

Transforming policy, teaching practice and learning in reading and higher-cognitive talk



The impact of Westbrook and Sutherland's work can be measured at the national level, through changes to national policy but also through the development of training and materials for teacher education and improved practice in schools directly affecting student learning.

Research at Sussex on two key areas of literacy – reading and higher-cognitive talk – has helped shape national education policy, informing approaches to talk and leading to a new assessment framework and national training materials on exploratory talk for all secondary-school English teachers, as well as influencing teacher education and practice in schools and pupil learning. Encouraging secondary school initiatives, such as the innovative Drop Everything and Read project, this research is helping to motivate pupils to read more, with associated and significant improvements in reading attainment, oral skills and confidence.

Overview

Developing higher-cognitive or higher-order forms of thinking, such as analysis, hypothesis, synthesis and evaluation, requires teaching approaches that focus on talk, enabling pupils to practise these processes in talking about texts they have read. Such thinking is central to all learning and is associated with many benefits, including critical thinking and the capacity to exercise judgement in a multitude of situations in their future lives.

Research at the University of Sussex by Julia Sutherland and Jo Westbrook, both Senior Lecturers in Education, has helped transform teaching practice and pupil learning in the areas of reading and higher-cognitive

talk. Their work has informed policy, leading to new assessment methods for children in Years 7-9; helped in the development of new national training materials on exploratory talk for all secondary-school English teachers, as well as pupils' learning in both talk and reading; and has established best practice in English classrooms in these two key areas of literacy.

This research, which took place between 2004 and 2012, directly involved 25 teachers and around 1,600 pupils through five successive and related projects. Engaging the research users directly in the research process, three of the projects included teachers as partners in their design and implementation, with teachers researching autonomously in partner schools across Sussex and beyond. This approach established a research culture in schools that ensures that the findings are embedded in teaching practice.

Jo Westbrook led two of the projects, one of which involved interviews with English teachers on their knowledge of reading comprehension processes, children's literature and classroom practices. She also conducted a six-year practitioner-inquiry project that developed reading comprehension skills of long, complex novels among lower-attaining pupils. Her research findings showed that pupils' independent reading, which is a requirement for successful comprehension, is insufficiently developed by English departments and schools. In addition, she demonstrated that pupils require access to sufficiently challenging contextual material and time dedicated to independent reading, and that

higher-order questioning by teachers contributes significantly to pupils' success in reading and understanding whole texts.

Julia Sutherland conducted two projects funded by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA): one introduced guided reading to 13 secondary English classes (approximately 390 pupils), involving trainees and mentors; and the other involved six trainee teachers in five schools, and their classes and mentors, promoting group talk and higher-order thinking. A third, year-long project (2007-2008) focused on developing exploratory talk in small groups, particularly in reading texts. Teachers were involved in the research process, with cross-school research and pupils exchanging formative feedback on videotaped talk to peers in partner schools. Sutherland demonstrated that the quality of peer exploratory talk and thinking can be developed among pupils and that such talk, accompanied by reflection, can have a liberating effect on pupils, enabling them to experiment with different identities and ways of talking, as well as supporting the development of reading skills.

Achieving impact

The impact of Westbrook and Sutherland's work can be measured at the national level, through changes to national policy on assessment and professional development, but also through the development of training and materials for teacher education and improved practice in schools directly affecting pupil learning.

In terms of policy impact, in 2010, influenced by Sutherland's research, a new national assessment framework for talk in English was developed. Exploratory talk and reflection on talk were established as two of four Assessment Focuses to measure progress among Year 7-9 pupils. The theoretical rationale for this policy was published in national training materials for all English departments, and cited Sutherland's TTA-funded work on the importance of promoting pupils' group talk and higher-order thinking in cognitive development and academic achievement. Training materials were distributed to Heads of English nationally and used in national training events for the Secondary National Strategy as professional development

tools for both Subject Leaders and teacher-educators in Initial Teacher Education (ITE). Sutherland's second TTA-funded project (2006) directly influenced national policy on the teaching of talk in secondary schools, being referenced in the rationale for a significant shift in direction towards including group talk in English (Department for Education and Skills, 2007).

Westbrook and Sutherland's research findings have been disseminated through publications in peer-review journals and chapters in three key textbooks for English teachers, at national and local conferences and through the former Department for Children, Families and Schools 'Teacher Training Research Bank' Web site (2006-2010). The textbooks are cited as key texts for secondary Postgraduate Certificate of Education/ Graduate Teacher Programmes on an ITE (English) site, funded by the Training and Development Agency for Schools, and are having a significant impact on the practice of trainees and experienced teachers of English across the country, including those on Masters programmes.

Engagement with six 'flagship' schools has had significant impact on teaching practice and pupil attainment. For example, Westbrook's collaboration with one local school with predominantly low socioeconomic intakes triggered their developing the Drop Everything and Read project, where all pupils and staff read daily for 15 minutes to develop a culture of independent reading. This has raised pupils' reading attainment and motivation to read. The school believes that the project has contributed to a significant increase in their GCSE English results over the last four years and it has helped reduce the number of pupils whose reading age is below average.

Sutherland's work has led to innovative practice on guided reading and group talk in a range of schools, including Brighton Aldridge Academy, Dorothy Stringer High School and Peacehaven Community School. Speak Out!, a project at Patcham High School (2011-2014), was directly influenced by Sutherland's work on collaborative talk. It involves developing the oral skills and confidence of the entire school, with a particular focus

on preparing pupils from lower socioeconomic groups to progress to successful employment, training or education. Speak Out! is currently working with three other schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Sussex.

Future impact

A new Sussex Research Development Fund interdisciplinary research project on reading comprehension, in collaboration with Professor Jane Oakhill in Psychology, is under way. This pilot project, which will be worked up into an ESRC major grant, has attracted interest from school networks, in part through participation in two Higher Education Innovation Fund conferences (June/July 2014). Westbrook and Sutherland have been contacted by Heads of English in low socioeconomic status areas who are keen to be included in this project, as it meets their needs, the Pupil Premium and Widening Participation agendas and the new National Curriculum (July 2014). Twenty teachers and 422 pupils in ten schools across Sussex and Brighton & Hove are now half way through the quasi-experimental project that draws directly on Westbrook and Sutherland's work and further develops this through Oakhill's work on inference and comprehension.

Funding and partnership

Project funding has been provided by the Teacher Training Agency, and Westbrook and Sutherland have worked in partnership with a range of schools across Brighton & Hove and Sussex.

Working with us

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