ORACY IN YEAR ONE: A BLIND SPOT IN NORWEGIAN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY EDUCATION?

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Abstract

This paper focuses on opportunities for student talk in Year One of the Norwegian L1 subject, based on observations from six classrooms (24 lessons) with two teachers in each. The analysis of the data first identifies how the lessons are organised (plenary, individual work, station work and work in groups/pairs) and then focuses on student talk within each organisational frame. The results are discussed with reference to Wegerif's (2007) concept of 'dialogic space' and Segal and Lefstein's (2016) four-level model for understanding dialogic qualities. The data reported in this paper suggest a clear contrast between the established and well-developed oracy practices at Norwegian kindergartens, which involve a high level of student participation, and highly regulated and teacher-dominated practices in Year One of Norwegian L1, offering students little opportunity to engage in oral interaction or to explore matters in their own language. While having two teachers in the classroom could have stimulated dialogic interaction, which has been shown to be effective (Clarke, Resnick, Penstein Rosé, Corno & Anderman, 2016), it actually seems to produce more discipline, more control and more student silence. One important exception from this trend is circle time, which seems to be a promising space for dialogic activities.

Keywords: oracy, Year One of the Norwegian L1 subject, organisation of classroom work, student talk, station work, plenary, circle time

1.   INTRODUCTION

According to the Norwegian National Curriculum (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2013), oral communication is one of the three main sub-fields of the Norwegian L1 subject, alongside written communication and content-area knowledge (language, literature and culture). The competence goals to be achieved by the end of Year Two of primary school all include key aspects of talk and conversation. Further, both theoretical and empirical research strongly suggests that the quality of classroom discourse is highly correlated with the quality of student problem-solving, understanding and learning (cf. Applebee, Langer, Nystrand & Gamoran, 2003; Mercer, 1995; 2002; Nystrand, 1997; 2006; Wegerif, Mercer & Dawes, 1999; Murphy, Wilkinson, Soter, Hennessey & Alexander, 2009). High-quality oral interaction in the classroom takes on even greater importance in the Internet age, when digital technology provides teachers with new opportunities for organising their teaching and for collaborative work in general. Further, now as always, oracy is a primary tool for thinking (Havelock, 1963; Nygard & Skaftun, 2019; Wegerif, 2016), and this, too, is more important than ever at a time when educational policy is calling for changes to promote student activity, in-depth learning and problem-solving. The prominent educational researcher Rupert Wegerif has suggested that the concept of *dialogue* is an appropriate starting-point for innovative steps towards educational practices suited to the Internet age (Wegerif, 2013; 2016).

However, in Norwegian school contexts, oral communication in general—not to mention oracy conceived of as a more specific approach to oral language as a primary system of thinking tools (Vygotsky, 1986; Mercer, 2000)—has received much less attention than reading skills and strategies in the past ten years. Proponents of dialogic features of classroom activity have been around for a long time (cf. Dysthe, 1995; 2011) but have tended to express themselves in more general terms rather than emphasising oracy in the sense suggested above. A large-scale study of Norwegian classroom practices concluded that a large amount of time (61% on average across the entire span from Year One to Year Thirteen) was spent on whole-class teaching (Hodgson, Rønning & Tomlinson, 2012, p. 41). While this type of teaching was found to involve oral interaction between teacher and students, one prominent feature of the findings was in fact a 'scarcity of depth in the interaction', and class discussions were found to be rare (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 63). The data underlying that study are almost ten years old, but in the absence of more recent work it is not outdated as a frame of reference. In fact, oracy is still an emerging research interest in Norwegian educational research, in line with international trends.

In Norwegian kindergarten policy and research there has been a similar focus on creating rich language environment and oracy practices that might support language development.[1] In contrast to school research, which tends to emphasise the

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[1] *Norwegian kindergarten is for children aged 1–5 years. It is attended by 91.3% of all children in that age range, and it strongly emphasises children's participation, play-based learning and*

persistence of traditional teacher-dominated practices, kindergarten research seems to find better conditions for dialogic action and interaction (Hoel, 2013; Gjems, 2016; Grøver, 2018), and kindergarten researchers also generally seem to generally agree on an image of the modern Norwegian kindergarten as well aligned with the official Framework Plan for Kindergarten (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2017). That plan stresses that kindergartens must promote communication and language, and that all children should participate in activities that promote communication and language development, which is to be achieved by involving them in interaction, conversations, shared reading and other activities so as to provide them with varied and positive experiences of using language as a means of communication, as a tool for thinking and as a means of expressing their own thoughts and feelings, taking the children's own experiences, interests or initiatives as a starting point.

The 1997 school reform in Norway increased the duration of compulsory education from 9 to 10 years. As a result, children now enter school one year earlier than before: in the autumn semester of the calendar year in which they turn six (meaning that some are five when they start school). The idea was to provide a transitional space for play-based learning, but the implementation of the reform soon lost track of this underlying idea (Haug, 2015). A few years later the focus on play in early schooling shifted radically following the Norwegian participation in international assessments (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS). The original plan for the six-year-olds might have provided room for oracy as a goal in itself, but the new focus on results and performance indicators has left this ground unattended. One astonishing circumstance in this respect is that hardly any links are made between kindergarten and school as educational contexts either in research or in policy documents. Even more astonishing was our general impression of silence in Year One classrooms (see below) when juxtaposed with our experience from kindergartens in development and research projects (Hoel, Oxborough, Wagner, 2011).

The present paper explores the conditions for oracy in primary school, based on observations of L1 Norwegian lessons in six Year One classrooms.[2] Those observations are intended to prepare the ground for more in-depth, video-supported fieldwork to be carried out in the same six classrooms in the spring semester of 2018, i.e. in Year Two. The analysis of the Year One data first identifies how the lessons are organised (proportion of time spent on whole-class teaching, individual work, station work and group work, respectively) and then explores the kinds of talk to be found in each setting. The research question is: 'What opportunities for student talk are provided in Year One of the Norwegian L1 subject?' The results are discussed with reference to Rupert Wegerif's concept of 'dialogic space' (Wegerif, 2007), i.e. an

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social relationships as well as movement and nature. The statutory adult–child ratios are 1 adult per 3 children under 3 years old and 1 adult per 6 children over 3 years old.

[2] *Norwegian primary-school students spend approximately five hours each day at school. L1 is the most prominent subject in Years 1–4, accounting for 8 out of 24–26 weekly lessons.*

experiential space involving different perspectives and voices, and to Aliza Segal and Adam Lefstein's four conditions for the realisation of student voice (what we will also refer to as 'dialogic participation'): (1) having the opportunity to speak; (2) being able to express one's own ideas; (3) being able to speak on one's own terms; and (4) being heeded by others (Segal & Lefstein, 2016).

2.   METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The present study is part of a case study linked to an overarching large-scale project ('Two Teachers') addressing the effect of an increased teacher–student ratio in L1 lessons in Years One and Two (6–8 year olds, all entering the project in Year One). The overall project was a randomised controlled trial involving 300 classrooms nested within 150 schools in 53 Norwegian municipalities (Solheim, Rege & McTigue, 2017). It set out to measure (1) students' achievement in reading and spelling, (2) students' literacy interest, reader self-concept and achievement strategies, (3) classroom climate and emotional support and (4) teaching practices in literacy instruction. In other words, its main focus was on written communication. The associated case study had a qualitative design and was intended in part to serve as an early-stage reality check for the interventions being performed, in part to provide an independent, broader study of classroom practices in primary school involving all subject areas.

The sample of six schools for the case study was chosen to some extent for reasons of convenience (within easy travel distance for the researchers involved), but also based on the idea that a municipality (local authority) represents a meaningful organisational context binding the separate schools and classrooms together into an 'embedded case' (Yin, 2014). The municipality chosen, which will here be called 'Seaside', includes a total of nine primary schools. Six of those were part of the Two Teachers sample and hence included in the case study. Seaside is relatively small, making it possible to grasp as a whole, but at the same time it has all of the administrative and organisational structures and complexities that form the most immediate context of each of the schools. Consequently, the six schools are all part of the same local school system rather than being random cases taken from all over Norway. Finally, Seaside is wealthier than the average Norwegian municipality, and this can be seen in the school environment. To us, this means that our case is well suited to display variation at the upper end of material conditions for learning at school.

The data used in the present study are derived from the intervention classrooms at each of the six schools (the number of students in the six classrooms varies from 14 to 26; see Table 1). Hence all of those classrooms received an extra teacher resource. Three of them were not required to change their instructional approach, meaning that they represent a 'business as usual' situation (Condition 0 in the Two Teachers project). The teachers in two of the classrooms undertook to enrol in and use the resources of an Internet-based programme for professional development in literacy instruction ('Language Tracks': http://sprakloyper.uis.no) (Condition 1).

Finally, the teachers in one of the classrooms, besides enrolling in the Language Tracks programme and using its resources, also received additional instructions on how to use the extra teacher in the classroom (Condition 2) (Solheim et al., 2017). The above-mentioned differences in conditions might have reduced the comparability of the six classrooms for the purposes of the present study, but in fact they do not seem to have exerted a notable impact during Year One. The implementation of the Language Tracks programme (Conditions 1 and 2) started in the autumn semester of 2016. The teachers were free to use the programme as they wished. In our observations, we did not see any obvious signs of influence from the programme. Condition 2 started in the spring semester of 2017 and included, among other things, guided reading and reading aloud to the teacher once a week. Our only observation of a practice resembling guided reading was in fact made in the one classroom assigned to Condition 2, but that was in December 2016, before the intervention started, and reading aloud was a common practice in most classrooms. However, our limited data clearly do not allow us to make any claims about the effect (or absence thereof) of the different treatment conditions. While the possible emerging effects do add some impurity to the data, they do not seem to concern the quantity and quality of oral interaction in the classroom, which is the focus of the present article. On this basis, we consider the six classrooms to be reasonably comparable parts of the Seaside case.

Table 1: Class size and allocation of classrooms to different treatment conditions in the Two Teachers project

School	S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6
Condition	0	2	0	0	1	1
Number of students[3]	21	23	14	22	26	19

During the course of Year One (2016/2017), a team of researchers spent time as participant observers during a total of 24 lessons in the six classrooms. The observations were performed towards the end of the autumn and spring semesters, for the most

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[3] *In the Seaside case, two teachers are present during all L1 lessons. The S3 class is quite small, as is sometimes the case in Norway depending on local conditions (children attend the school nearest to where they live). 20–25 students in a class has been the normal range, and the average teacher density at Norwegian primary schools is 15.8 students per teacher. In the 2018/2019 academic year, a new teacher-density norm was introduced for Years 1–4 at Norwegian schools (https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/nye-regler-innforing-av-larernorm-i-grunnskolen/id2606134/; https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/larernorm/id2608687/), imposing a statutory ratio of 1 teacher per 16 students from 2018, and 1 teacher per 15 students from 2019.*

part during lessons before the lunch break. The data produced by the researchers consist of field notes and photographs as well as narrative summaries calling attention to aspects of organisation and language exposure and also, more generally, to 'pedagogical opportunity spaces'. The field notes were written in a table format; this was based on an ambition to grasp the workflow intuitively by moving to a new row for each activity shift and also indicating the time. Naturally occurring conversations with teachers and students are also referred to in the field notes.

The data were coded in three steps using the NVivo software. All data were coded by the two researchers together, in order to ensure inter-rater reliability through negotiation and agreement. The aim was to delimit any events where students were engaged in talk. In the first step, all field notes were coded with reference to a set of four organisational forms which had been developed in dialogue with the data and available typologies of such forms (Alexander, 2008; Hodgson et al., 2012; Klette, 2003): plenary (whole-class teaching, including circle time), individual work ('seat work'), station work, and work in student pairs or groups. While teacher-led station work can often be seen as a type of 'collective group work' (Alexander, 2008, p. 40), we chose to have a separate category of 'station work' since this reflects a practice common at Norwegian schools. Further, peer work in groups and peer work in pairs are separate categories in Alexander's overview, but since both categories are rare in our material we merged them into one. We also added a category, 'Intro etc.', for time spent on getting started or getting organised. Based on this initial coding, the time distribution for each lesson was registered in Microsoft Excel. This generated detailed overviews of lessons and organisational forms, which were further condensed into aggregate overviews for each classroom, showing time distributions as percentages of total observation time.

In the second step of our analysis, we focused only on activities during which students might talk. Hence seat work was excluded (some quiet student–teacher dialogue typically does occur during seat work, but our field notes did not capture this). The categories of station work and plenary were further sub-divided. The sub-categories for station work were linked to the different tasks to be carried out at each station (reading aloud; individual seat work; construction games; teacher–student conversation; guided reading). For reasons that will become clear later on, we did not further differentiate the whole-class situations where students are sitting at their desks and the teacher(s) is/are addressing them from a position at the front of the classroom, letting such activities constitute one sub-category. However, we did distinguish another important sub-category of plenary, namely 'circle time', where students leave their desks and sit together at the front or back of the classroom.

Finally, in the third step of our analysis, the focus was on opportunity spaces for student talk in the most 'promising' categories: station work and plenary. First, we determined whether or not the students spoke at all during individual activity sequences. Where students were found to speak, we went on to identify different kinds of talk. Starting from Alexander's description of repertoires for talk in everyday life, for teaching and for learning (Alexander, 2008, pp. 38–40), we developed a set

of six types of talk, representing a continuum from student dominance to teacher dominance:

1) Narrative sharing (student dominance)
2) Conversation (teacher and students)
3) Recitation (instruction involving students)
4) Formalised talk (including reading aloud, singing, etc.)
5) Dialogue between teachers
6) Instruction (teacher dominance)

Narrative sharing (1) is essential in everyday life and also in the repertoire of talk for learning. This category is particularly important in our approach, since this kind of talk might be expected to build a 'bridge' between kindergarten and school practices. Conversation (2) encompasses all kinds of student–teacher talk where we sensed that there were dialogic aspects going beyond the framework of strictly teacher-controlled recitation, meaning that this category covers mixed content. Recitation (3) provides students with a space for talking, but only a very limited and regulated space serving the instructional purposes of the teacher. Formalised talk (4) resembles what Alexander (2008) calls 'rote', but without the emphasis on learning by heart; we use this category for events where students read aloud from books and booklets or sing together. Dialogue between teachers (5) is a category we have coined ourselves in order to describe situations where two teachers engage in a dialogue in front of the class. Finally, Instruction (6) includes sequences where only the teacher speaks.

3.   ANALYSIS

In what follows, we will start by presenting the temporal distribution of the different organisational forms (plenary, seat work, stations and group/pairs), thus providing an overall picture of how work in the observed classrooms is organised. Then we will narrow our scope to events where students might talk, focusing on student talk in station work and in plenary activities. Finally, we will explore student talk during circle time, which is where we found the most promising signs of the existence of a dialogic space.

3.1 Organisation of classroom work: distribution of time

We observed 24 L1 lessons in the six classrooms, representing a total of 17 hours and 24 minutes of classroom time. An overview of the lessons, the total time of observation and the distribution of time across different organisational forms in the six classrooms is given in Table 2.

Table 2: Organisation of classroom work: distribution of time

	Lessons observed	Minutes observed	Plenary %	Seat work %	Sta- tions %	Work in groups/pairs %	Intro etc. %
School 1	3	135	19	24	52		5
School 2	5	210	9	15	71		5
School 3	5	190	35	65			
School 4	5	230	20	35	30		4
School 5	1	45	20	53			
School 6	5	235	48	50		0.2	1
Mean %	24	1045	28	38	31		3

As can be seen from Table 2, the organisation of lessons is characterised by the prevalence of three large categories. Individual seat work is the largest category by a fairly small margin, while plenary activities (conceived of as teacher-led activities) and station work are about as large. There are no instances at all of work in peer groups and practically none of work in pairs. The numbers under 'Intro etc.' indicate that little time is spent on getting started or on getting organised in general, meaning that there is a high degree of teacher control and discipline. This is consistent with the overall impressions presented in the observing researchers' narrative summaries.

Even though the limited sample size might give some cause for concern, we consider the overall picture to be meaningful. On that assumption, some important features emerging from Table 2 should be highlighted. First, individual seat work is the most prevalent single type of activity. This tendency is reinforced by the fact that the analysis of station work (see below) shows that individual seat work is actually quite a prominent element of what goes on at stations as well. Second, plenary activities account for almost twice as much time in two of the classrooms as such activities do in the others.

In an extensive study of Norwegian classroom practices (Norwegian acronym: SMUL), Hodgson and colleagues found that 61 per cent of the time was spent on plenary/whole-class activities, 15 per cent on work in groups, 21 per cent on individual seat work and 3 per cent on station work (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 46). Those figures are based on observations of 259 lessons (involving 78 different teachers) carried out between 2007 and 2010, across Years One to Thirteen and involving three school subjects (L1 Norwegian, social studies and science). The picture is slightly different if only Years One to Four are considered (data based on 51 lessons, 33 of them L1 Norwegian lessons; Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 38): station work is more strongly associated with those years, while group work is less common early on (it increases from Year Five onwards). However, the general picture characterised by a predominance of plenary activities is the same (although there are some differences between subjects). Table 3 shows the distribution of time (percentages of total time observed)

for all Years and subjects in the SMUL study, for the L1 Norwegian lessons in Years One to Four in SMUL and for the observations in the present study of Year One.

Table 3: Distribution of classroom time across organisational forms

	Lessons (*N*)	Whole class/ plenary (%)	Individual seat work (%)	Stations (%)	Groups/ pairs (%)
Years 1–10, all subjects*	259	61	21	3	15
Years 1–4, Norwegian L1*	33	53	34	10	4
Year 1, Norwegian L1**	26	28	38	31	0

* SMUL study (Hodgson et al., 2012)
** Present study (Seaside municipality)

Plenary activities often represent a space for talk. Station work allows a wide range of activities, spanning from individual work via teacher-administered activities to collaborative activities. Both of these organisational forms represent opportunities for dialogic activity. Below, we will first explore station work and plenary activities, homing in on sequences where students have opportunities to talk. Then we will conclude our analysis by focusing on circle time as a particularly promising space for dialogic activity.

3.2 Student talk at stations

Five of the lessons observed were planned and executed as station work: one lesson at School 1 and two at each of School 2 and School 4. Those lessons involved the establishment in the classroom of three or four work stations where students worked individually or together with a teacher. The individual work involved ranges across reading, writing and drawing as well as some fine-motor play activity (such as construction), and it includes the use of digital resources. Such stations are all silent one. At stations which were not silent but involved oral interaction, students typically engaged in reading-related work. They mainly read aloud to the teacher sitting at the table, but to some extent there was also oral interaction relating to reading and writing. The teachers invited the students into talk about letters, sounds, words, etc. When coding the field notes, we first included all situations where students talked in the category of 'Conversation'. This inclusive coding indicated that teacher–student conversation was part of all lessons organised as station work. However, a closer look at the sequences coded as Conversation showed that the conversations in question typically involved teachers giving instructions or prompting students for specific answers in the form of brief statements, often consisting of only a single word. In fact, we found only one case characterised by more open-ended dialogue and active student participation.

The event in question took place during station work at School 2 in December 2016, i.e. during the first semester of Year One. There are four stations in the classroom: one where students engage in construction play, one where one of the two teachers assists students in reading (one at the time, while the other students are passive), one where students carry out individual work on mathematical tasks, and finally a station where the other teacher conducts guided reading, engaging the group of students in dialogue about a short booklet created for educational purposes ('Lille fuglen' ['The Little Bird']). The teacher calls for student comments on the front-page image, the title and the content, before focusing on specific words and their spelling. All students have their own copy of the booklet. Along the way, students also bring in associations to their private spheres, and the teacher seems to be forthcoming to those elements without yielding completely. This is one of the first observations made in this particular classroom, and in the field notes the teacher is characterised as 'mild and sensitive, experienced' ['lun og fin, erfaren'].

Another interesting example of student talk during station work is also from School 2, this time in May 2017 (near the end of Year One), and involves the teacher and six students working on short words and letter–sound correspondences. The tasks, which are rather simple and few in number, are the same for all students: they are asked to identify the last sound of a word, find out how many sounds there are in a word and identify a missing letter. This opens up for talk about aspects of decoding. One student, a girl, comments that she wishes that they could have 'difficult Norwegian' instead ['Kan vi ikke ha vanskelig norsk?'].

3.3 Student talk in plenary activities

When analysing plenary activities, we first coded all field notes with reference to whether or not students were given the opportunity to speak. Then we further divided them into categories derived from the juxtaposition of our data with the literature on organisational forms in classroom activities. The results are shown in Table 4 below. All plenary activities were coded into this scheme, meaning that raw numbers of occurrences can give an idea of what goes on in the classrooms during plenary time.

Table 4: Different kinds of talk during plenary activities—number of occurrences

	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4	School 5	School 6	Total
Narrative sharing		1		1			**2**
Conversation				3		7	**10**
Recitation		1	1	2	2	4	**10**
Formalised talk	1	1	3	2		3	**10**
Dialogue be-tween teachers	1			1		4	**6**
Instruction	4	4	6	7		1	**22**

As regards validity, School 5 with only a single lesson observed may be considered too random to be commented upon. Otherwise, it is clear that teacher instruction is a predominant feature in most classrooms. This should not come as a surprise. Instruction typically occurs at the beginning and end of a lesson as well as at times when the focus is shifted or new activities are initiated. At the bottom of the list is Narrative sharing, meaning that there is not much space for students to share experiences or tell stories from their everyday life. What is more, the two occurrences identified are actually both highly controlled by the teacher, such that students are typically only given the opportunity to contribute a sentence or so each. Initially, we found this observation rather surprising. However, over time we have found this to be a consistent theme during our Year Two fieldwork as well, and it also reflects our overall impression that there is a high degree of discipline and teacher control at the six primary schools in Seaside.

Of the other four categories, Dialogue between teachers is worth paying special attention to. This is an interesting speech genre in which two teachers talk to each other, positioning the students as 'eavesdroppers'. It is monologic in the sense that the students are not allowed to talk, but nevertheless it makes them more active listeners than in the case of Instruction. What is more, on two occasions (at Schools 4 and 6, respectively), the teachers 'opened up' what might otherwise be a closed dialogue between them by turning their gaze and attention towards the students. It would seem that the genre of teacher-to-teacher dialogue calls for further study and reflection.

Formalised talk in the form of singing or reading aloud occurs in all classrooms, and Recitation (here used to mean instruction where students are also called upon to speak) is found in almost all of them. However, towards the top of the list in Table 4 where the types of talk with greater student involvement are listed, the boxes for

some of the classrooms are left blank. There are thus clear differences in how much space is made available for student talk in the various classrooms. While, as noted above, we must be wary of over-interpreting these classroom differences, it is in fact only in two of the classrooms (Schools 4 and 6) that we have found events resembling normal conversation in plenary activities. In particular, the classroom observed at School 6 stands out as a learning environment where there is a great deal of language exposure and varied activities.

Further, a closer look reveals that a very large share of the instances of Conversation during plenary activities occur during circle time.

3.4 Student talk during circle time

As shown in Table 2 above, a total of 28 per cent of the 1,045 minutes observed in the six Year One L1 classrooms was accounted for by plenary work. In some of the classrooms, plenary activities include circle time, where the teacher gathers the young students close around her in the front or back of the classroom. Table 5 shows the approximate time spent on circle time as well as students' and teachers' engagement in talk during circle time.

Table 5: Time spent on circle time and students' and teachers' engagement in talk

School	Time (min)	% of total observed time at each school	Students are engaged in talk (min)	Only teachers talk (min)
School 1	0			
School 2	0			
School 3	20	11	13	7
School 4	14	6	11	3
School 5	0			
School 6	101	43	85	16
Total	135		109	26

As can be seen in Table 5, circle time occurs in three of the six classrooms but only the School 6 classroom uses circle time as an important working method (accounting for 43% of the total time observed). Further, across those three classrooms, most of the circle time (109 out of 135 minutes, or 81%) is devoted to engaging the students in talk.

Table 6 shows the types of talk in which the students at the three schools engage during the 109 minutes of circle time involving student talk observed.

Table 6: Distribution of student talk during circle time across types of talk

	Total	Sing-ing	Activating prior knowledge in dia-logue, pre-paring ac-tivities to be carried out during subse-quent seat work	Reading together (in cho-rus)	(Playful) talk about language (words, or-thography, punctua-tion, sounds)	Contrib-uting a sentence (for the teacher's notice board)	Undefined/ thin data
School 3	13	2				6	5
School 4	11				11		
School 6	85	3	37	7	37		1
Total	**109**	**5**	**37**	**7**	**48**	**6**	**6**
% of all student talk		4.5	34	6.5	44	5.5	5.5

It is clear that circle time is most often (44% of the time) used to engage the students in (playful) talk about words, orthography, punctuation and sounds. One example is the 33 minutes devoted at School 6 to work on a letter from a mouse family, where part of the session involves comparing and talking about easily confusable orthographies and sounds (e.g. *kjære* 'dear; darling' versus *skjære* 'cut'—(alveolo)palatal voiceless fricative spelled <kj> versus retroflex voiceless fricative spelled <skj>; those two phonemes are commonly merged in the region where Seaside is located), compound words (*museungene* 'the mice babies'), capital letters and punctuation. Another example comes from School 4, where a 10-minute session focuses on the pronunciation and spelling of four short and frequent 'tricky words': *her* ('here'), *er* ('am/are/is'), *jeg* ('I') and *og* ('and'), by means of playful competitions.

In addition, a considerable proportion of all circle time (34%) is spent on activating prior knowledge in dialogue to prepare for activities to be carried out during subsequent seat work. This type of talk is found mainly at School 6, where extended periods in circle are dedicated to varied work on specific themes, such as the 40 minutes spent on preparing for letter writing (the class has received a letter from the mayor asking the students to write a letter to the next cohort of Year One students). This activity involves discussions about letters and other items commonly found in letterboxes, about new Year One students and life at kindergarten and about what to write in the letter (suggestions are written on the whiteboard), and it also includes the only observed occurrence of (spontaneous) peer conversations in pairs, about what to write about life at school. The 40-minute session is interrupted twice, once

by a word game and later by a head-and-shoulders-knees-and-toes, presumably in order to create excitement and variation as well as to 'release energy'.

To sum up, circle time seems to be a promising space for dialogic activities in the L1 subject. In our case, the main focus of circle-time activities was on the decoding aspects of language (orthography, letter–sound correspondences, punctuation) and, especially at one school, also on activation of prior knowledge and preparation of activities to be carried out during subsequent seat work.

4.   DISCUSSION

This study has some limitations. Our sample size is small, with 24 observed lessons in total, spread out across a period of approximately six months. The total time observed varies between the classrooms, from well over 200 minutes at three of the schools to only 45 minutes (one lesson) at School 5. Also, the number of students differs between the classes, from 26 at School 5 to only 14 at School 3. This might influence the opportunities for student talk. Further, our observations are not supported by video recordings, which would have provided more solid and precise foundation for our analysis, and the observations cover only to Norwegian L1 lessons, meaning that both the day and the week are missing as meaningful units. Nevertheless, the consistency of findings across classrooms indicates that the overall picture we have obtained of literacy practices in Year One is probably a reasonably true reflection of everyday life in primary-school classrooms in Seaside. As a municipality representing the upper end of material conditions for learning at school, the Seaside case might be considered a critical case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) in the sense of representing the best possible conditions. Such conditions permit a careful generalisation of negative findings. Hence, if opportunities for oracy are restricted in Seaside, it is reasonable to assume that they are no better at Norwegian schools in general.

In contrast to our overall impression in the present study of 'silent classrooms', the SMUL analysis of ordinary whole-class teaching found 'a positive tendency towards a large amount of oral interaction between teacher and students' (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 63; our translation). Part of this difference in the interpretation of classroom observations may be attributable to a significant difference in the time devoted to plenary activities (53% of the time in SMUL versus 28% in the present study; see Table 3). Further, our data (from 2016/2017) indicate a shift towards greater use of station work (31% versus 10%) compared with the SMUL data (collected in 2007/2008–2009/2010), mainly at the expense of time spent in plenary. Such a change over time would not be surprising, since station work is a relatively new way of organising classroom activities in Norway and is associated with a progressive approach to best practices inspired by the Australian Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF; Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2009). Our data suggest that station work is predominantly silent, and this is consistent with the SMUL finding that, to a large extent, station work involves simple tasks and routinised work (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 66). Further,

the SMUL study includes an activity category called 'Narrate' which was observed during station work, but this does not refer to free narrative—rather, it refers to students' response to teacher prompts and is in fact similar to what we have categorised as 'Recitation'. One important part of the rationale for station work is to create opportunities to follow up differentiated groups of students more closely at teacher-led stations while the remaining students are working on their own. At first glance, this kind of teacher-guided activity seems to call for high-quality dialogic interaction, and it most definitely has the potential to make space for dialogic interaction. However, both our data and those from the SMUL project indicate that this potential has yet to be realised: there is not much oral activity during the kinds of station-work sessions observed.

Given that (silent) station work seems to be increasingly common, at the expense of plenary activities, we might ask whether students' opportunities to speak in the classroom (cf. the first condition according to Segal & Lefstein (2016)) are more limited in 2017 than they were in 2007. Our failure to find any occurrences of planned work in pairs or groups might also fit into this picture: the 4 per cent found in SMUL is not much, but a shift to zero nevertheless comes across as dramatic. Again, however, it is important to be careful about the conclusions drawn owing to the small number of lessons observed—both in our study and in that of Hodgson and colleagues. The total proportion of time spent in plenary ranges from 9 to 48 per cent in our six classrooms, while the range for individual seat work is from 15 to 65 per cent. Hence there is a great deal of variation across classrooms. In the framework of our ongoing case study we will obtain far more extensive data from Year Two, and then we will be better able to provide a more valid overall picture of how lessons are organised at Norwegian primary schools.

The second and third conditions for the realisation of student voice (Segal & Lefstein, 2016)—having the opportunity to express one's own ideas and to speak on one's own terms—imply, alongside the material production of speech, cognitive engagement supported by language and connected to the students' own experiences. In that way, it points towards verbal thinking (Vygotsky, 1986) in a process of deep learning in a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007; 2016). In this context, it is worth pointing out that while (as already mentioned) the SMUL analysis of ordinary whole-class teaching emphasised the educational potential of plenary talk, the SMUL authors also drew a conclusion similar to ours by stressing 'a disappointing scarcity of depth in the interaction, in the sense of exploration and support for the development of student understanding of the subject content' (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 63; our translation)—particularly in primary-school classrooms (ibid., p. 57). This conclusion is consistent with our analysis of student talk in station work and in plenary. Student talk at stations is very limited and—with one exception—there is no substantial engagement by students beyond contributing single-word answers to questions relating to formal aspects of texts, words or letters. In plenary sessions, student utterances are similarly strictly regulated by the IRE (Initiation–Response–Evaluation)

structure (Mehan, 1979); they are typically brief and spoken in a low voice. Extended discussions do not occur.

What is more, the most important finding of all may be a negative one: we have not seen any indications of an underlying understanding of oracy conceived of as thinking by means of words and as a skill to be developed at school. The clearest sign of the absence of such an understanding may be the marginalisation of free narratives involving the sharing of experiences—which incidentally also marks an important break with the emphasis on dialogic interaction and oral-language development seen at kindergarten. The SMUL project found a 30 per cent increase in the use of silent reading in individual seat work from 2007 to 2010; the authors' suggested explanation was that this was due to the immense focus which was placed on reading following the 2006 curriculum reform in Norway (Hodgson et al., 2012, p. 67). This might still be a factor determining the pedagogical choices of teachers and thus a factor contributing to the silencing of primary-school classrooms.

We are drawing a gloomy picture here. This picture is actually unfair in the sense that it leaves out important features of the lessons observed. In fact, we also noticed that the teachers we observed truly care for their students, and our material includes a great many examples of events that can be subsumed under the heading of 'warmth', which is consistent with the overall impression of a 'nice and warm tone' with a great deal of 'praise and acknowledgement' found in earlier studies of Norwegian classrooms (Klette, 2003, pp. 48–49). To some extent, this caring approach could be seen to ensure that students are 'heeded by others', which is the fourth condition for dialogic participation according to Segal and Lefstein (2016). However, that condition concerns the overall classroom culture: students who speak their mind must be acknowledged as significant participants not only by the teacher(s) but also by their fellow students. By contrast, the warmth observed in the present study is linked to the purely social relationship between loving adult and child, rather than to educational goals or dialogic qualities of the interaction. It positions the student primarily as the object of the teacher's care rather than as a subject taking part in a learning community where engagement relevant to the specific school subject is valued. Hence warmth as a social category only rather vaguely resembles Segal and Lefstein's fourth condition. In fact, rather than ensuring the kind of equality underpinning their concept of 'being heeded by others' and creating a dialogic space in which students can use and develop their own voices, such manifestations of warmth can actually be claimed to help maintain hierarchical order and discipline in the classroom.

Finally, our data also contain other important exceptions from the rather gloomy overall picture, particularly with regard to the active use of circle time at School 6, which—interestingly enough—seems to have raised the proportion of plenary time at that school (48%) to the vicinity of the level found in the SMUL project (53% for L1 Years One to Four) even though traditional whole-class teaching is clearly rarer in our classrooms. Another interesting feature identified in our data, and made possible by the presence of two teachers in the classroom, is the category of 'Dialogue

between teachers'. In this category, particularly where the dialogue is opened up for student involvement in a somewhat dramatised manner, we sense an ambition to create a dialogic space in the classroom. However, those observations mostly come from a single classroom, making this more of a 'case within the case' which manifests what we might refer to as a greater *potential* for dialogue compared with the overall picture.

5.   CONCLUSION

Our data provide a glimpse of Year One school practices within a shared and meaningful administrative framework, and they allow us to highlight some important features. The short version of the answer to our research question—'What opportunities for student talk are provided in Year One of the Norwegian L1 subject?'—is that there is not much opportunity for student talk in the primary-school classrooms we have observed. What is more, a comparison of our results with those from a more comprehensive study of Norwegian classroom practices (the SMUL project; Hodgson et al., 2012) might seem to indicate that this space has actually shrunk over the past ten years. Further, the student talk observed by us is highly regulated and teacher-dominated, leaving little opportunity for students either to engage their cognitive powers in oral interaction or to explore subject matters in their own language. This finding is consistent with the general image of a scarcity of depth in oral interaction reported from the SMUL project. Finally, classroom practice seems to be firmly anchored in a traditional framework where one important objective—albeit never explicitly stated at any level—is to introduce the IRE structure to the Year One students (cf. Mehan, 1979). Thus, even though the teachers are warm and caring, there is no trace of any conscious work being carried out to establish a dialogic space (Wegerif, 2007).

As already mentioned, our case study is linked to a large-scale study addressing the effect of an increased teacher–student ratio during Norwegian L1 lessons in Years One and Two (the Two Teachers study; Solheim et al., 2017). All observed classrooms discussed in this article were among the intervention classrooms in that study and so have two teachers present at the same time. One important reason given for increasing the teacher–student ratio is to attain equity in education and to help ensure social adjustment (cf. Vaag Iversen & Bonesrønning, 2013). Research has established that there are differences in linguistic skills between students from backgrounds characterised by high and low socio-economic status, respectively (Clegg & Ginsborg, 2006). It has also established that students' oral skills are important predictors both of early decoding skills and of later reading comprehension (Suggate, Schaughency, McAnally & Reese, 2018). The simultaneous presence of two teachers in the classroom might have created, and was perhaps expected to create, more space for dialogic interaction. Instead, it actually seems to create more room for discipline and control. In fact, rather than helping students find their own voices, it even seems to *silence* them—or at least to help establish the well-known IRE structure of

classroom discourse (Mehan, 1979). It is not fair, however, to blame neither the teachers nor the schools for this tendency. It seems more reasonable to consider it as indicative of the persistence of traditional values and practices in the everyday life of school, in which discipline is strongly associated with a productive climate for learning. It might also reflect the increasing focus on educational leadership in Norway over the last 15 years, along with programs designed for regulating classroom behaviour. Along that line of reasoning, what our results would seem to indicate is that the development of oral language and (oral) thinking is not a prominent feature in collective and individual ideas about (good) school practices.

We have juxtaposed our findings with Segal and Lefstein's four-level model of dialogic participation (Segal & Lefstein, 2016). That model was originally used to grasp a tension between surface and depth seen at Israeli primary schools—what the authors refer to as 'exuberant, voiceless participation' and consider to be (as reflected in the title of their article) an 'unintended consequence of dialogic sensibilities'. Segal and Lefstein's study reminds us that governmental reform and an explicit focus on dialogic teaching is no guarantee that the ideal of making space for the students' own voices will be realised. Tension was also a driving force behind the present study—a paradoxical tension which we had sensed existed between the high value explicitly ascribed to dialogue as a space for oral-language development at Norwegian kindergartens, on the one hand, and the impression of silence and discipline as core values during the first year of school proper, on the other. The situation described by Segal and Lefstein (2016) is one where dialogic methodology is implemented top-down. The Norwegian situation, characterised by less centralisation of teaching methods and practices, suggests that there may be another way to bring about the kind of deep, cultural change that is necessary to transform traditional school practices into a dialogic space for learning. This is of special relevance given the above-mentioned ongoing discussion about the situation of six-year-olds at Norwegian schools, where critics of the reform lowering the school-starting age claim that the joy of learning which proponents of that reform promised would characterise the new Year One is long gone.

One way of reconciling the (undeniable) need to keep order in the classroom and that to keep oracy alive as a means and a space for joy, learning and development could be to ensure that the gap between kindergarten and Year One is bridged in a manner that acknowledges the dialogic practices of kindergarten to a greater extent. The findings of the present study suggest that circle time may constitute an appropriate bridge in this context, but there is obviously a need for much more research into this matter.

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