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Teachers' strategies for enhancing shy children's engagement in oral activities: necessary, but insufficient?

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ABSTRACT

Shy children can present challenges for teachers aiming at inclusive classrooms. Their educational attainments can be lower than their peers, they may have difficulties in adjustment to school and they can be at risk of meeting clinical criteria for social anxiety disorder. One recurrent finding is that they are often quiet across a range of school situations. The study reported here focused on teachers' strategies to engage shy students in frequently occurring oral activities, such as group work, in elementary school classrooms. Data were gathered through post-observation stimulated-recall interviews with eight teachers who had experience of success with shy students and three focus groups with 11 similarly experienced teachers. The analysis examined teachers' actions with these children to enhance their visible engagement in activities that require oral participation. The findings suggest that although teachers attended to the psychosocial aspects of student engagement, there was little emphasis on the pedagogic purposes of oral activities with these children. We conclude that more attention should be paid to the academic aspects of oral activities when aiming at inclusion for shy children.

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Shyness; inclusive education; oral activities; teacher strategies

Introduction and background

Inclusive classrooms

In common with many other countries, Norway aims at offering inclusive learning environments for its school students. Inclusion through adapted education is a fundamental educational principle and enshrined in law (Ministry of Education and Research 1998; Nilsen, 2018). This principle applies to all students, as well as those with recognised special needs. Our focus in this article is adaptations that are made to accommodate the needs of shy students in oral activities. These children have quite specific needs if they are to engage in classroom life and require adaptive pedagogies, but do not necessarily meet the threshold for designated special needs and the additional support that might bring.

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Furthermore, the quietness and reluctance to contribute in class that characterises many shy students may go unnoticed by teachers.

Adapting the educational environment to ensure that all students are included in the opportunities for learning can be challenging for teachers (Florian and Black-Hawkins 2011; Nind and Wearmouth 2006) and is particularly so when teachers are tailoring pedagogies for children with needs that require quite specific adaptations, whether on organisational, academic or social dimensions (Nilsen 2018). Teachers, however, can find that they are making these adaptations without specialist support. In his study of Norwegian teachers' experiences of including pupils with special educational needs in primary and lower secondary school classrooms, Nilsen found only a limited degree of coordination between general and special education and argued that this situation had led to a lack of adequate adaptation for successful inclusion in mainstream classes, reducing the likelihood of meeting the needs of all students, including those with special needs. Indeed, teachers in that study indicated that children with special needs tended to fall by the wayside at school, to be left on their own, with these aspects of classroom life particularly affecting pupils who are withdrawn and quiet.

That shy children with withdrawn and quiet behaviour are at risk of falling behind is unsurprising given the considerable importance accorded oral activities in current pedagogies, whether whole class discussions, group work, paired tasks or oral presentations. The finding, therefore, points to the need to understand more about how shy children are helped to engage in these crucial activities. In this article, we focus on how teachers work with children who exhibit shy behaviours, in order to ensure that their behaviours in oral activities do not impede their progress. Although shyness is not a designated special need it does imply both psychosocial and academic difficulties. Drawing on a study of how teachers work with shy children in Norwegian elementary schools, we offer an analysis of teachers' perceptions of the problems that shy children encounter in relation to oral activities, how they respond professionally to these problems and the implications of their responses.

Shyness

We can distinguish between shyness as a transitory response to specific circumstances and as a disposition, a tendency to respond in particular ways to a class of recurring situations. In both senses, it is associated with quietness, reluctance to speak up and to volunteer answers to questions or contributions to discussions. Reticence is accompanied by self-consciousness and feelings of anxiety. A substantial body of research that has assessed dispositional shyness in a number of ways – observational methods, teacher and parent ratings and questionnaires, and students' questionnaires, reports that shy students tend to have academic and social difficulties in school (Kalutskaya et al. 2015).

In comparison with their less shy peers, their educational attainments are lower, performance on tests of language development is poorer, they are more likely to have difficulties in adjustment to school and they are at greater risk of meeting clinical criteria for social anxiety disorder. One recurrent finding is that they are quiet across a range of situations in school; Evans (2001) provides a comprehensive review of these studies. Research has investigated teacher–student classroom interactions. Jones and Gerig (1994) reported that 'silent' sixth-grade students initiated fewer interactions, responded less often to direct questions and questions directed at the class as a whole. Evans and Bienert (1992)

encouraged a sample of kindergarten teachers to adopt different styles of conversing with their students in 'show and tell' sessions and found that teachers directed a high rate of questions to shy students and that reducing the frequency of direct questions led to greater verbal participation and fluency.

Another research approach has been to question teachers about their pedagogic strategies for dealing with shy and quiet students. Thijs, Koomen, and Van der Leij (2006) found that kindergarten teachers reported using socio-support strategies with shy children more than they did with average and hyperactive children. These strategies, formulated by the researchers, included 'trying to make the child feel safe' (p. 639), structuring class activities so that the child does not have to be alone, and encouraging him or her to play with other children. Coplan et al. (2011) examined elementary-school teachers' reports of the likelihood of using a preselected set of strategies for hypothetical shy, quiet children as described in vignettes. In comparison with average or typical children, there was greater likelihood of using social learning strategies (verbal encouragement and praise, concrete reinforcement and modelling behaviour) and peer-focused strategies such as involving classmates and encouraging joint activities outside the classroom. In another study based on vignettes and hypothetical students, Deng et al. (2017) included social learning strategies items in a broader study of pre-service elementary school teachers. Items referred to promotion of social skills; involving a classmate in problem solving; praising the student for appropriate behaviours; encouraging the student to join activities. Participants reported greater likelihood of using these approaches with shy students than with average and exuberant students. Conversely, participants were less likely to use 'high-powered' (punishment, direct intervention) strategies with shy students. Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan (2014) applied qualitative methodology, conducting guided conversational semi-structured interviews with five elementary-school teachers. The interviewees referred to encouragement of collaboration with peers but there was greater emphasis relative to quantitative studies on understanding the reasons for the child's quietness, teachers' sensitivity, and issues of trust and emotional comfort.

These studies show that teachers claim to adapt their pedagogic strategies to the needs of shy and quiet children and that strategies are not only directed at the encouragement of contributions but also at offering socio-emotional support for the student and creating a 'safe' environment, one where shy students can feel comfortable about responses to their contributions, an 'emotional comfort level within the classroom' (Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan 2014, 258). The assumption here is that the students' reticence is due to inhibition brought about by their fear of being negatively by others (Crozier 1995).

The research just outlined has limitations. It tends to identify generalised strategies through data reduction methods, to present researcher-generated pedagogic strategies to participants, and to employ vignettes with hypothetical students rather than studies of individual teacher-student interactions. In consequence, studies can be divorced from actual classroom practice. The research we report drew upon interviews and focus groups with classroom teachers discussing their experiences with individual students over time in order to elicit their strategies for enabling the oral participation of shy children and to consider in-depth the nature of the strategies that they describe.

Oral activity and learning

Concluding their 2006 systematic review of research on including children with special educational needs in mainstream classrooms, Nind and Wearmouth recommended that teachers focus on peer group interactions and ‘a common concern with participation in a learning community’ (p. 122). We suggest that for some students it is this kind of participation that is most challenging and makes demands on the adaptations teachers need to make.

It is recognised that classroom talk not only indicates learners’ current understandings, so aiding formative and summative assessment, it can also enable the development of these understandings. But not all talk is equally useful in enhancing cognitive development. Barnes, whose seminal work (Barnes 1976/1992) has been so influential in this regard, emphasised exploratory talk as key to student engagement as learners. Building on Barnes’ analyses, Mercer has developed an account of a ‘social mode of thinking’ (Mercer 1995), which, he argues, strengthens learners’ reasoning capacities. He connects these analyses with Vygotsky’s concerns with learning through engagement with others in the intermental plane as a step towards the consolidation of personal understanding in Vygotsky’s intramental plane (Vygotsky 1978; Wegerif, Mercer, and Dawes 1999).

Exploratory talk requires careful classroom management and confident student engagement in group or paired work. It is often hesitant and incomplete, enabling thinking aloud, trying out ideas and making meaning. Ideally, students engage critically but constructively and everyone participates: reasons are given, alternative ideas are offered, and knowledge is made publicly accountable (Keefer, Zeitz, and Resnick 2000; Mercer and Littleton 2007). Importantly, through a series of interventions, for example, the ‘Thinking Together Programme’ (Mercer and Littleton 2007), Mercer has been able to show the cognitive benefits of exploratory talk between students. Our concern is that developing a social mode of thinking through exploratory talk is likely to be difficult for shy children.

Expectations for oral engagement also place demands on other students in their interactions with shy children. Rajala, Hilppø, and Lipponen (2012) distinguished between inclusive and exclusive exploratory talk. The former is more productive and involves eliciting expanded responses from all participants. Strategies include asking each other questions such as ‘What do you think?’ and ‘Why do you think that?’ For shy students with difficulties with oral activity, social interaction and ensuing anxiety, the strategies appear a useful step, but do not entirely eliminate their dislike of being in the spotlight. These are by necessity challenging questions and can lead to further challenges when ideas are expressed; they therefore call for sensitivity from other students. Mercer and Littleton (2007) identify challenge as a key feature of exploratory talk and it is a lot to ask of children to moderate their tone when challenging. We also know from Mercer’s earlier work that significant efforts need to be made to avoid what he called less productive disputative talk and less challenging cumulative talk (Mercer 1996).

Nonetheless, opportunities to talk or to think aloud are necessary if cognition is to be enhanced in classroom settings. Claxton, for example, makes a compelling case for classroom environments where making mistakes is not only permissible, but desirable, enabled by teachers who create ‘potentiating milieux’, where ‘there are plenty of hard, interesting things to do, and it is accepted as normal that everyone regularly gets confused, frustrated

and stuck' (Claxton 2007, 125). Oral activities that are cognitively productive make demands on both teachers and students.

Although current pedagogic attention mainly focuses on student–student, or teacher–student interactions, Barnes also discussed presentational talk as part of classroom life (Barnes [1976] 1992). In this kind of talk, students present final drafts to others and need to tailor the content, language and mode of presentation to the audience. Such public performances are very obviously likely to cause anxiety in shy students, calling for pedagogic adjustments to be made, and indeed teachers are aware of the difficulties faced by shy children in this activity (Mjelve and Nyborg 2018). However, we suggest that the more private interactions are also challenging. Talking, even in the relatively safe space of group work, implies being visible to others, being the centre of attention if only briefly, dealing with unpredictability and putting oneself on the spot – all dimensions that are at the core of shy students' difficulties (Crozier 1995).

The research questions

We have argued that shyness can impede students' participation in oral activities and that oral activities are central to pedagogies that aim at empowering students as learners. Much of the research into oral activities and teachers' strategies for supporting shy students in school has taken the form of inferences from findings that are based upon correlational data with large samples of children rather than detailed examination of teachers' strategies or evaluation of their effectiveness. For example, see Coplan and Rudasill (2016) for an account of suggested strategies based upon empirical research into students' shyness. In the present study we have focused on the details of teachers' actual strategies, when and how they are used. The theoretical basis of the study is detailed in Mjelve et al. (2019). There we explain, from a cultural-historical perspective (Edwards et al., 2019), that the strategies employed by teachers when they make adaptations in order to include shy children can be seen as the tools they use to work on their interpretations of the needs of the child.

Our approach, therefore, allows us to recognise differences in how shyness is interpreted and variation in the school and classroom contexts in which strategies are adopted and refined. In the current analyses, we focus on one aspect of what teachers do: how they engage shy children in oral activities in ways that reduce the anxiety that can inhibit the children's involvement. We, therefore, address the following research questions while drawing on interviews with teachers who have experience of successful work with shy students:

- (1) What problems do teachers identify concerning shy children's oral activity at school?
- (2) What actions do teachers take to address these problems?
- (3) What do these actions tell us about the learning opportunities for shy children in tasks that demand oral contributions?

The study

Sampling

The interview study discussed here occurred in the first year of a five-year national examination of the strategies elementary school teachers employ when working with shy

children. The interview data have informed a national survey of teachers' strategies with shy children, which is currently being analysed. We, therefore, employed purposive sampling (Patton 2002) in order to recruit teacher informants known for their successful experience of working with shy children. These participants were recommended by professionals such as the Educational Psychological Counseling Service; higher education colleagues who worked with teachers; and elementary school principals. It was intended that the interviews would reveal the actions teachers took to encourage shy students' opportunities for learning in tasks that demanded oral contributions.

The teachers, from different elementary schools and regions, comprised two sub-samples (see Table 1). The first ($n = 8$) were currently working with a shy child. These participants were interviewed individually, after we observed them interacting with the shy child in a whole-class teaching session, using stimulated recall (Dempsey 2010). The second group ($n = 11$) had recent experience of teaching shy children, but were not currently doing so. This sub-sample engaged in one of three focus groups ($n = 4, 4$, and 3). In Table 1 we have not indicated the year group these teachers were currently teaching as they were recalling experiences over previous years.

The two types of interviews allowed us to draw on a range of viewpoints, and not limit the sample to those teachers who were currently working with a shy child. They also meant that we could connect individual responses with those that arose in the focus group discussions, as ideas arising in the individual interviews were used to prompt discussions in the focus groups and were evaluated and elaborated in these discussions.

Data collection

The data were collected through two types of interview: post-observation stimulated recall interviews and focus group sessions.

The observations used to stimulate recall involved the first and second authors in observing for one two-hour period in a teacher's class. The teachers had been asked to teach English, maths, Norwegian or social studies in the way they regularly do. These subjects were selected because they are likely to involve a range of teaching strategies from whole-class interactions through paired work, all of which involve children's oral activities.

Table 1. The participants.

Individual interviews ($N = 8$ teachers)		Focus groups (3 groups, $N = 11$ teachers) Teachers and years of experience (y)
Female/male teachers, grade	Experience	<i>Group 1, 4 teachers:</i> Male, 10+ y; Male, 0–5 y; Female, 10+ y; Female, 5–10 y
Female, grade 6	10+ y	<i>Group 2, 4 teachers:</i> Female, 5–10 y; Female, 0–5 y; Female, 10+ y; Male, 10+ y
Female, grade 5	5–10 y	
Female, grade 7	5–10 y	
Female, grade 6	10+ y	
Female, grade 2	0–5 y	<i>Group 3, 3 teachers:</i> Female, 10+ y; Female, 10+ y; Female, 10+ y
Male, grade 7	10+ y	
Female, grade 6	10+ y	
Female, grade 5	0–5 y	

The classrooms were all set out to enable whole class engagement, small group and paired work; while during peer on peer interactions the teachers were all mobile, walking around the classrooms to monitor and support students.

During the observations, one researcher focused on teacher actions using field notes, the other made iPad video recordings of the targeted shy child and occurrences around them. Field notes captured teachers' approaches that appeared to offer positive support for the shy children and documented situations where the class took part in activities that demanded the shy students' involvement in oral participation. The video recordings were in intervals of one-minute filming and one minute off, generating 40–45 min of recorded observations in each session.

The stimulated recall interviews were based around the video clips and field notes and tailored to each teacher. They took place in school within a week of the observations and focused on the teacher's observed actions in the class and their rationales for them. The observations were not used for any other purpose and were seen only by the teacher and the research team. The interviews were conducted by the two first authors, one led the interview and the other took notes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed and lasted between 47 and 82 min, producing a total of 503 min of interview data.

Focus group sessions were held at the university and were led by the same two researchers. One researcher led the interview, the other took notes, and added questions if there remained lines to be followed up. The sessions employed prompts from a semi-structured interview guide concentrating on teachers' actions in classrooms and allowed probing of themes emerging from the individual interviews. As each session continued interactions became increasingly conversational with teachers responding to each others' examples to provide rich data on professional diagnoses and responses. The sessions were audio-taped and transcribed and lasted between 78 and 91 min producing a total of 260 min of interview data. The interviews were all conducted in Norwegian and translated into English.

Data analyses

The analyses presented here are based upon the interview and focus group data. The focus on how students' oral activity was enabled, in a process that was both inductive and deductive, drawing on the research we have discussed with a sensitivity to what the data were telling us. All the interviews were translated into English before the analyses occurred.

The first step was to identify teaching activities in the classrooms where either oral exchanges between the teachers and the shy students or between the shy students and other students, were the primary focus. Watching a movie or an individual writing task was thus not relevant. Our reading of the literature on oral activities outlined earlier together with the field notes and iPad video recordings identified five potential learning situations involving oral activities: *answering questions in class*, *giving presentations*, *working in groups*, *working in learning pairs*, and *teacher-student dialogues*. They were not all evident in every observed lesson, but were explored with all of the teachers in the individual interviews and served as prompts in the focus group sessions.

With these five situations as broad guides, the transcripts of the individual interviews and the focus groups were examined to identify extracts of teacher talk about their

strategies with shy children in relation to oral activities that enabled us to address the research questions. At the same time, we remained alert to the possibility that other learning situations involving oral activity might emerge in the data.

These analytic steps were undertaken individually by the two first authors and the emergent findings were discussed with the whole team. Consequently, the processes of reviewing, naming and renaming the categorisations followed a hermeneutic iteration between the whole and the parts (Kvale et al. 2015) and between the data and the theoretical framing of the study.

Validity, reliability and ethics

Recruitment of participants was in accordance with the requirements of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data. All participants signed standard informed consent forms and the interview data were anonymised after data collection. We reiterate that the video recordings were watched only by the research team and the relevant class teacher. Procedures were cleared by the university's ethics committee. Having two researchers involved in data collection strengthened the reliability of the data; while the research design, using observations and interviews, contributed to maximising trustworthiness (Hays and Wood 2011). There were also some member checking with the teachers who were interviewed individually, as they could confirm and elaborate on the observations during the interviews. Further, to ensure internal validity in relation to analyses, the research group (four researchers from three different countries) collaborated closely throughout all the stages in the research process, from reviewing relevant literature for the research questions to discussions and elaborations of the analysis and findings, as recommended by Kvale et al. (2015).

Findings

The detailed analysis confirmed the identification of the five areas of activity as the most salient. In discussing teachers' strategies in each of these areas we address the research questions:

- (1) What problems do teachers identify concerning shy children's oral activity at school?
- (2) What actions do teachers take to address these problems?
- (3) What do these actions tell us about the learning opportunities for shy children in tasks that demand oral contributions?

Answering questions in class

The problems identified here were captured by this teacher's comment: 'If you (the shy student) say something wrong, it gets noticed, she (shy student) is very sensitive about it, not everyone cares, but she thinks about this'. However, the difficulty was not limited only to fear of being wrong; here is another teacher: 'To ask someone in class, it can almost be a question concerning what you did during the vacation, they (shy students)

don't raise their hands'. The teachers agreed that the fear of having the other students listen and their possibly making a mistake could lead to their silence in such settings.

The teachers also agreed, nonetheless, that oral contributions during whole-class discussions were important. There was, however, little evidence of encouraging exploratory talk in their responses to the challenge of shyness; instead, the focus was on the reduction of anxiety. For some teachers preparation was the strategy: 'I would tell her [the question] the day before so that she could practice on something she could be 100% sure that she knew'. Another approach was nonverbal signs: 'My student found verbal attention hard because she did not want everyone to turn and look at her. Movements or gestures we could use that were not verbal and that no one would notice, were the best'. The argument was that nonverbal signals, private to the teacher and the student, reduced pressure on the student making it easier for her to talk in class. Another example related to feedback: 'I never say "excellent" to these students of mine (the shy students), but I often wink and they respond with a discreet smile. Then they have received acknowledgement that what they did was good'.

This area of activity and teachers' strategies reflect Barnes' concern with presentational talk rather than exploratory talk. By focusing on anxiety reduction with shy children the teachers were encouraging engagement but were not consistently focusing on enabling deeper understanding of the concepts being taught.

Giving presentations

Giving presentations to the whole class was more clearly related to Barnes' presentational talk. Presentations were regarded as an important part of school life and it was expected shy students should be able to do this to some extent. The teachers were aware of the anxiety these could cause shy learners both before and during presentations: 'They can suffer from anxiety prior to a presentation'. And from another teacher: 'She just stands there and can't say a word. The other students are trying to help her, but it is just as if she blocks out the world, just standing there, staring at a point far away'. Another commented: 'Standing in front of the group, not being able to handle it is obviously quite tough'.

In supporting shy students with the demands of presentations teachers focused on careful calibration of the demand. Strategies included individual goal setting so that students' capability and confidence grew over time:

Everything you (the students) do in school concerns the matter of gradually increasing the level of difficulty, like a stair. "You manage this now so next time you can manage this (to student)". It is all about the steps not being too big, because if the steps are too big, it stops.

Another talked of limiting expectations to begin with: 'Presentations can start with them (shy students) coming up in front of the blackboard saying "the color is this", you have to be sure that they can handle it, don't make too high demands'. Another approach was reducing pressure by limiting the audience so that they started by presenting to small groups:

It is about practice. If you have done something once, and that turned out pretty well, it becomes easier the next time, and perhaps you dare giving your presentation to 10 instead of 5 and you realize that it went okay.

Reducing the demand also involved paired presentations:

I approach the children whom I know are extra scared, and make a plan for the two of them, like “Now, Ola is going to say that and Kari say that, and you practice this”, then they know exactly what to say.

All of these strategies aimed at reducing anxiety over time.

Presentations can be challenging for all students for different reasons and the teachers were generally aiming at all children feeling safe by employing ground rules, that reflect Claxton’s (2007) potentiating milieu:

It’s a very safe environment in terms of holding presentations, no one laughs, and nobody gives you bad feedback, it is more “okay, you did really well. If I had one wish regarding what you could have done differently (to student)”, that would be it.

The efforts made by the teachers with the shy children were ensuring that they could eventually engage alongside their peers in what was regarded as a highly valued classroom activity in Norwegian schools. Their adaptations were thoughtful, with the aim of including these children in activities that will be important throughout their school lives.

Working in groups

The teachers recognised that, as the literature suggests, working in groups could be challenging for shy students. One explained: ‘When they are working in groups, even though it’s only a small group, she (shy student) needs to be very confident in everyone present before she dares to speak out’. Finding a voice in group work was not related to ability: ‘Group assignments can often be difficult. Especially if you (shy student) are a high achiever and you know that you could have done it differently, but you struggle to express what you mean is the best way’.

The teachers aimed at encouraging oral contributions, without focusing on what kind of contribution. Consequently, one strategy was to consider group composition for anxiety reduction: ‘I have a feeling at least, that she (shy student) found it okay when she was in a group where she felt safe. It was easier to collaborate’. Working in same sex groups was also used as a strategy: ‘she (shy student) is very aware of everything that can make her stand out and be different, but she works well with most of the girls’.

A less common strategy focused on building the self-confidence of the shy student to encourage their participation in a group. There was an example of building on a student’s strengths: ‘She (shy student) has been living in the Philippines and they speak good English, so during the English lessons we used her a lot and then she was looked upon as a very strong English student’. A few teachers also discussed how imaginary situations can create conducive environments for shy children. In one case a teacher explained how she used the strategy: ‘It is a kind of playful storyline and then it is easier to get engaged in the group. In this setting, she (shy student) would speak much more than she normally does during the lessons’. This example nicely points to how moving the spotlight from the child to the joint task can be helpful.

The last comment suggests that it is worth reflecting on whether focusing on if the learner feels safe and is contributing to group work over-emphasises the person; whereas a focus on the task and ways of challenging interpretations and responses to

the task might be advantageous. Here instead of a deficit interpretation of shyness, we should perhaps question the normative expectations of group processes that are concerned with making a contribution and also consider the pedagogic purposes of different group activities. It was marked that safety and talking dominated teachers' concerns; with little or no attention to the quality of the interactions, the encouragement of exploratory talk or the value of being tentative or making mistakes.

Working in learning pairs

All the teachers used learning pairs working on joint tasks as a general strategy. However, they acknowledged that these collaborations could be challenging for shy students. While finding the right partner for the child was a concern, the teachers also noted that the shy student's non-verbal language could be problematic:

I think a lot about how she sits in the classroom. She often pulls her knees towards her chest. She is closed, as if she is protecting herself with her body, and her look. She very often looks down or away from the person she is talking to.

This nonverbal behaviour can be rational for the shy student, but her fellow student is likely to interpret the behaviour as a rejection. The behaviour can, therefore, impede constructive collaboration in the learning pair. Other difficulties in the learning pairs were related to demands of the task itself. Again, with a focus on safety, a teacher argued that shy students needed to know what to discuss with the other student in advance: 'I believe she would feel safer working with it (the curriculum) on her own, and maybe together with a peer the next time'.

Unsurprisingly, a common strategy was to pair the shy child with the appropriate partner, again safety was a dominating concern: 'I normally seat her together with a person whom I believe she feels secure around, who is not fooling about too much, she tends to become a bit nervous if people fool about or tease'. As with group work, ease in same sex groupings was noted: 'She (shy student) is not very confident around the boys, and seldom sits next one of them'.

What stands out again here is the focus on the reduction of anxiety to enable the shy students' voices to be heard. Again, lacking in the discussion was attention to the kinds of cognitive challenge that can arise in such activities and its implications for student learning and the importance of exposing a shy child to that kind of challenge and the opportunity to stretch themselves through making mistakes and getting stuck.

Teacher –student interactions

The teachers talked of following up topics with the shy children to ensure that they did not fall behind, through not overtly engaging in other classroom interactions. They also recognised that these one-to-one conversations could place demands on shy students. Nonetheless, they believed it was important to persist: 'I have many students that are my responsibility, she (shy student) is a bit invisible'. They understood how important they were to their shy students 'She (shy student) is dependent on someone (the teacher) coming over and contacting her, then she might ask some questions. She feels as if she

is not entitled to take my time in the classroom'. This teacher commented that this shy child did not want to be a burden; hence the teacher needed to be proactive.

These one-to-one exchanges could be incorporated into the general flow of classroom life so that the child was not put in the spotlight. Teachers discussed how they included the shy child in their movement around the class to check on students' engagement with tasks: 'It is important to be aware of the quiet, silent students, and keep them at the back of one's mind all the time and stop by them and ensure that they are keeping up'; and 'I approach her; she doesn't raise her hand when she needs help'. There was also sensitivity in how the approach was made:

I think about it when I sit down next to her instead of facing her. If I sit down facing her, I somehow feel that I capture her a bit and that she's not given the opportunity to avoid eye contact.

These conversations could also occur in more public arena and potentially cause discomfort. One teacher explained: 'We had to make a deal. I had to ask her "did you get what I just said" and she was supposed to nod, in order for her to show me that she understood'. Such deals could give predictability to interactions and also give the student the possibility to give a nonverbal response. Again teachers' strategies attend to the inclusion of the shy child in visible classroom activities through focusing on anxiety reduction and safety.

Discussion

The teachers participating in the study all had successful experience in including shy children in classroom life and were all sensitive to how shyness may impede student engagement in activities that required their oral contribution. This sensitivity was an important premise for the study. It allowed us to reveal the demands that these teachers recognised, which might not be apparent to all practitioners; and also enabled us to go in some depth into their strategies with shy students and their implications for the child as learner.

In response to the first research question: *What problems do teachers identify concerning shy children's oral activity at school?* our analyses show that shy students made psychosocial demands on teachers who were aiming at inclusive classrooms where all students shared 'a common concern with participation in a learning community' (Nind and Wearmouth 2006, 122). We found that the teachers were first and foremost focusing on how oral activities could produce feelings of anxiety in these students. These feelings of unease could occur before, during, or after the potential interaction. The teachers were thus focusing on how psychosocial features both within and around the child can render the different oral activities difficult and potentially prevent shy children from being included in everyday classroom activities. Interestingly, these perceived psychosocial demands on teachers were present in some way across all five areas of activity and although the teachers described different situations, there was little distinction between the demands in each area of activity.

The second research question: *What actions do teachers take to address these problems?* took us to teachers' strategies with shy pupils. The teachers reported trying to help these students during oral activities by reducing potentially high levels of anxiety. The teachers were thus responding to their interpretations of the demands implied by the shy children and were acknowledging that shy students had psychosocial needs. This emphasis on

attending to the psychosocial needs of shy children with appropriate support is found in other studies (Bosacki, Rose-Krasnor, and Coplan 2014; Coplan et al. 2011; Deng et al. 2017; Thijs, Koomen, and Van der Leij 2006). The teachers in the present study aimed at creating inclusive classrooms and were acknowledging that inclusion can comprise several dimensions (Nilsen 2018) including responding to psychosocial dimensions of students' engagement. They also involved other students in creating conducive environments for their shy peers, placing psychosocial demands on these pupils.

Some of the teacher strategies could be described as careful primary school practice. They included sensitivity in giving feedback and being mobile around the classroom, monitoring progress and helping faltering students. Research has shown the dangers of teachers being deskbound with long queues (West and Wheldall 1989). Similarly working alongside the child and getting physically to their level can help all children (Marsh 1970). However, some of the teachers' actions involved creating learning contexts that lacked challenge by giving students tasks they could easily accomplish or allowing them extra time for preparation.

The third research question: *What do these actions tell us about the learning opportunities for shy children in tasks that demand oral contributions?* considers the implications of teachers' actions for the learning opportunities for shy children in tasks that demand oral contributions. We discussed earlier the wealth of research that demonstrates the importance of working in groups and pairs as part of a learning process (Mercer 1995, 1996; Mercer and Littleton 2007). Key to learning in these settings is the opportunity for exploratory talk and experiencing challenges to one's ideas. Our findings suggest, however, that the teachers' emphasis on shy students' visible inclusion in classroom processes meant that these students were not encouraged to experience an important element of exploration, what Claxton described as getting 'confused, frustrated and stuck' (Claxton 2007, 125). The teachers' emphasis on helping these children succeed without anxiety meant that they were less likely to experience the cognitive challenge that accompanies uncertainty and exploration.

Conclusion

There is much to learn from this study of the strategies employed by experienced primary school teachers. The teachers were no doubt right in focusing on anxiety reduction through calibrated exposure and time to prepare in areas of activity, which involved speaking in the public arena of the whole class (the first two areas of activity). However, we suggest that strategies that focus solely on the psychosocial are necessary, but arguably need to be augmented by a concern with cognitive challenge if these students are to fully participate 'in a learning community' (Nind and Wearmouth 2006, 122).

We saw that lowering the stakes by making an activity playful encouraged shy children's involvement and we suggested that de-centring the child to focus on the task was a worthwhile strategy. There was mention of a form of ground-rules in relation to giving presentations with the statement from a teacher *It's a very safe environment in terms of holding presentations, no one laughs, and nobody gives you bad feedback ...*; but there was no evidence of ground-rules in relation to group or paired work, despite the importance of Mercer's work in this area (Mercer and Littleton 2007). We, therefore, cannot make judgments about the degree of cognitive challenge offered to the other students.

Shy children make demands that were recognised by these experienced teachers, but these demands were interpreted as almost entirely psychosocial and the teachers' responses were aimed at addressing those demands to achieve behavioural inclusion in classroom life. Our analyses suggest that more attention should be paid to the academic aspects of inclusion for these children.

The small-scale study has limitations. It cannot aim at external validity, though the survey it has informed will achieve that form of validity. Its focus is on teachers' descriptions of their strategies. The classroom observations served to facilitate the individual interviews but more systematic and in-depth observational research would have produced a richer data set. It would yield insight into the nature of teachers' interactions with shy students, in ways which would allow a detailed examination of their interpretations of students' needs over time and more contextualised understandings of their pedagogic decision-making and indeed whether the teachers offered more cognitive challenge to the other students. Such studies would, therefore, allow an examination of differences in general pedagogic approaches by teachers and in student learning styles. Importantly we have no data on changes in students' learning. As a consequence, we have drawn on research on oral activities and students' learning to indicate concerns about the nature of cognitive challenge experienced by the children in such activities. In doing so we have gone some way to explaining the evidence of academic underachievement among shy children outlined earlier. We, therefore, acknowledge that more work is needed to explore that connection.

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