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The Reciprocal Rebellion: Promoting Discussion in Authoritarian Schools

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ABSTRACT

In her ethnographic study, *Factories for learning: Making race, class and inequality in the neoliberal academy* (2017), Christine Kulz depicts an oppressive system in a United Kingdom secondary school, Dreamfields. Kulz illustrates how many children and teachers are stripped of their autonomy, rights and dignity. In this article, Northfields, a school like Dreamfields, is profiled. Like Dreamfields, Northfields is an authoritarian, heavily surveilled institution with both teachers and pupils often being reprimanded for minor transgressions. This case study shows how an English teacher managed to successfully use Reciprocal Teaching in her classroom, even though its emphasis on co-operative learning was contrary to the spirit of Northfields. Reciprocal Teaching changes the way pupils and teachers see themselves, improves their discussion, reading and exam results. Reciprocal Teaching re-orders education by fostering meaningful relationships, challenging the hegemony of neoliberal schools: it is a rebellion against their authoritarianism.

KEYWORDS

Reciprocal Teaching; Factory For Learning; high stakes testing; collaborative learning; authoritarian schools; teacher & pupil autonom

Introduction: Context of the participating school

The subject of this study, Kate, was an experienced English teacher and a former Head of Department. At the time of this research, she was an Assistant Principal at Northfields Academy, a secondary school whose intake was local children aged 11–8 years. As we will see, this school was an exam factory: its pupils were relentlessly drilled to take tests and pass examinations (Hutchings 2015; Kulz 2017). It operated like a prison of sorts where both children and staff were surveilled constantly, with their behaviour being stringently regulated. In the 19th century, the social reformer Jeremy Bentham proposed a new type of prison which he called the Panopticon, in which the architecture of the building was configured in such a way that the prisoners were aware that they could be seen at any moment (Bentham 2017). Michel Foucault developed this idea with reference to the emergence of the modern state and argued that in our modern heavily surveilled world, we are all aware of being watched and internalise this ‘gaze’ as being ‘normal’. As a result, we are incessantly policing ourselves, checking to see if we conform to the norms of the social system we are part of (Foucault & Gordon 1995:146–165). Foucault’s critique is

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particularly applicable to Northfields because, as we will see, most pupils and staff had internalised the ‘gaze’ of a ‘grade-based’ system, and, as a result, were constantly policing themselves so that they might pass the relevant exams or inspections.

Kate became involved in this research because she had attended training about Reciprocal Teaching at a conference workshop that I led, and decided to trial it and see whether it could improve her pupils’ results. Reciprocal Teaching is a strategy which encourages pupils to learn from each other, viewing learning as a reciprocal process which involves dialogue and discussion (Palincsar and Brown 1984; Gilbert 2018). As a formal pedagogical method, it involves pupil taking turns at being teachers who support everyone else in their group to:

- Read a passage.
- Summarise what they have read (develop understanding)
- Sum up how much they understand (comprehension monitoring)
- Ask questions to help their understanding (questioning)
- Clarify anything they don’t understand and raise any other points they have about the text. (clarification)
- After a passage has been read, the role of teacher passes on to the next pupil: the aim is that over time every pupil becomes a teacher. (turn-taking)

(Summarised from Palincsar and Brown 1984; Gilbert 2018)

Until she used Reciprocal Teaching, Kate had adopted the dominant pedagogical approach at Northfields which was ‘direct instruction’ (Yandell 2014) which meant, in the context of Northfields, ‘that the teacher stands in front of a classroom and presents the information’ (Study.com 2019). Other models of direct instruction are more complex, perceiving it to be a way of organising the ‘learning process’ into ‘several organized steps, procedures, and techniques’ (Shammari, Sharoufi, and Yawkey 2008, 82). Within English teaching, this should involve planning learning so there are chances for teachers and pupils to discuss texts and topics because the subject itself requires learners to socially construct knowledge (Grossman and Shulman 1994). This ‘discussion-based’ version of direct instruction was not prevalent in Northfields. According to Kate, who, in her role as Assistant Principal, had observed many classes in different subjects across the school, most lessons involved teachers lecturing from a PowerPoint and pupils silently taking notes and/or tests.

In this context, adopting Reciprocal Teaching as pedagogical strategy was radical. It was this departure from the norm of Northfields which intrigued me as a researcher, and led to me to ask my central research questions:

- Can collaborative learning ever work in an exam factory like Northfields?
- Can it work for teachers and pupils?
- Will it be accepted by the senior management?
- Will improve the exam factory’s narrow definitions of achievement?
- Will it more generally emancipate learners and teachers?

Methodology

My research draws upon Christine Kulz's ethnographic case study of Dreamfields, an urban secondary school, which she scrutinises in *Factories for learning: Making race, class and inequality in the neoliberal academy* (2017). Kulz's depiction of Dreamfields has many similarities with Northfields. Her research shows how learning is commodified in a school set up to meet the demands of the market: Dreamfields Academy purports to provide its secondary pupils with the skills and knowledge to become successful workers and consumers. It is a 'neoliberal' institution. Neoliberalism seeks to 'define and regulate social life' by using market principles; people are identified by what they buy and sell. The rich enjoy many more privileges than the poor because of this operating principle (Gane 2012, 613). A central problem for neoliberalism is that success is predicated upon an individual's ability to compete in a market stacked in favour of the wealthy: this means that disadvantaged people invariably fair less well and thus severe inequality occurs. Kulz uses this critique of neoliberalism to inform her ethnography, and offers a template which can be employed to perceive contemporary education in the United Kingdom (Ball 2018). Her findings form a central part of the article's methodology because they are used to frame the overall context in which Kate worked. Neoliberalism as manifested in the values and practices of many English schools creates certain kinds of inequality and social relations by making pupils and teachers compete against each other. There is a relentless focus on individualisation and stratification by measuring staff and students using all kinds of numerical data – including test and inspection grades.

My research builds upon Kulz's work in an original way by showing how the effects of Reciprocal Teaching can be explored using Kulz's conceptual apparatus. Kulz does not investigate the granular detail of teaching in her ethnography. This article shows how her analysis of the ways in which Dreamfields marginalises young people's views and limits their autonomy could be applied when researching pedagogy.

Reciprocal Teaching is underpinned by learning theories pioneered by Lev Vygotsky, which in many ways are the polar opposite of the Dreamfields/Northfields 'way'. Vygotsky had withering contempt for rigid versions of the direct instruction model of teaching (as opposed to more enlightened interpretations of direct instruction), the dominant pedagogy at Dreamfields and Northfields. He called it 'pedagogically fruitless' and 'nothing but a mindless learning of words, an empty verbalism' (Vygotsky 1934/1987, 170 as quoted in Yandell, 2018). Instead, he advocated a dialogic approach where a 'more knowledgeable other', namely a teacher, discusses a topic with a learner, showing them why, how and what they might learn (Pritchard 2008, 24). Many theorists have built upon his ideas, developing what has been termed a neo-Vygotskian approach to learning. The book *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context* (Kozulin et al: 2003) promotes a 'neo-Vygotskian model' for educationalists (138–152) which aims to be 'holistic' (150) in the way it views adolescents' development, integrating 'cognitive, social, emotional and motivational aspects of this development' (150). As an established neo-Vygotskian pedagogy, Reciprocal Teaching (Palinscar & Brown 1984) is particularly appropriate for use in the English classroom because as a subject English demands that readers and writers 'socially construct' knowledge about the texts and topics (Yandell 2013).

Participants

Kate decided she would use Reciprocal Teaching with her Year 9 class, thirty-two 13–14-year-olds, who were being prepared for their General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) in English and English Literature (DfE 2013a&b) a year earlier than is normally recommended by the government. This early preparation for high stakes externally marked examinations like GCSEs is, at the time of writing, common in many English secondary schools. The class was larger than average because it was a ‘top-set’ – pupils judged to be high achieving within the context of Northfields. This said, there was a wide spectrum of abilities and behaviours in the class: some pupils were deemed to have special educational needs and serious behavioural difficulties. My research was largely ethnographic in that I did not intervene to help Kate with her teaching, but observed her teach, and interviewed her and her pupils before, during and after they reciprocally taught to ascertain how successful Kate’s use of Reciprocal Teaching had been and answer my previously mentioned research questions. Kate chose six students for me to interview. To a certain extent, they represented the diversity of her class:

- a girl and boy from socially advantaged backgrounds who were predicted the highest marks;
- two girls from less advantaged backgrounds who were predicted above average grades;
- and two boys from disadvantaged backgrounds who struggled at school.

It should be noted that these terms ‘socially advantaged and disadvantaged’ were drawn from the neoliberal academy’s categorisation of its pupils: socially advantaged meant that these children had parents who had attended university, socially disadvantaged meant that they were children entitled to free school meals, a government indicator of poverty (Department for Education 2022). One of these students, Harry, had been labelled as having ‘emotional, behavioural needs’ by the academy, and the other, Jordan, designated as having ‘special educational needs’ (SEN). As we will see though, when Harry and Jordan became teachers of their peers these categories became problematic and inappropriate; in certain key ways, they were no longer ‘disadvantaged’ ‘SEN’, and ‘emotional, behavioural’.

There was an ‘Action Research’ element to the investigation in that Kate used Reciprocal Teaching as an intervention to improve her pupils’ achievement in English, refining her methods as she used Reciprocal Teaching (Hopkins and Ahtaridou 2008, 47). During the year she taught the class (September 2015–July 2016) and until July 2019, Kate and I liaised by email and talked extensively. She also read several drafts of the article. I observed Kate teach Reciprocal Teaching at two periods in the school year: first in October 2015, and then in June 2016. This way I saw her class at the very beginning of their adventure with Reciprocal Teaching, and after they had used it for approximately thirty one-hour lessons across the academic year.

Methods and ethics

Both Kate and I collected the data which included:

- my videos of lessons where Reciprocal Teaching was taught by Kate;
- my video interviews with Kate (2015–2019);
- my video interviews with the pupils;
- the pupils' spoken and written work, collected by Kate and shown to me;
- the pupils' test scores at various stages during the year and their final GCSE levels, collected by Kate and shown to me.

The research was ethical in that all permissions were given by relevant carers and teachers, using proformas supplied by my university. All students have been given pseudonyms and the school is anonymised. Furthermore, a reciprocal approach was taken to the research whereby I offered my support and ideas when required and/or appropriate. Forming relationships within such a constrained, surveilled, pressurised institution was a delicate, sensitive process. I too went on my own reciprocal journey through the research, finding my sensibilities, learning, life enriched by encountering these pupils and teachers over a sustained period of time. Every effort was made to make the research a sustaining, rich experience for all the participants.

Comparing Dreamfields and Northfields

There were some very specific similarities between Dreamfields and Northfields which are worthy of attention for several reasons. These are laid out here in [Figure 1](#), based on data culled from interviews and observations of Northfields.

As this [Figure 1](#) suggests, the significant tensions between the neo-Vygotskian model of teaching and the 'Factories for Learning' teaching styles were revealed by this research. Dreamfields promoted a pedagogy where 'for many students, learning to accept authority was a pre-requisite for self-advancement and as an important realization of their school career' (Kulz 2017, 118). In contrast, the neo-Vygotskian model seeks to make adolescents 'active constructors of themselves and their relations with the world' (Kozulin et al. 2003: 150); the role of the teacher is not to impose their authority upon their students, but to use their expertise to nurture independence and autonomy. This is particularly relevant to English teaching where pupils' informed opinions are central to developing their appreciation of and responses to literary and non-literary texts (Rosenblatt 1994).

Dreamfields, as characterised by Kulz, took a military approach to behaviour management enforcing things like silent walking between lessons. In contrast, a neo-Vygotskian approach encourages students to negotiate their own codes of collaboration with teachers. Dreamfields adopted a 'factory' approach to learning which sought to package learning into discrete, decontextualised units which were replicable across time and classes (Kulz 2017, 172). Conversely, a neo-Vygotskian approach perceives learning as context dependent. A teacher's skill involves being able to adapt and refine pedagogies according to the class in front of them. Above all, an effective English teacher encourages personal responses to texts and helps their pupils develop their own voices (Rosenblatt 1994).

Reciprocal Teaching was unusual at Northfields Academy. This was because it actively encouraged students to be autonomous learners, nurtured collaboration, and put the learner at the heart of meaning-making. Its uneasy position in the school was obvious when I observed lessons taught by different teachers. In the other English lessons and

Feature	Dreamfields	Northfields
Architecture: panoptic	Dreamfields was purpose built, using 'panoptic' principles (Foucault 1995) so that teachers and pupils could be constantly viewed by senior leaders. There was no staffroom; teachers were always expected to be working.	Northfields' building used similar principles. All staff and classrooms had glass walls. CCTV was everywhere. Senior staff regularly monitored both the CCTV and the physical space of the academy.
Rigid behavior policies	The cultivation of 'docility' (Kulz 2017: 173); silence between lessons; the use of the 'verbal cane', which meant severe punishment for minor infringements of the behavior code.	A very similar cultivation of docility, which uses almost identical tactics. The threat and enactment of expulsion for non-compliant pupils and teachers.
Institutional segregation	Grouping by 'ability' led to social segregation with children from advantaged backgrounds dominating 'top' sets with 'bottom' sets being populated by socio-economically deprived males of colour.	Similar use of grouping by 'ability', with very similar social results. 'Bottom' sets were populated by poor, white working-class children, mostly boys.
Obsession with testing (172)	Regular high stakes testing of children; massive data collection of results.	Almost identical assessment procedures.
Limited teacher autonomy (172)	Teachers were expected to comply with school rules, follow rigid curricula.	Like Dreamfields, there was a relentless drive to 'teach to the test'.
Hollowing out of democratic processes (173)	Dreamfields was a school where pupil, parental, community voice, particularly dissenting views, were marginalized and/or silenced in terms of governance.	Pupils, parents and staff had very little influence in the way the school was run. As with Dreamfields, a small elite governed the school.

Figure 1. Comparing Dreamfields with Northfields.

subject lessons, I observed pupils' desks were in rows, always facing the front, with all activities being dictated by the teacher. It was what Mosston labels the 'command' approach to teaching, being 'autocratic and teacher-centred' (Mosston quoted in Carpenter & Bryan 2016: 376).

Kate's Reciprocal Teaching lessons were the opposite in terms of layout and activities: tables were set out in groups. Pupils were only intermittently required to listen to their 'real' teacher. The students clearly had much more independence to decide when and what they might discuss, read and write. Their learning was 'framed' by the teacher (Carpenter and Bryan 2019, 377) in that Kate provided the content and the main activities, but they had considerable choice in the way they learnt.

There are decades of evidence that when group learning is initiated by a teacher in this way, children learn more effectively than by other methods (Palincsar and Brown 1984; Petty 2014, 65–68). What is fascinating is that those in power at Northfields tolerated it and it led to a transformation in the way both Kate and her pupils viewed learning.

Group work in a Factory for Learning

Instituting Reciprocal Teaching into her teaching, was a risk for Kate because it required ‘group work’, which was perceived by many of the teachers in her school as ineffective and disruptive. Furthermore, some of the sources that she read had divergent views about group work. While the EEF (2021) and the Evidence-Based Teachers’ Network (2021) promoted group work as a central plank of effective pedagogy, bloggers such as David Didau (February 2015) and some members of Research Ed such as Tom Bennett were very against it (quoted in Mannion & Mercer: 2015). As Barbara Bleiman, a former Co-Director of the English and Media Centre, points out in her blog ‘Investigating Group Work – Classroom Research as Genuine Enquiry’:

There has been a rising volume of voices in the educational world suggesting that group work is ineffective and should no longer be viewed as an important element of classroom work (2017)

Kate was unusual in that she was able to take advice from these contradictory sources, and come to her own conclusions.

Kate’s pupils were uniformly positive about working in groups in lessons. Jordan, who had struggled with low self-esteem and grades, thrived both intellectually and socially. He became more confident, and his grades improved too. He said:

If somebody makes one point, it allows the other person to develop upon that point as well. So that means you can get a wider variety of points because if you’re doing it by yourself, you just get your ideas, but this way you get other people’s ideas.

Jordan perceived that Reciprocal Teaching had both a social and intellectual effect: his peers were able to ‘develop’ other people’s points, to build upon their understanding. Another pupil, Harry, who had suffered many reprimands at Northfields because of his behaviour, said:

One thing I’ve noticed is that I’ve noticed a lot of progression in both myself and my peers. There’s also been an increase in confidence in people’s contributions in classes. I’ve noticed a lot more people putting their hands up in lessons since doing Reciprocal Reading. People are starting to discuss much more things with other people. There’s a building of chemistry as well.

Indeed, as Bleiman (2017) and many others have demonstrated (Fisher 2011: Educational Endowment Foundation 2021), the sustained use of group work was transformative for these ‘troubled’ pupils; they and their peers felt more confident to contribute and created a ‘chemistry’ (to use Harry’s phrase) amongst each other. In Vygotskian terms, they were beginning to become their own ‘scaffolds’; to support each other in generating new interpretations, meanings and knowledge about texts and topics (Kozulin 2003).

Factory vs organic learning

A factory produces manufactured products, whereas a forest organically creates an ecosystem. Reciprocal Teaching changed the way students learnt in Kate's class; they began to learn more freely, responding much more personally and originally to literature and the world around them.

This process took time: they were saplings at the beginning of the process in September 2015, but by the summer of 2016, they were much more assured in their learning, sturdy trees. This point is illustrated in their responses to their GCSE set texts.

During the first term of the project, Kate's class read *Animal Farm* (Orwell 1944: 1994) in Reciprocal Teaching groups of 5–6 pupils. They were studying it a year earlier than normal, in keeping with the school's policy. Recent research has shown that Orwell's work can suffer if taught in schools like Northfields, which are heavily surveilled and subject to multiple accountability measures. Gilbert and Pitfield (2019) observed how Orwell's message can be lost if pupils are expected to copy a teacher's interpretations without having a chance to work out the meaning of the text for themselves, a point which is true of all literature teaching.

The opposite happened in Kate's lessons. During one lesson in September 2015, I observed Kate's pupils reading the novel using Reciprocal Teaching. This meant that a pupil became a pupil-teacher who asked the group members a set of questions which were aimed at helping them understand the text and monitor their own understanding, such as:

- 'What is this text about?'
- 'How much do you understand and how much don't you understand?' 'Is there anything that needs clarifying?'
- 'What questions do you have about the text?'
- (Palinscar & Brown 1984: Gilbert 2018)

I saw that once the pupil-teacher in the group was happy that everyone understood, many pupils were progressed to ask more probing questions about the themes and contexts of Orwell's allegory.

For some pupils, the reciprocal discussions not only helped them understand the book, but also offered important psychological understanding. Jordan said:

I really enjoyed talking about *Animal Farm* in my group, and asking questions like who does Napoleon really represent? For me he seemed like a sneaky bully, clever, very clever, but a bully. In our group, we talked about the Napoleons we've come across in our lives. It was a really helpful conversation for me because I've suffered from bullying a lot.

Clearly, these group conversations supported Jordan's personal growth. They helped him understand how and why he'd been victimised in his life. In this sense, Reciprocal Teaching resurrected the 'personal growth' approach to teaching English (Dixon 1975) where there should be a strong 'focus on student talk, critical discussion' and 'children's real lives should be central to their learning', freed from the teacher's vision of 'learning outcomes' (Tarpey 2017, 159).

Kate reported at the end of their reading of *Animal Farm*, several months later, that most of her pupils were considerably more politically aware, having gained insights into Orwell's concepts and applying them to their own situations. She observed:

Some pupils would comment that some of the naughty kids at Northfields had the same fate as Boxer being sent to the knacker's yard. Many of them began to see that there were real parallels between Northfields and the Animal Farm. This wouldn't have happened if they'd been taught the novel in the normal Northfields way; they'd had never had a chance to discuss the book for themselves, and to really feel the connections between their own lives and the text.

Reciprocal Teaching promoted what Paulo Freire and his followers term 'critical literacy' or 'critical awareness' (Freire 2014:2014). Freire writes in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2014) that to become truly educated learners 'must acquire a critical awareness of oppression ... One of the gravest obstacles to the achievement of liberation is that oppressive reality absorbs those within it and thereby acts to submerge human beings' consciousness' (51). It appears here that Reciprocal Teaching enabled Kate's pupils to read *Animal Farm* in such a way that helped them read both the word and the world of the school that they inhabited, perceiving its iniquitous discipline policies, which made miscreants vanish like the animals on Orwell's farm.

One pupil Chelsea, in common with many others, felt that Reciprocal Teaching significantly helped her improve her reading. She said:

I would say it has helped my reading of *Animal Farm* and other books and stuff because as you're reading you're making more links to what might happen when you're trying to predict stuff. It's helped my confidence because I feel I can put my hand up and say something without thinking it might be wrong. I'm much more willing to put my hand up in a whole class situation now.

Chelsea found that the process of prediction, whereby all the pupils in the group have to guess what might happen next, supported her understanding of *Animal Farm* because it required her to think 'about how I might write the story'. Reciprocal Teaching significantly developed students' cognitive and creative skills with its iterations of requiring such hypothesising and testing.

When I observed Kate's class in the summer of 2016, they were studying *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson 1886: 2008). It was noticeable that they were talking much more expansively than they had done in the autumn and this time about a text which was linguistically more challenging than *Animal Farm*. Their reading aloud was more expressive, and they seemed engaged by the process of working in groups, taking to it naturally from the beginning of the lesson to the end without Kate having to explain to them how to read, discuss or work together.

Indeed, Kate believed by the beginning of the summer term (early April 2016), having reciprocally taught for two terms, the class no longer followed Reciprocal Teaching's rubric, but rather the principles of Reciprocal Teaching informed their discussions. They summarised, questioned, clarified and reflected upon their learning (Palinscar & Brown 1984), but not in any strict order. Reciprocal Teaching had become embedded with the class; they had become a genuine community of readers (Cremin et al. 2014). They had learnt that discussions about literature were pleasurable and meaningful. Their reading was much less 'manufactured': Kate did not provide them with 'ready-made' responses

and leading questions, which directed their reading to very specific interpretations. Their responses were what Giovanelli & Mason would call ‘authentic’, in that their reading was ‘born out of an individual’s own process of unmediated interpretation’. The students in the Reciprocal Teaching groups had the ‘space to interpret the text, to experience it for themselves’ (Giovanelli and Mason 2015, 42).

This point was best illustrated by another unconfident pupil, Ellie. As Kate noted, she flourished as the class progressed with their Reciprocal Teaching. Her powers of interpretation and analysis significantly developed. Ellie said:

I think it does help with confidence because people are afraid to make a point and then be judged on it, but then if you say it in a group, and somebody says something different, you feel like you have to justify why you think that, find evidence for your points and justify your evidence. You feel like you have to justify it more to get them to side with you.

Here we can see that Reciprocal Teaching had fostered an approach which was ‘research-based’ in that pupils felt compelled to find their own evidence to ‘justify’ their points.

The saplings had grown into a sturdy forest of learning. Although the most interesting gains from Reciprocal Teaching went far beyond the terms of the narrow/rigid assessment criteria, it was also interesting to note most students attained grades well above what had been predicted for them in their in-school and externally assessed examinations, GCSE English and English Literature. This was because Reciprocal Teaching facilitated a level of thinking and responding to texts that was more authentic, cogent and deeper, which was plainly visible in their examination answers.

Quizzing, questioning and Reciprocal Teaching

A feature of the Factory for Learning is the ‘quiz’, where the teacher acts as quiz master to the whole class, requiring short answers to closed questions, thus checking their factual retention of exam texts. While Kulz does not explicitly highlight this pedagogy in her research, the ‘quiz’ is very much an established feature of schools like Dreamfields. It is also a particular aspect of online learning platforms which replicate the teaching strategies of schools like Dreamfields (Yandell 2020). A highly-publicised ‘free’ school (an academy which has been set up from scratch), runs on even more draconian principles than Dreamfields (Carr 2018), and advocates quizzing as a central tenet of its pedagogy. Students’ books mostly contain responses to factual quizzes. A teacher at this school wrote in a blog:

What we do is mark our weekly quizzes. For each subject, let’s say pupils are given their maths (sic) homework on Friday, they will have a quiz on content that has been taught in the past week, and that has been given as homework on the following Monday. This is a whole school policy. (Rizvi 2016)

This is a behaviourist method which sees learning as a form of copying and regurgitation of facts (Pritchard 2008, 5–16). The principles of Reciprocal Teaching, being based on constructivist, Vygotskian principles (Palinscar & Brown

1984), would never view quizzing as the only way of nurturing and/or assessing learning. If quizzing in English is just about ‘facts’ of a text, it is not developing the deep knowledge or skills required for meaningful literary study.

In contrast, Kate was keen to encourage deeper thinking. She said:

Before we progressed with Reciprocal Teaching, my class would regularly give me one-word answers: this meant I was leading the lessons the whole time, with a few bright kids helping me out.

According to Kate, the cycle of asking open-ended questions which were designed to provoke discussion, built up pupils’ confidence over time, much in the same way as illustrated by Palincsar & Brown’s original research (1984). Groups, which initially had responded with minimal utterances began, over a period of months, to extend their answers and volunteer more information. As we have seen, saplings grew into forests.

This is the opposite to quizzing in that the whole purpose of the pedagogy was to engage the students in debate, where they produced evidence and argumentation to evidence their points. Kate’s students talked about texts and topics in much more detail. When she asked for whole-class feedback after the students had been reciprocally teaching for about thirty minutes, she perceived that the students were also much more assured about giving their opinions. She said:

The interesting thing is, they got to their ideas much quicker. For example, they were able in groups to come up with ideas about Gothic techniques within minutes which might have taken me weeks to drill into them if I was teaching them from the front. They fed off each other in a really positive way.

Furthermore, Reciprocal Teaching helped the students learn relevant knowledge in a much more profound fashion than they did previously. This is an important finding because the Ofsted (the Schools’ Inspectorate) Inspection Framework (Department for Education 2019) requires leaders to construct a curriculum which is designed to:

give all learners, particularly the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) or high needs, the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life (9)

This framework uses the word ‘knowledge’ ten times, while the School Inspection Handbook has thirty-three references to it: schools’ effectiveness is now judged upon the extent to which they provide their students with ‘cultural capital’ and ‘core knowledge’ (Core Knowledge Foundation 2015). Within the subject of English, recently there has been a lively debate about what constitutes knowledge, with some experts arguing that what amounts to ‘powerful knowledge’ is contestable and problematic: English cannot be reduced to a list of canonical texts, a set of rigid skills or a list of dry, decontextualised facts (Eaglestone 2021). Reciprocal Teaching not only helps pupils internalise salient facts, content and skills, but also provides pupils with the conceptual tools to engage in epistemological debates. A pupil in Kate’s GCSE class, John, said: ‘We had some interesting discussions about what was important to know in English. I think it’s more about questioning and analysing than knowing lots of facts about a text’.

Kate perceived that Reciprocal Teaching enabled pupils to internalise relevant factual knowledge both intellectually and emotionally. The pupils ‘felt’ the power of their knowledge; it was not abstract to them, but was meaningful to them. Kate said:

While reading *Jekyll* I would go around the class monitoring the conversations. Usually, somebody in the group might say, ‘Right, this is really Gothic’ and someone else might respond, ‘Let’s look at this passage because there’s a lot of descriptive language which makes Hyde seem very menacing.’ If there are words which describe Dr Jekyll or Mr Hyde’s face, a person in the group might explain that the description is something to do with Victorian physiognomy, and that the Victorians believed your inner character was expressed in your face. This was stuff I had taught them about the context, but it was internalized. Reciprocal Teaching helped my students stop being machines parroting goblets of knowledge they didn’t understand, and realise that reading a really difficult text and thinking about it can be an enjoyable process.

This is a vital point: Reciprocal Teaching enabled students to ‘feel’ the knowledge. For example, John said: ‘I felt this horror that the Victorians judged people by how they looked. I mean, how lookist (sic) is that?’ John’s informal tone here is also important to note: the process of internalising vital knowledge led to a familiarity with it that made education fun.

Indeed, for many students, Reciprocal Teaching helped them enjoy their learning for the first time in the academy. This happened, in part, because they appreciated co-operating with other students, instead of competing against them. Jordan, who reported that he usually found school boring and stressful, said:

It’s like before I used to look at a passage and if I saw difficult words in it, I’d feel a bit sick and skip the difficult bits, and use the PEE (Point, Evidence, Explanation) structure in my writing to pretend I knew what was going on when I didn’t. But now, I actually enjoy reading difficult passages because it’s a bit like a chess game; you have to figure things out to get them right. Reciprocal Teaching has really helped me because I know what questions to ask if I don’t understand a passage. I know how to go about re-reading a passage and guessing at difficult phrases by looking at the rest of the passage. It makes it so much more fun.

As Kate noted Jordan grew hugely in assurance during the year: he began to see reading as something that could help him learn and grow as a person. He was no longer isolated but was empowered to ask questions freely, and realised discussion with other pupils improved his comprehension and confidence. This observation has implications about nurturing children’s wellbeing, which can be fostered within the subject of English if a personal growth approach is taken (Dixon 1975; Tarpey 2017). It also suggests that Reciprocal Teaching can transform social relations and the culture of the classroom by cutting through neoliberal hierarchies in the way it promotes discussion and reciprocity amongst different social groups. It breaks down the barriers between social groups by fostering a much more egalitarian atmosphere in the classroom.

Research, radicalism and Reciprocal Teaching

The senior staff at Northfields tolerated Reciprocal Teaching – even if they did not actively encourage it. What is salient it not that Reciprocal Teaching proved a successful strategy – there are decades of research which shows it works (Palincsar & Brown 1984; Hattie 2012, 95; Petty 2014, 154–164) – but that it happened at all and for such a long time – a whole academic year – in such a school.

A Factory for Learning prides itself upon stoking up individual competition; students are situated as competing against each other (Kulz 2017, 56). So why was Reciprocal Teaching allowed to happen in a school environment where collaborative learning was normally discouraged?

This was, in large part, because Kate had become a teacher-researcher not only of her subject and her pedagogy, but also of utilising discourses which appealed to her colleagues and the leadership running the academy (Eyers and Richmond 1982; Yandell 2019). She was a well-respected Assistant Principal, who had a history of attaining ‘good’ results. Furthermore, she was a ‘research-informed’ teacher who was able to cite persuasively the evidence that Reciprocal Teaching improved exam grades, quoting the likes of John Hattie (2012), Geoff Petty (2014) and Palincsar and Brown (1984) to the senior management of Northfields to justify her use of group learning. Above all, she had persuaded her management that Reciprocal Teaching would raise ‘levels of achievement’. The discourse was performative (Ball 2003); every reference about Reciprocal Teaching was framed by summaries of the quantitative research into the strategy. For example, Kate explained to her line managers repeatedly that Reciprocal Teaching had ‘improved outcomes by double in six months’ (Petty 2014, 154), and that it had ‘an effect size’ which was bigger than most other ‘educational interventions’ according to John Hattie (2012: 95). These terms about achievement impressed them.

The more she used Reciprocal Teaching the more she rediscovered the radicalism that stirred her passion for English as a subject in her youth. She came from a working-class background and believed that it was her English teacher who taught her in her late teens who had ‘really educated’ her by encouraging open-ended discussions about literature in his classes.

What he did was very simple. He got us talking about the issues, about great literature, questioning things, questioning positions, bias, he got us thinking deeply.

After attaining a literature degree & a post-graduate certificate in education, during the next decade Kate had become a ‘research-informed’ teacher who was able to cite research fluently and persuasively about what teaching strategies raised achievement. But it wasn’t until she started using Reciprocal Teaching that her youthful radicalism began to seep into her teaching. She began to perceive that Reciprocal Teaching was an act of rebellion against the prevailing hegemony of her school’s ‘spying’ culture.

Her line managers were primarily suspicious of group work because it could be noisy. The ‘head of behavior’, would patrol the school every day and if he did not like what he saw and heard – largely basing his judgment on noise-levels in classrooms – he would invite errant teachers to observe the behaviour policy ‘properly’ enacted: this involved observing lessons where the pupils were virtually silent. If, after this ‘support’ had been provided, a teacher continued to preside over noisy classrooms, they would be invited to

get more ‘support’, which meant being told to find a job at another school. Similarly, a well-behaved but ‘chatty’ student could easily get ‘three comments’ (warnings) and receive a detention at the end of the week; accumulated detentions usually led to permanent exclusion. Bearing this draconian disciplinarian context in mind, it is easy to see why group work with its emphasis upon discussion did not occur in most lessons.

Both Dreamfields & Northfields were purpose built using ‘panoptic’ principles (Kulz 2017, 38) so that teachers and pupils could constantly be viewed by senior leaders. Kulz argues that this internalised, self-policing gaze was nurtured in Dreamfields through the architecture and the discourses promoted by the school. This was certainly the case at Northfields too. There were no staffrooms; teachers were always expected to be working; all classrooms could be viewed from the outside, teachers’ workspaces had very little privacy and could be watched by pupils & teachers alike. This, coupled with the constant threat of exclusion of staff and pupils for non-compliance, led to everyone seeing everyone else with a degree of suspicion and mistrust.

With Reciprocal Teaching, every student looked ‘deeply’ at the learners in their groups. Students became teachers and so took on the ‘Mantle of the Expert’ (Heathcote and Herbert 1985). Obsessive teacher surveillance was not needed because everyone was looking at each other in a reciprocal fashion; the pupils’ ‘teacherly’ gazes required their students to reciprocate with their best efforts, their questions, their thoughts. Kate said:

When the pupils and I started to realize that Reciprocal Teaching worked – it did raise attainment – I got past the fear of being watched, and started to genuinely care what the students were saying, and pay full attention to them without feeling I needed to look over my shoulder all the time to see if a senior leader was spying on me. If a student made an interesting point, I wouldn’t feel the need to stick to a lesson plan, my teaching became much more responsive. I didn’t worry about what the SLT (Senior Leadership Team) would think because I knew if they came in, they would see good work going on. Some of the kids were used to being watched. One of the students, Harry, who was always being spied upon because he was dubbed as a behavioral problem, started to change because lots of these barriers came down and he stopped worrying about being spied upon all the time. I suddenly realized that he was very bright. The data system didn’t help him because he would feel really good about his learning doing Reciprocal Teaching and then get a mock score back, and be demotivated. He always felt like an outsider in the group because of the constant spying. It was embarrassing for him to be visited by SLT, which he was a lot. He tried to laugh it off with jokes and being silly, pretending he didn’t care, but he did. When he got into Reciprocal Teaching, he flourished because he found out he could hold his own with other children; Reciprocal Teaching was a real equalizer with the children after it had been used for a while and I’d moved the groups around to make them more co-operative.

Here we can see that a new form of the ‘gaze’ was being shaped by the process of Reciprocal Teaching, what might be called the ‘reciprocal gaze’. Both Kate and her pupils began to see each other much more deeply; to see who they really were, what they really were interested in, what they enjoyed reading, what they enjoyed talking about. This led to much greater cooperation. It is interesting to note that even in such a heavily surveilled place at Northfields, Reciprocal Teaching could do this. Both pupils and teacher viewed their learning as being generated by discussion, open-mindedness and the enjoyment of the subject. Clearly, this is one of the key purposes of English teaching, and something that Reciprocal Teaching can facilitate.

Students in the Reciprocal Teaching groups came to know each other much better, and learn about the diversity of people in their class, with genders, social classes, ethnicities interacting in a way they'd never done before. Kate said:

Reciprocal Teaching started to break down class backgrounds. H. was your typical example of this. He was a white working-class boy, who had internalized the idea that he was not as good as the others. This was a very powerful feeling in him. Reciprocal Teaching meant that he was no longer segregated off with other children of similar social backgrounds to him. Doing texts like *Animal Farm* meant that we could interrogate issues connected with class and talk them through. Before Reciprocal Teaching most of the time, the students were segregated in terms of seating, pupils would sit by 'data': so under-achieving boys were all grouped together. There were initially four of 'under-achievers' in the front row before Reciprocal Teaching, but they were dispersed in Reciprocal Teaching groups and this meant they got to know children from different backgrounds. I had to be quite strategic when I asked the students to sit next to who they wanted; I made sure that they only choose one student to go with and then placed other students with them. So, for example, I would put H. and his friend J. (they both wanted to sit together) with a few other children from more socially advantaged backgrounds. I also did things like using envoys to sit in on other groups and report back about what they were doing. This led to students wanting to be mixed up more socially.

So here we see Kate using Reciprocal Teaching strategically to generate more of a socially integrated classroom, where different children from different backgrounds interacted with each other. While the Factory for Learning approach promoted social segregation with its grouping of pupils from poor backgrounds in one area in a classroom or the school, Reciprocal Teaching worked best when children from different backgrounds were mixed up. Furthermore, Reciprocal Teaching fostered an atmosphere whereby both teachers and pupils became researchers into developing their own practices as pedagogues, readers, writers, speakers and listeners; everyone became their own experts (Eyers and Richmond 1982; Yandell 2019).

Findings and Implications for Practice

Outlined below in [Figure 2](#) are the main findings from the article. Admittedly, this is a very small-scale study, and they are tentative outcomes. However, given the other research that has been cited, it should be noted there is a substantial base to endorse these results (Palinscar & Brown 1984; Hattie 2012, 95; Petty 2014, 154–164; Gilbert 2018, Gibbons 2019).

What is not discussed in [Figure 2](#) is possibly the most important finding of the article. This is not easily tabulated, hence its absence from [Figure 2](#). Reciprocal Teaching could have a unique place in educational policy in that it promotes collaborative learning, and it is also 'acceptable' in an exam factory. It raises 'achievement', according to such schools' narrow definitions of the word. Much Reciprocal Teaching research is framed in the 'evidence-based' discourses which speak to the teachers who are committed to Factories for Learning approaches (Palinscar & Brown 1984; Hattie 2012, 95; Petty 2014, 154–164). This means it is permitted a place in Factories for Learning, while many other collaborative learning strategies are explicitly ruled out. This research shows that it can have a transformative effect upon teachers and pupils when it is used, even in a very tightly controlled, heavily surveilled, exam-obsessed

	Factory for Learning approach	Reciprocal Teaching approach
Teaching Style	Highly authoritarian, teachers follow prescribed lesson plans & are deliverers of content; little room for them to be aware of learners' mistakes.	Everyone learns to be a teacher; teaching is a democratic process, with everyone sharing their ideas; the 'real' teacher is in a good position to correct mistakes and address misconceptions.
Reading	'Ready-made' responses provided by the teacher, who dictates the meaning of the text.	'Authentic' responses, with students offering their personal, diverse, informed opinions about their reading; dialoguing with each other to discover new knowledge.
Writing	Answers to quizzes; using recipes & acronyms such as PEE: Point Evidence Explanation (Gibbons 2019), for students to rigidly follow.	Pupils structuring their own writing and arguments, viewing writing as a meaningful articulation of personal discussion and thought/feeling.
Behaviour	Rigid, draconian discipline policies; the use of intense surveillance systems; making everyone a prison warder, normalizing the Panopticon gaze.	Reciprocal care, the nurturing of autonomy and consideration; the relaxation of surveillance systems; the internalization of the Reciprocal gaze.
Teacher Education	Fostering the 'reflective' teacher who self-polices	Fostering the reciprocal teacher who seeks to connect with other teachers and learners.
Raising achievement	Teaching to the test; obsessive data collection of test results.	Achievement is viewed holistically; results do improve but not in a linear fashion.
Personal, Social and Moral Development	The production of the compliant subject in a neo-liberal society.	The nurturing of a moral, caring and, if required, rebellious citizen.

Figure 2. Research findings.

school like Northfields. It can improve results and behaviour, and also help everyone perceive the deeper purposes behind learning; a 'reciprocal gaze' is generated whereby pupils and teachers view each other as trusted learners and researchers in the subject of English.

However, while it has been shown that Reciprocal Teaching can fit into the rubric of a Factory for Learning, it's clear that it is a transgressive pedagogy in the current context. My argument is centrally about the re-ordering of classroom (and school wide) relationships which happens when Reciprocal Teaching is embedded. It can be a mechanism by which pupils and staff can enter into much more reciprocal, relationships with each other. Its nurturing of both pupil and teacher autonomy is a form of rebellion in such authoritarian schools.

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