Ambition Institute

TEACHER HANDBOOK

B11 | BEHAVIOUR: PAIRS AND GROUPS

WATCH

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READ | EVIDENCE SUMMARY

TEACHING CHALLENGE

Ms Silva can keep pupils on task when they practise independently. There are times when she feels it could be valuable for pupils to work in pairs or groups, but she is frustrated that pupils can go off task or produce poor work when she allows them to talk. How can she manage the way pupils conduct discussions so they get maximum learning benefit from collaboration?

KEY IDEA

Teachers need to prepare for and intentionally support behaviours that enable quality pupil talk.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Ms Silva can support talk that enables effective pair and group work by understanding that:

> There are behavioural challenges particular to group and paired work. Teachers can pre-empt them by pre-planning groupings, and sharing and checking behavioural expectations and practice.

> Effective talk tasks support pupils to talk successfully if they avoid overloading pupil working memory so pupils can articulate key ideas, consolidate understanding and extend their vocabulary.

> Teachers can support pupils to manage their behaviour and learning during collaboration.

GETTING PUPIL BEHAVIOUR RIGHT IN TALK TASKS

At the heart of pair and group work is effective pupil talk. High-quality discussions help pupils better understand what they already know by articulating their thoughts more clearly (EEF, 2018). Peer discussion is also beneficial for building vocabulary, and aids social and linguistic development (Alexander, 2017).

However, when pupils work with their peers it can give rise to behavioural issues, as pupils may get distracted or be unable to complete a task. Just as when introducing other classroom routines, teachers should anticipate and plan to avoid behavioural problems (Kern & Clemens, 2007). To promote on-task talk, Ms Silva can:

> **Outline behavioural expectations:** Where appropriate share specific words to try to use, time limits and rules for turn taking. The EEF (2018) provide an example of rules for discussion.

> **Explain why these behaviours are important:** If pupils know why something is effective, they're more likely to do it properly and be more motivated to do the hard thinking expected of them (Coe et al., 2014; EEF, 2017).

> **Check understanding:** To succeed, pupils need to understand behavioural expectations and task instructions (Rosenshine, 2012).

> **Practise routines:** Pupils become more automatic and fluent through practice, so Ms Silva can ensure pupils talk successfully by regularly practising talk routines (Rosenshine, 2012).

Ms Silva should pre-plan groupings, as pupil groupings can affect pupil motivation and behaviour (Tereshchenko et al., 2018). She may wish to get pupils to work in pairs first, as this will help pupils to practise routines, behaviours and strategies of discussion, making it more likely pupils will talk successfully before working in larger groups. Once pupils are on task and thinking hard in pairs, she might start to trial group work – but only if she is confident that this will benefit learning. In short, Ms Silva should take an intentional approach to grouping pupils.

PREPARING TALK TASKS THAT SUPPORT PUPIL LEARNING

As well as getting the behaviour right, Ms Silva needs to ensure pupils have the best chance of learning successfully from talk. Pupils need to understand the goals of the task in relation to their learning. Because we 'learn what we think hard about' (Coe, 2013), Ms Silva's aim should be to get all pupils to think hard about important content during talk tasks. However, Ms Silva needs to balance this with ensuring that her pupils experience success, as this is critical for motivation and learning (Coe et al., 2014; Rosenshine, 2012).

A key factor in ensuring pupils think hard and experience success is teaching in ways that avoid overloading pupil working memory (Dean for Impact, 2015). Ms Silva's talk tasks are more likely to succeed if she:

> Makes the tasks themselves simple, while keeping the content challenging (Gathercole et al., 2006). For example, using tasks with minimal steps.

> Builds on existing pupil knowledge (Deans for Impact, 2015).

> Provides enough guidance and support, for example, scaffolding (Rosenshine, 2012).

High-quality classroom talk can support pupils to articulate key ideas, consolidate understanding and extend their vocabulary. Knowledgeable pupils are likely to get more insights from discussing their existing knowledge than they could without discussion (Kirschner et al., 2018). Therefore, Ms Silva should consider when in the learning sequence she introduces talk tasks, as they are likely to be more effective after behavioural expectations become embedded and pupil knowledge increases.

SUPPORTING PUPILS TO MANAGE THEIR LEARNING IN TALK TASKS

Having prepared tasks that support on-task behaviour and learning, how can Ms Silva now manage pupils during talk tasks? She can:

> **Circulate:** Ensuring pupils are on task and not struggling (Rosenshine, 2012).

> **Support:** Directing pupil attention to available scaffolding (Van der Pol et al., 2015).

> **Reinforce:** Using praise, rewards and sanctions to reinforce desired behaviours (IES, 2008).

The preparation Ms Silva has done should support pupils to self-manage their behaviour and learn more effectively. This will allow Ms Silva to focus more on supporting pupil learning and less on managing off-task behaviour during paired and group talk.

NUANCES AND CAVEATS

It is best when pupils are taught new knowledge before introducing pair or group work. They may struggle if peer collaboration is introduced too early in the learning sequence.

While it is possible for teachers to pick up on pupil misconceptions during pupil discussions, this is not likely to be the quickest or most efficient way of checking for understanding: strong whole-class questioning might be more effective. Discussions are best used to help pupils organise their knowledge.

Ability grouping shows limited evidence of impact on pupil outcomes (Coe et al., 2014). Ms Silva must ensure the groups pupils are placed in don't negatively affect pupil attainment, behaviour and motivation. Ms Silva should ensure her within-class pupil groups are flexible and that she continuously considers whether pupils are in a group because this is an effective way of tailoring support for an identified pupil need e.g. ensuring groups based on attainment are subject specific and changing groups regularly, avoiding the perception that groups are fixed.

CHECK

Answer the questions below to check your understanding of the evidence summary. Answers are available at the bottom of the 'Reflect' section.

1. What are the benefits of classroom discussions for pupils?

   a.) Help pupils to articulate their thoughts more clearly.

   b.) Beneficial for building vocabulary and aiding social and linguistic development.

   c.) Helpful as a mechanism for pupils to teach each other new content.

   d.) Help pupils to better understand what they already know.

2. What strategies can you use to make classroom discussions successful?

   a.) Let pupils have a go and work out how to talk effectively – practice makes perfect!

   b.) Set clear rules for discussion and communicate these expectations.

   c.) Monitor the quality of discussions.

   d.) Decide what the purpose of each discussion is and communicate this to pupils.

3. Which of these are good reasons to get pupils discussing their knowledge in pairs or small groups?

   a.) To find out whether pupils have any misconceptions about the information they've been taught.

   b.) To allow pupils to explore and use knowledge they are comfortable with, and ask each other questions to help further organise knowledge in their mental models.

   c.) To help pupils verbally articulate their thoughts about content they are familiar with before writing, so that the quality of their writing is improved.

   d.) To motivate pupils; because pupils like talking to their peers they are likely to stay on task.

FURTHER READING

Education Endowment Foundation (2018). Sutton Trust-Education Endowment Foundation Teaching and Learning Toolkit. bit.ly/ecf-eef14. See entry on oral language interventions.

REFLECT

A REMINDER OF THE KEY TAKEAWAYS:

Ms Silva can support talk that enables effective pair and group work by understanding that:

> There are behavioural challenges particular to group and paired work. Teachers can pre-empt them by pre-planning groupings, and sharing and checking behavioural expectations and practice.

> Effective talk tasks support pupils to talk successfully if they avoid overloading pupil working memory so pupils can articulate key ideas, consolidate understanding and extend their vocabulary.

> Teachers can support pupils to manage their behaviour and learning during collaboration.

1. What did you see in this module that you already do or have seen in other classrooms?

2. What do you feel is the gap between your current practice and what you have seen in this module?

3. Which of the 'key takeaways' do you need to focus on? Where and when might you try to apply them to your teaching?

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Van de Pol, J., Volman, M., Oort, F., & Beishuizen, J. (2015). The effects of scaffolding in the classroom: support contingency and student independent working time in relation to student achievement, task effort and appreciation of support. Instructional Science, 43(5), 615-641.

QUIZ ANSWERS

1. a, b, d

2. a, c, d

3. b, c