

Talk toolkits of teachers and children

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Teitl: Creating a speaking and listening classroom : integrating talk for learning at key stage 2

Enw'r Awdur: Dawes, Lyn

Enw'r Cyhoeddwr: Routledge

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Chapter 1

TALK TOOLKITS OF TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

The idea of talk as a ‘tool’ for use in learning originated in the early twentieth century in the writings of Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky realised that we use tools to think – that is, that words and speech are metaphorical tools put to use to develop and communicate understanding. We can take this idea – that language acts as a ‘set of tools’ – to analyse the ‘talk toolkit’ of teachers. For teachers, talk is really the main tool of the trade. But what talk tools are effective in terms of teaching and learning? It is evident to any classroom observer that some teacher talk is of immense benefit for learners, and some is a hopeless waste of time.

The next section offers examples of talk from primary classrooms, so that we can consider what is more, or less, effective in terms of teaching and learning. Before reflecting on these snippets from classroom life, it’s important to note that although it is very easy to point out how to teach, it is very difficult to actually do it. Yet most teachers are extremely good at their job. Their creativity, commitment and enthusiasm help children to learn day after day in schools. Such expertise is generated over time as teachers constantly reflect on their practice; self evaluation (often rather negative!) is a characteristic of the profession. The examples from classrooms included here are intended to contribute to developing practice. I offer no support to those who blame teachers for the ills of the education system in general, or children’s problems and difficulties with learning in particular.

The teacher’s toolkit: some ineffective talk

Transcript 1: Triangles is an example of a teacher (T) at work. Year 3 children are seated on a carpet around the teacher in a low chair. The Learning Intention for the lesson is: ‘To use everyday language to describe features of familiar 3-D shapes’.

We can consider what talk tools this teacher is using, and to what effect.

Transcript 1: Triangles

- T: Right, OK. You guys. I wonder who, um, can anybody tell me what we did in Numeracy last week? *(five hands go up)*
- T: Blake?
- Blake: Traditional tales?
- T: No, listen, numeracy. Numbers. What did we do? Anyone? *(still the same hands up)* Come on, you were all there. Polly? *(Polly does not have her hand up)*
- Polly: Triangles?

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T: Right! Shape is what we were doing, 2-D shapes, and last week we looked at triangles. What is important about a triangle? (*few hands are up*) Tamar sit on your bottom. Triangles you remember – we drew some and looked around the school. Gilliam you are listening today, you tell us (*Gilliam does not have her hand up*) – triangles (*draws a triangle in the air with her hands; other children wave and make 'I am bursting to tell you' noises*) . . .

Gilliam: (*pause*) The end of the Toblerone box?

T: Yes, right, that is the shape. Yes. But what do we know about them? Ria?

R: Three sides.

T: (*not entirely satisfied*) Ye-es, three sides. Anything else?

R: Three angles.

T: Not you Ria, let's give everyone a chance. Tamar. On your bottom. William?

W: Three sides and three angles, the same?

T: OK, well, OK. Three sides and three angles, but maybe not always the same, for a triangle. Remember? OK. (*moves on to questions about a square*)

Comment

This sort of talk is a complete waste of time in terms of learning. Why is it a waste of time? The answer is not simple, but is worth teasing out, because this sort of talk is universal in classrooms. It is well meaning, and the children seem to be joining in. But it is really pointless.

To find out why it is so futile, first we can look at some of the talk tools the teacher uses:

- 1 A brief marker to indicate that the lesson has begun.
- 2 Questions.
- 3 Reformulations – repeating and refining children's answers to fit the story of the lesson.
- 4 Recapitulations – repetitions and reminders about previous learning.
- 5 Commands to do with behaviour.
- 6 Feedback on responses.

In short, the teacher orchestrates the class talk. The questions are meant to engage children by appealing to their memories and their willingness to contribute. The teacher asks five questions, all of which are uninteresting. Some children contribute to the conversation. Most do not. Those that recall the last lesson learn nothing from this conversation; those that do not, learning nothing also. This would not be a problem if this sort of talk was infrequent, but such sessions can go on for ten or 15 minutes at a time, three or four times a day. The best we can say is that a few children are using key vocabulary.

The teacher constantly uses talk to deal with behaviour, such as putting up hands to bid for turns, or to show 'listening', or not sitting nicely. Primary children are often praised for 'sitting beautifully', and really you do wonder quite why this particular skill attracts such approval. Of course it is because those who are sitting beautifully are quiet and still, making the tedious question-and-answer routine seem more fluent and important. But those who conduct a sort of personal mini-riot in the form of shuffling, playing with shoelaces, drifting off into a dream or – heaven forbid – kneeling up, know what to expect. 'On your bottoms!' I think this phrase should be banned, along with 'sitting beautifully', 'I wonder who is going to tell me . . .' and 'I should be able to see more hands than that!'

Some of the 'rules' that govern this sort of classroom talk are:

- 1 The teacher talks, asking 'teacher's questions' – to which she already has an answer in mind.
- 2 The children listen, or appear to, and speak when invited.
- 3 Only some ideas are acceptable, and the teacher knows which.
- 4 'Hands up' signals a willingness to answer (strange variations are becoming more common as teachers try to move away from 'hands up' but to be honest, 'thinking thumbs' or other signals all have the same function).
- 5 'Calling out' is not allowed, except sometimes when a teacher is looking for a particular response and hears it said.
- 6 The teacher provides no straightforward information or explanation without cross-questioning the children.

These esoteric rules, not found in any other social setting, are learned rapidly when children enter school. This class can be seen to know them quite well.

We can identify some time-wasting features of the talk:

T: Can anybody tell me what we did in Numeracy last week?

By asking the children to think back, the teacher tries to contextualise future learning. The question is a typical 'teacher's question' – that is, a question to which the teacher already knows the answer. Most ignore it. It is not interesting. The idea of guessing what is in the teacher's mind has little appeal; someone else will play the game. And last week is a very long time ago.

Blake: Traditional tales?

T: No, listen, numeracy. Numbers.

Blake offers an idea of something that happened last week – the wrong thing. The problem of defining numeracy as 'numbers' does not help children who are thinking of triangular shapes as maybe having points or lines or colours.

T: Come on, you were all there. Polly? (*Polly does not have her hand up*)

Polly: Triangles?

Teachers often choose those children not waving their hands about. This may be to check who is paying attention, to bring up short someone who is misbehaving, or sometimes to choose a child who will reliably have the right answer. Children learn to put up their hands if they don't know the answer. Some children always put up their hands; others never do.

T: Tamar sit on your bottom.

It is worryingly common to hear teachers say this to children. Why is Tamar wriggling about, or kneeling up? She is likely to be bored. What else could she be doing to learn about shapes? How long have the children been sitting on the floor? And do we think it is a good idea to comment regularly on children's bottoms in learning situations?!

Gilliam: The end of the Toblerone box?

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Instead of asking Gilliam to elaborate on this useful idea, the teacher rejects it as not quite what she has in mind. The children must keep guessing what she is thinking.

R: Three angles.

T: Not you Ria, let's give everyone a chance.

Ria has contravened the rule that when invited, a single answer is required. To say more is tempting once you have broken the barrier and spoken, but here the teacher reminds the class that it is not only knowledge that is important, but 'giving everyone a chance'. She is assuming that her questions will engage their thinking. It has not.

W: Three sides and three angles, the same?

T: OK, well, OK. Three sides and three angles, but maybe not always the same, for a triangle.

What does William mean by 'the same'? The teacher assumes that he thinks the angles or sides measure the same and gives him half-hearted feedback. But maybe he meant that the number, three, is the same. We will never know.

I suggest that a better start to this lesson would be for the teacher to hold up a triangle and say to the children:

Last week we looked at triangles – here is one – it has three sides and three angles. We looked at squares and rectangles too. Think on your own or with the person next to you; what's the difference between a triangle and a square? Think what you can say that will help us all to remember.

The children can share ideas. (Astonishingly I have seen some classes do so for as little as ten seconds before being stopped.) They can then offer suggestions – and they can be asked by name, avoiding the hands-up problems – and the teacher can go on to introduce the cubes and pyramids that are the lesson focus. That did not happen for some time in the lesson transcribed. And then instead of pointing out key features (such as six faces, 12 edges, six corners) the children had to carry on guessing what the teacher wanted them to know. Such questioning is very frustrating to watch, and for children, must be endlessly tedious and hard to understand. Why do we never tell children things? I think they would like us to.

It is the questions that are the problem. Teachers' questions proliferated in an age when there was a shift from didactic teacher talk in silent rooms, to trying to involve children a little more. Now, it is almost revolutionary to suggest that a teacher should clearly explain something to children, without asking a lot of questions along the way. But the questions have become less and less useful, more and more leaden and heavy, and are now millstones hung around teachers' necks, passed on to every new generation of education students. This is how to teach – we must involve the children, and that means: ask them some questions! We must string them along, allowing them to think they are smart and know the answers! We must make them interact with us by offering some of them an occasional chance to give a one-word answer. We must never tell them anything because they really must *discover it for themselves*!

But this is not teaching. Children discover nothing by playing this guessing game. The questions are not authentic. Teachers' questions allow teachers to pull out of children words

that the class needs to hear. Teachers' questions do have their uses – questions such as 'What is this called?' 'What is the difference between 12 and seven?' – will elicit answers for all to hear, and help identify those who know and those who don't. But often, episodes of interminable questions leave the class and the teacher quite baffled by one another, and do not help children to understand anything. New teachers copy those who have had years of practice at handling children this way. Children, having little choice, rapidly learn the rules. (Those who will not play along can be seen sitting around the fringes of the carpet in whole class sessions – with the Teaching Assistant, at the teacher's knee – carefully staying very quiet, or creating their own minor rumpus.) It seems that teaching and learning proceed through such conversations. But if we are honest, it does not.

Transcript 2: The Great Fire of London is an extract from a whole class session with a Year 3 class. The children were seated on a carpet and the teacher had a laptop from which she showed pictures of London on the Interactive White Board (IWB). We can consider the impact of teacher's questions on individual children in this sequence.

Transcript 2: The Great Fire of London

(Teacher puts up a slide of a London street in the 1600s)

- T: London, then, what can we see?
 Children: ('houses' . . . 'the sky' . . . 'dark')
 T: Quiet please. Quiet. Hands up (hands go up) Kellen?
 Kellen: Can we see the fire?
 T: No, um, first we have to find out about London, what it was like. Take a look at the detail. Romilly?
 Romilly: Houses?
 T: Houses. What were they . . . are they like our houses? Sam?
 Sam: Yes (this is the 'wrong' answer)
 T: Oh? Really? The same –?
 Sam: . . . like, . . . um, roofs and the windows, there are windows and doors –
 T: Oh yes but, the size of them, or, how many houses in the street? Look –
 Rafferty: I know about the Great Fire of London.
 T: Just a minute, Rafferty.
 Rafferty: I went there, it started in Pudding Lane, in the bread shop, I –
 T: Oh don't tell them, they have to find it out for themselves. Now. Look again at the houses –

Comment

'What can we see?' – 'Are they like our houses'? These are dull questions. Sam guesses wrong, although his ideas are correct; the teacher agrees with him twice; but it is not what she wanted, and so the inquisition must go on. Kellen's question – 'Can we see the fire?' – is pertinent; why can't the children look at a slide or printed picture of the fire? Wouldn't that grip them? Of course, so why not? It seems to be because the session had to proceed through the ubiquitous and deadening question-and-answer routine. Giving away 'the answer' – the fire – would, like Rafferty's knowledge, stop the children somehow 'discovering' it for themselves.

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Rafferty, it turns out, has been with his family to the museum in London. Interestingly the teacher stops him sharing his knowledge. She really does believe that the children will ‘find out for themselves’ through her questions, and this learning will somehow be more valid. But I have no doubt that to stand Rafferty up at the front and give him a few minutes to describe all he knows would be of immense benefit to the children’s thinking. An expert amongst us! No weird questions to answer! Information freely given! But the teacher is very wary of this.

The idea of children *discovering things* is engrained in her approach and she believes that her questions aid this process. The questions are prompts to thinking, in a way; unfortunately their prompt value is more than cancelled out by how dreary it all is. Motivation and interest faded perceptibly as the slideshow went on. Each slide took four or five minutes, and involved more and more desperate questioning as the teacher tried to win back the children’s attention. By the last slide, a picture of St Paul’s, the children were shuffling and fidgeting and had to be reminded to ‘sit beautifully’.

Discovery is actually impossible in some situations – one of these being sitting on a carpet with 29 classmates while looking at pictures on a screen and being asked tedious questions (‘How many fields can you see? What is the river called?’). The children were finally asked to share a set of non-fiction books and find a picture of a house to draw. They squabbled over the books.

I suggest a better start to this topic would be to show a picture of the Great Fire of London and ask the children who knows anything at all about it. The children could be asked to think about why the houses burnt quite so catastrophically. As well as talking about the fire, the children could usefully discuss how best to share books, what sharing means and who is good at it, how to ask and how to offer help. Then the picture drawing could take place with the enquiry in mind, and much less arguing about resources. The fire was not mentioned again in the lesson, but the pictures were labelled *windows*, *door*, *roof* – the words Sam had used before everyone stopped listening.

The teacher is using the same talk tools as in Transcript 1 – a starting marker, teacher’s questions, repetitions – but another feature of the talk is evident here. Teachers seem unwilling to tell children that an answer is wrong or inappropriate. Instead they must use a particular, rather kindly ‘Are you sure?’ tone of voice coupled with a suggestion that there may be something amiss – ‘Um, well, let’s see if anyone agrees with you . . .’ or as the teacher says here, ‘Really?’ Children are not fooled by such evasions. Patronised in this way, they soon learn to avoid giving an answer unless they are completely certain they are right, to avoid the horrible embarrassment of a teacher saying to them, ‘Mmm! That is such a good guess, but perhaps we could ask someone to help you . . .’.

I suggest that questions used to test knowledge should be answered accurately. ‘Sharan, what is six multiplied by five?’ ‘Twenty-five.’ ‘We–ll, good try, but not quite . . .’ is not a talk sequence that can support learning. ‘Sharan, what is six multiplied by five?’ ‘Twenty-five.’ ‘No’ leaves everyone in no doubt. Maybe Sharan’s immortal soul would be deeply bruised by this, but I don’t think so. I think it is better to be honest and clear with children. They know what ‘not quite’ means anyway. Sam’s ‘Yes’ is not wrong, but does not fit the teacher’s previously decided narrative, so she treats it as wrong. The teacher has in mind the idea of the children discovering that the houses were flimsier, made of wood, huddled together, and so on. But, ‘Yes,’ says Sam. Here is a chance to find out what the child really thinks.

'In what way?' would bring this out, followed by a suggestion to consider all the similarities and differences, particularly thinking about what creates a fire hazard.

Perhaps this is a harsh analysis. I suggest observing how colleagues, students or teachers on Teachers TV teach, with a focus on counting how many questions the teacher asks to which she already knows the answer. Some of these may have a useful function; we note that Sharan cannot multiply five by six. But many will be to do with forcing children into a ridiculous and utterly tedious guessing game, under the illusion that this is teaching.

In **Transcript 3: What seeds need**, the teacher is starting a topic on growing plants with Year 5. What learning is going on?

Transcript 3: What seeds need

- T: Right. Now. What do seeds need to grow? (*hands go up*) Alice?
- Alice: Sunlight and [. . .] water.
- T: Hmm (*sounding uncertain*) sunlight and water, you think. What else? (*fewer hands*) Bryce?
- Bryce: Earth.
- Kieran: Compost.
- T: Put your hand up. You might be chosen to talk if you put your hand up. (*Kieran puts up his hand*) Hmm come on, someone different. Muj?
- Muj: Something to grow in.
- T: Yes something to grow in, but what else? To grow?
- Chloe: Blue pellets to keep away slugs.
- T: That's not vital. What else does it have to have? What other vital things? We've got sunlight, water and soil.
- Denes: Can worms help them grow? On my Gran's allotment, right, she has worms, they –
- T: (*dismissively*) Worms!
- Denes: (*nodding*) Yes.
- Alice: Yes in the soil, they make holes in the soil.
- T: Yes – help the soil. Absolutely. Worms. Right, now I want you to put together a role play for me . . .

Comment

The teacher had not decided whether to stick to talking about germination (seeds usually need water, air and some warmth) or to talk about plant growth (plants usually need sunlight, water, air and some warmth and usually a growing medium such as soil). She asks six teachers' questions. She accepts the children's suggestions, sunlight, water and soil – without sounding too confident about it – but has another idea in mind, and prompts the children to guess what it is. I am not sure what she wanted them to say – possibly warmth, or air. The interesting idea of slug pellets reminds Denes of soil creatures and he asks a question about worms, which is dismissed as nonsensical by the teacher but picked up by his classmate Alice. Alice's idea that worms make holes reminds the teacher that worms do help plants – which is what she asked – by aerating soil. But this is slightly too complex an idea to fit in the simpler narrative that plants need sunlight, water, soil and . . . air? Warmth?

The teacher has put herself in the position of arbiter of all knowledge, and so has to cover up the slight muddle by rapidly moving on. This cannot happen when questions are genuine and everyone is on a quest for information or understanding. Teachers do better when they make it clear what they do not know, or what is new to them, clarifying their role as part of the enquiry rather than the complete solution.

The children have no chance to share what they genuinely know or understand. It is evident that Alice seems to understand what plants require, Denes has experience of allotments, Chloe has learned about keeping slugs at bay, Kieran offers the suggestion of compost as a different medium from soil, Muj may be summing up what soil and compost are, or is aware that plants need a habitat, even if it's simply a plant pot. These ideas are not what the teacher wants. Each suggestion is taken as an end point, rather than an opener to a wider discussion.

But what is she trying to teach? The Learning Intention for this session was 'To be able to say what seeds need to grow into plants.' I suggest that it might be more productive to hand out some seeds and ask the children to tell each other everything they can think of about how to help the seed grow into a big plant. The teacher can then invite children to share what they have heard, or nominate a classmate who they think has something interesting to offer. Having established conditions for germination, and growth, the teacher can then point out or explain the difference; and then summarise the conditions as a list and move on to organising the role play.

The teacher's final words in this extract, 'for me . . .' are interesting. The teacher is not really asking for help or appealing to the children's better nature, as in 'Please make a cup of tea for me . . .'. She is casting herself as audience, judge and jury. The role plays, rather than helping children to learn, are to be 'gifts' for her. We cannot tell what the outcome will be if they don't satisfy, but the children probably know.

In **Transcript 4: Eating apples**, the teacher has 21 Year 3 children seated on the carpet. The Learning Intention is 'To use a range of strategies to subtract numbers up to 30'. This extract enables us to identify a kind of crossover talk in which teachers' questions are being phased out in favour of a more authentic sort of query.

Transcript 4: Eating apples

T: OK, what if I have 12 apples in my bag and I get hungry and eat 4 of them. Now that's too many to use your fingers. How many left? Turn to your partners and work it out.

(children talk for about 45 seconds)

T: OK, how do you work it out? What sum do you do? *(several hands up)* Holly?

H: Eight.

T: Not the answer, the sum. What did you do?

H: I worked it out [. . .] by working with Sacha, we had 12 fingers –

T: Ah, I see. Hmm. Anyone else? What sum? Chara?

C: We did: 12 take away two makes ten, ten take away two makes eight –

T: Ah, very clever. Can you all see that? *(writes and says, $4 = 2 + 2$, $12 - 2 = 10$, $10 - 2 = 8$).*

- T: Brilliant guys. Now who thinks . . . (*children chat and shuffle*) – I'll just wait a second for you to stop fidgeting. Sit on bottoms. Cross legs. Sitting still. Right. Who thinks . . .

Comment

The teacher made sure that the children thought about the numbers and how to manipulate them, and asked a genuine question – 'what did you do?' She really does not know what strategy the children used, and invites them to tell her and the class. The chance to discuss strategies is a valuable learning opportunity. To listen to Holly, Chara and the teacher is another chance to understand. However, the teacher had in mind a strategy she would have preferred them not to use, and this influences her responses.

Put yourself in Holly's place, who had the sum right but whose method was evaluated as something to be a bit ashamed of; or Chainey, who had the correct answer but wasn't invited to speak; or Melin, who still had not solved the problem, and did not understand the written sum on the board; or Tom, who had calculated the answer the instant the teacher provided the numbers. What effect would this talk have on your learning?

I suggest that this teacher could helpfully start with concrete objects and show some subtraction strategies. Abstract numbers, and the dreadful handwriting which the white-board seems always to generate, are not really conducive to understanding. She could stand 12 children up and have them be apples, or use big pieces of paper, or blocks. She could show an example of separating the number four into its component twos, or show how to count backwards in ones, twos or threes, and so on. She could explain or demonstrate strategies which are alternatives to counting on fingers. She might then provide the children with several puzzles to answer and give them time to talk them through. By listening to their talk, she can choose which children will contribute to the whole class feedback. This teacher was genuinely trying to find out what the children thought and how they manipulated numbers. But the pace of the session was so numbingly slow that ultimately she had to revert to the sitting-still reminders. Sometimes, why children don't actually riot I do not know.

The teacher's talk toolkit

Teachers use talk for many reasons during a school day. They make swift decisions about what to say and do. Their professional repertoire includes talk for learning and talk to sort out behaviour – this is essential, but I am not concerned here with talk for giving instructions about playtime or how to walk along the corridor. It is of course important to use talk to ensure that children's behaviour enables everyone to learn. For the moment however, I will defer thinking about talk for behaviour management, and simply think about talk which could be considered as *talk for learning*.

Talk for learning

Using talk we can do the following classroom work:

1. Ask questions

Authentic, or to which we already know the answer.

2. Create a working relationship with children

Find out what children do or do not know or understand.

Check what they are interested in.

Ensure motivation and engagement with the topic in hand.

Attend to the child's emotional state.

3. Give clear explanations

Use resources to describe and demonstrate.

Tell children what they need to know.

Tell stories, read text, evaluate and analyse problems.

Model effective ways of talking and thinking.

Answer children's questions.

Instruct and check for understanding.

4. Help children to explain what they think and why

Orchestrate whole class dialogue.

Ask thought-provoking questions.

Chain ideas into a line of thinking.

Support children's elaboration of ideas.

Elicit hypothetical or uncertain ideas.

Talk through misconceptions and errors.

Help children to evaluate and analyse ideas.

Help children to synthesise new ideas.

In **Transcript 5: Iron**, the teacher is conducting a whole class plenary session with a Year 5 class who have been studying electrical conductivity through practical activity. They have just packed away the equipment. The teacher again uses *questions*, but not all teachers' questions. We can look for indicators of *creating relationships*, *giving explanations*, and *helping children discuss their ideas*.

Transcript 5: Iron

- T: That's really good. What, what thing would you like to go on to next, or do again, or find out about?
- Matthew: Well we just wanted to see if any other electrical conductors can be turned into magnets.
- T: Ah, that would be interesting wouldn't it? Have you got anything in mind? Could you think of anything? No? But it would be worth a go wouldn't it? Could we turn tin foil into a magnet? Um, maybe we would be able to try that next time.

- Polly: What about a coin?
 T: A coin, yes – I wonder if we could? I don't know. That would be great wouldn't it? What do you reckon, do you think we could? What do you think?
 Class: Yes
 T: What are coins made of? Hera?
 Hera: Metal . . . like . . .
 T: Can you say a bit more about what you mean – metal –
 Hera: The metal nail we had, it was iron and it lit up the bulb . . . it was a conductor –
 Alex: Cornflakes have iron.
 T: Well! Cornflakes have iron, yes, but I don't think . . . (*class laugh*)

Comment

The talk is evidence of the teacher's interest in the children's thinking. The question: 'what would you like to find out about?' is genuine. The question: 'what are coins made of?' is a teacher's question; however, Hera's brief answer is treated as just an indicator of what she might contribute. She is prompted to elaborate and responds by offering the key words, metal, iron, conductor. With no invitation, Alex makes the link between iron in this context and another everyday occurrence of the word – a mineral which features in cornflakes advertising. The teacher takes this seriously and it is the class that realises that Alex is joking. The teacher did not reprimand Polly or Alex for speaking out, or comment on other behaviour. The class was focused on the science, and 'behaving beautifully' just by doing that.

Teachers almost always have the underlying aim of encouraging children to extend their thinking; talk is the medium through which this happens, and teachers can ensure thinking goes on by asking – or helping children to ask – genuine questions. Teachers can aim to support children as they give extended answers to such real questions. The session might now take a sidestep into a discussion about the difference between iron nails and iron in cornflakes, and why we need to eat iron, and if this makes our bodies good conductors – and this would be excellent. It is important to follow these thinking trails.

Much of the teacher's input in **Transcript 5: Iron** uses talk tools to *help children discuss their ideas*:

- | | | |
|------------------------------|----|---|
| Teacher's questions: | 2 | ('Could we turn tin foil into a magnet?'
'What are coins made of?') |
| Relating: | 1 | ('That's really good') |
| Explaining: | 0 | |
| Discussing children's ideas: | 10 | ('What thing would you like to go onto next?'
'That would be interesting wouldn't it?'
'Have you got anything in mind?'
'Could you think of anything?'
'It would be worth a go wouldn't it?'
'I wonder if we could? I don't know.'
'That would be great wouldn't it?'
'What do you reckon, do you think we could?'
'What do you think?'
'Can you say a bit more about what you mean?') |

In comparison we can look at the talk tools used in **Transcript 1: Triangles**:

Teacher's questions:	5	('Can anybody tell me what we did in Numeracy last week?' 'What did we do?' 'What is important about a triangle?' 'But what do we know about them?' 'Anything else?')
Relationships:	0	(not counting input on how to sit on a carpet)
Explaining:	3	('Numeracy. Numbers: Shape is what we were doing, 2-D shapes: Three sides and three angles')
Discussing children's ideas:	0	

Perhaps we can see from this simple analysis why I said that I think such talk is a complete waste of time. The teacher does not know how the children are feeling, and does not make sure that they are motivated or interested. She tells them three things which most of them knew already. This minimal information is given in a muddled way, mixed in with an increasingly anxious teacher's questions to try to make the children think – or at least speak. Little learning happens.

In **Transcript 6: Function machine**, a Year 4 teacher is at the whiteboard. She is showing the class how to use an electronic maths game, in which the task is to find out what *function* (+, −, × or ÷) the machine carries out on numbers entered, by looking at the output provided. What learning goes on?

Transcript 6: Function machine

- T: OK. I'm going to put a number in – (*looks at class quizzically*)
- Louis: One thousand!
- T: OK . . . Louis immediately said one thousand. Is that a good number to put in?
- Kyle: No.
- T: You're shaking your head. Why do you think it's not? Shall we come back to you? You've got an idea but you can't explain it? OK, Louis had one thousand. Anybody think yes or no to that idea? David?
- David: Start off with an easier number.
- T: Start off with an easier number. By an easier number what kind of number do you mean?
- David: Um, something like, lower, five.
- T: Fine. A smaller number, a lower number, yes. Louis can you see that point of view?
- Louis: Yes.
- T: If we put in a thousand we could end up with a huge number. If we put in five do you think it will be easier to work out what the machine has done?
- Class: Yes.
- T: Everyone agree?
- Class: Yes.
- T: OK, I'm going to type in five.

Comment

The teacher is listening to the children, and using their ideas. She asks for ideas and gives children the opportunity to explain their thinking. She explains the 'point of view' that a lower number will make things easier. The children are familiar with this phrase – they know that suggestions can be challenged, and a range of points of view will be considered. She checks that the first child sees why his suggestion might make things difficult. She also checks that the class agree with the new suggestion before using it. You could fault the teacher because she is a little directive; but classroom talk is never perfect, and we can see that she is talking to the children the way she would like them to talk to one another. Chapter 3 explains how to teach children to engage one another in this sort of exploratory talk.

Conclusions

If we assume that teachers know things and children need to be taught them, then it should be children who ask the questions. But in primary classrooms, this does not often happen. A set curriculum, rigid and incomprehensible Learning Intentions, rapid and meaningless changes between subjects throughout the day, and no idea of any overall personal aim for education, mean that children in classrooms are passive. They have learned how to sit beautifully, how to make a good guess, and how to keep a low profile.

Heartbreakingly, this is not what primary teachers want. Teachers know that children are lively-minded, creative creatures with their own agendas for learning. But teachers under the baleful eye of the always-impending Ofsted inspection, like a permanent CCTV camera in the mind, must get through curricula, jump between subjects, make children achieve targets, follow rigid routines, go with the precepts of ever-changing initiatives and strategies, 'drive up standards', use the limited software provided with the whiteboard – indeed, there is little time to do anything else if the individualised assessment documents are to be completed – they must forget their vocation. They must avoid too much discussion, because it's time consuming. They must avoid too close a relationship with the children, because this, too, is time consuming. They must not explain anything, because children must find out for themselves. So it is that we arrive at the current position. On most mornings, you can go into school and see up to 30 children seated on a carpet, with a teacher valiantly trying to get them to answer inane questions, while time flows away. It is a tribute to both teachers and children that they work so hard at it all and still remain friendly and relatively calm. I think if the current situation had been imposed overnight, say in 1995, there would have been uproar. But it has evolved slowly and insidiously, eroding creativity, confidence, interest, individuality, flair, learning and teaching.

Fortunately, somehow, many, many teachers manage to keep coming up with gripping things to do and fascinating ideas; they help children to see the bigger picture, get them thinking, and subvert the rigid Learning Intentions with their enthusiasm. They find out how children are feeling and what they want to know and do. They put children's time to good use in meaningful activity and interesting quests. And funnily enough, their classes do very well when faced with tests.