

Contacts: If there are any questions you would like to ask my supervisor about the study you may contact [REDACTED] at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria [REDACTED] to have your concerns addressed.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study. Before signing, I invite you to contact me so that I can answer any further questions you might have. I can be reached at school at [REDACTED], or by email at [REDACTED].

Parent/Guardian Consent form

“Grade Four Students’ Perceptions of Oral Language Activities: A Teacher’s Inquiry Into the Importance of Talk in the Language Arts Classroom”

I give permission for _____ to participate
(Name of Child)

OR

I do not give permission for _____ to participate
(Name of Child)

in the research project, “Grade Four Students’ Perceptions of Oral Language Activities: A Teacher’s Inquiry Into the Importance of Talk in the Language Arts Classroom” being conducted by Ms. Jill Clayton.

Please check below if permission is given for your son/daughter to participate in:

- the small group discussions in the early afternoon (up to two times, audio taped)
- filling out the questionnaire and participating in the small group discussions in the early afternoon (up to two times, audio taped)
- only filling out the questionnaire at the first group discussion

Parent’s Parent/Guardian Signature)

(Date)

Please keep the attached letter and return this signed permission form to [REDACTED] in the labelled return envelope.

Appendix C

Student Consent Form “Students’ Perceptions of Oral Language Activities: A Teacher’s Inquiry into the Importance of Oracy in Language Arts”

Dear Students,

January 26, 2009

As well as being a teacher, I am a graduate student at the University of Victoria. As part of my degree, I need to conduct a research project. You are being invited to participate in this research study.

As part of the regular curriculum, we will be focusing on the use of talk or “dialogue” as a means to discuss books we read as a full class. I will be asking you to think about how you learn best. I am interested in grade four students’ ideas about how useful talking with others is in your opinion. I will be writing a research project about participants’ ideas about talk in the classroom. I won’t be using your real names in the project. Your ideas, however, will have been given to me while you were in a group. Some people might be able to recognize the thoughts that you shared in group talks.

You need to choose whether or not you want to participate in the project. If you choose not to participate in the study, you will participate in all activities because the full class will be participating in these activities regardless of the research project. Your consent form should be returned to [REDACTED]. [REDACTED] has been chosen to hand out and collect parent and student consent forms. She takes on this role so she can remind students that it is entirely a student’s decision whether or not they would like to participate. You will not have to give a reason why you do or do not want to participate in the study.

Your parents/guardians have a letter that has more information about the study and who they can contact if they have questions about the study. Students, please share this letter with your parents. Parents, please talk about this with your child and if they consent, have them sign below:

Student Consent

My parent(s)/ guardian(s) and I have reviewed the information in this consent form together and I consent to participate in Ms. Clayton’s master’s project research report.

Name of Participating Student

Student’s Signature

Date

Appendix D

Name _____

Date _____

Questionnaire on Talk during Pre-Writing Strategies

Circle the number that best matches your opinion. – How strongly do you agree or disagree with the statement? 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Undecided 4=Agree 5=Strongly Agree

1. I like to listen to the ideas of others.....	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is easier to write if I can explain my thinking to a partner	1	2	3	4	5
3. My ideas can change when I listen to others.....	1	2	3	4	5
4. My ideas can change when I talk with others.....	1	2	3	4	5
5. Talking about how I learn is easy for me.....	1	2	3	4	5
6. I am uncomfortable talking to others about my ideas.....	1	2	3	4	5
7. Learning in a group is easier than learning alone.....	1	2	3	4	5
8. Talking helps me think.....	1	2	3	4	5
9. I like to share my ideas with others.....	1	2	3	4	5
10. Talking with a partner about my ideas takes up too much time.....	1	2	3	4	5
11. I find it easy to talk about the strategies that help me learn.....	1	2	3	4	5
12. I like partner work better than small group work.....	1	2	3	4	5
13. I work well with friends.....	1	2	3	4	5
14. I get a lot of work accomplished when I work in a small group.....	1	2	3	4	5
15. I like to have a choice in who I work with.....	1	2	3	4	5
16. My reading responses make more sense if I get a chance to talk about my ideas before writing.....	1	2	3	4	5
17. I would rather get work done than socialize.....	1	2	3	4	5
18. I get more done when I work by myself	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted from British Columbia Ministry of Education. (1988). *Enhancing and evaluating oral communication in the intermediate grades: Teacher's resource package*. Victoria: Author; Cantwell, R. H., & Andrews, B. (2002). Cognitive and Psychological Factors Underlying Secondary School Students' Feelings Towards Group Work. *Educational Psychology*, 22(1), 75-91; and Warrender, C. 2008, Draft Master of Education Project, *Student perceptions of structured talk activities*.

Appendix E

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Which type of oral language activities did you enjoy the most?
2. Which type of talk activity helped you learn the most?
3. How did this type of talk help you learn?
4. How did talk activity affect your thinking?
5. Describe how you work well with others.
6. What made it difficult to work with others?
7. What would you change about how we use talk in the classroom?
8. What advice might you give a new teacher who is wondering about student-led discussions for learning?
9. What is learning?
10. Who is more important in your learning, the teacher or you? Why?
11. What is your definition of a discussion?
12. Suppose a new student wanted to join your group discussion. What should he or she need to know?
13. What is the student's role during the discussion?
14. What is the teacher's role during the discussion?

Appendix F

Short Answer Questions

1. When students in our class spend ten minutes talking to partners in A/B partner talk, Turn and Share or Walk to Talk:
How useful is this time talking to a classmate?
2. When we do A/B partner work before you have to write on your own, what do you find most useful? What is least useful?
3. In your opinion, why do you think I include this time for talk just before students go off and write on their own?
4. If I decided not to include this time for talk, would your writing be any different?
How?
Can you think of some writing as an example of this?
5. Do you like to participate in A/B partner talk? If yes, why? If no, please describe why not?
6. What would you tell a student teacher about talk as a pre-writing strategy? Do you think a new teacher should get in the habit of using A/B partner talk or small group work?
Why?
7. Do you think a new teacher should get in the habit of using A/B partner talk or small group work? Why?
8. When do you learn the best? (In what kinds of situations?)
9. How do discussions with classmates help you?
10. Why do you think your teacher encourages you to discuss?
11. Do you prefer to choose your own partner? Why?
12. Think about some of your group members' participation. Why do you think some group members participated as they did?