

Seven- to Nine-year-olds' Understandings of Speech Marks

SOME ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

At first sight the speech mark would seem to be one of the easiest to use of all punctuation marks. After all, all one has to do is take the piece of speech or written language and surround it with the appropriately shaped marks. But, are speech marks as easy to understand and use as suggested above, especially for young children beginning their punctuation careers? Some readers may well at this point be asking, 'But what is a speech mark?' It is a good question, firstly, because outside of the UK the term is hardly ever used and secondly, because the term is extremely recent. The speech mark is simply an alternative title for those punctuation marks used to frame speech or quotation in written language and it is the latest in a long line of terms used to name them.

INTRODUCTION

The contention that the punctuation of speech is unproblematic also appears to be supported by researchers and educationalists. Despite the centrality of punctuation to the writing process, and continual complaints about children's failures in learning to punctuate, researchers have largely ignored the topic. That there has been a general lack of research about children and punctuation was acknowledged by the author of a major evidence review produced to retrospectively justify the English *Framework for Teaching Literacy*, the document that since 1999 has directed how literacy should be taught in English schools. The author (Beard, 1999) commented about punctuation, "Punctuation has rarely been discussed at length in literacy education publications." While there has been an improvement in this situation since then, compared with other areas of literacy education the overall total is still very small, and is smallest of all for the punctuation of speech and written quotation. This comparative neglect hides many issues related to the punctuation of speech, and there are a number of reasons why the punctuation of speech may be more complex for children (and some adults) than has generally been considered.

Issues Relating to Naming

The first issue is that the naming of the mark used to denote the introduction and closure of speech or quotation is currently inconsistent, and has been for centuries. While the term 'quotation' has been used in English since at least 1456 when, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Sir G. Hay wrote, "Here efter followis the chaptiris of the ferde buke after the quotacions of the Rubricus," what many people know as the quotation mark has been given many titles. It has been termed a 'note of Citation' (Anon, 1680, p.18), a 'double-comma turned' (Care, 1687, p.61) or 'a double comma reversed' (Hawkings, 1692, p.79), a 'quotation quadrat' (Moxon, 1683), a 'quotation' (Brown, 1700, p.16), an 'inverted comma' (Anon, 1702, preface) and a 'quotation mark' (Jones, 1704, p.143). This variety of names forced Luckcombe, writing in 1770 (p.265), to comment, "But why we have hitherto found no proper name for French Guillemets, though so much used in England, cannot be counted an impertinent question." However, the naming game continued with a 'quotation justifier' (Jacobi, 1881) and a finer distinction 'open quotes' and 'close quotes' (Shaw, 1996, p.118). One of the more unusual but very interesting usages seems to have been coined by P.B. Ballard in 1930 (p.22) when in a primary school textbook he uses the term 'lip mark': "Note that when a speaker opens his mouth to speak, two lip marks

(commas) are placed in the paper, and two more are placed when he finishes and closes his lips.” The more vernacular and child-oriented term for speech punctuation marks has long been ‘sixty-sixes’ and ‘ninety-nines.’ Finally came the term ‘speech mark’ of which the earliest written use traced so far is Ledgard, published in 1977. So recent is this term that it does not even appear in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Despite this recency, by 1999 it was the only term specified for use in the *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching*, the document that now directs how literacy should be taught in all schools in England (DfES, 1999). As will be seen below, the above list of names is not exhaustive, for children have managed to add to it.

Issues Relating to Boundaries and Voices

Understanding and using speech marks depends on being able to (a) identify the boundaries of speech, and (b) distinguish between direct and reported speech. However, all teachers of younger children know that identifying the boundaries of direct speech is not easy for them (Cordiero et al., 1983), although one parent (Robinson, 1989) started to play a game with his two and a half-year-old son, when by accident the father said, “What’s that thing up there said Daddy?” and the child replied, “Another aeroplane said Joseph.” These kinds of jokey exchanges continued for a couple of weeks before dying out. One of the last times it occurred was the child’s complicated construction, “What’s the matter with your head Daddy the doctor wondered said Joseph.” Such precocity is rare. Hall observed a six-year-old who started putting new and apparently random marks in his writing. When these were discussed, the child said they were speech marks, objects that he had been learning to identify in his reading material. When asked why he had used them the child said he had put them in because it was him doing the talking, an explanation the other children instantly adopted and they then started to use these marks in their writing. On one level the children were incorrect because they had confused authorial voice with character voice, but on another level they could be viewed as correct; after all, almost all children’s writing is read out aloud by them to the teacher.

Ferriero and Zuccheraglio (1996) found that Argentinian and Mexican seven- and eight-year-olds used more punctuation during direct speech than in the rest of their story texts, but little of this involved quotation marks. When speech boundaries were marked it was often by other punctuation marks such as full stops or exclamation marks. Even with reading, despite the frequency with which direct speech appears in books for young children (Baker and Freebody, 1989) and despite some enthusiastic intonation in reading some direct speech (‘Who’s been sleeping in my bed?’), children often have difficulty in working out who is speaking, and when

there is a change of speaker (Perera, 1996). This is particularly the case when there is no straightforward signalling of direct speech by reporting clauses (e.g., 'he said' or 'she shouted').

Issues Relating to Representation

Conventionally, punctuation of direct speech or written quotation is today often signalled by multiple punctuation marks, possibly a comma or colon preceding the speech, maybe capitalization of the first letter and the use of speech/quotation marks to enclose the quotation. Inevitably, punctuation manuals vary considerably in what they claim about standard practice and, anyway, the evolution of the marks that signify quotation is anything but straightforward (Mitchell, 1983). While the enclosing of speech or quotation is natural today, in earlier times usage was quite different. Speech marks were set outside the margins of the text, and were placed at the beginning of every line on which the quotation appeared (Parkes, 1992). But even disregarding what manuals have to say about standard practice, how conventional is conventional? Relatively recently, James Kellman, a Booker prize winner, avoids using any punctuation of speech in his book *The Busconductor Hines*, published in 1994. Frank McCourt's Booker prize-winning novel, *Angela's Ashes*, ignored convention—no speech marks are used and all speech is introduced by a hyphen. In the same year, 1996, Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace* contains whole chapters in which speech is not distinguished by the use of punctuation marks. Curiously, while choosing to do this Atwood nevertheless uses all the other punctuation marks. While many will argue that great writers can make choices like this and that children still have to learn the basics of punctuation, it nevertheless demonstrates that punctuation is a tool to be used by authors rather than a device to control them.

The situation becomes much more problematic when one surveys books designed for very young children. If ever there was an arena within which authors, illustrators and designers play around with the marking of direct speech, it is young children's literature, and it can sometimes seem as if the more popular is a children's book, the more likely it will have unconventional use of speech punctuation. Speech is frequently signalled by color, by typeface, by typestyle (bold, underlining, etc.), by type size, by space, position on page, or by combinations of these features (plus others we have not mentioned). Thus when young children read, they are offered considerably more than the conventional speech punctuation marks beloved of traditionalists.

Even if the discussion is restricted to speech marks alone and to their conventional representation, there is a problem—they still appear in different forms.

Even conventionally we have to get used to 'curly' speech marks or 'straight line' speech marks. Modern typography allows the creation of many more shapes for speech marks. Then, of course, in conventional speech punctuation the marks can occur in single or double forms (and we will not even get into the stylistic problems of speech within speech). It might be argued that these are largely irrelevant as issues, and that children can easily cope with understanding how a range of marks can be equivalent. The trouble is that these equivalences in other circumstances become significant differences as several punctuation marks share some of the graphic characteristics of speech marks. Faced with the comma, the apostrophe and the 'curly' speech mark all being very small marks and often containing a tiny blob with a tail, and distinguished only by orientation or height on line, is it surprising if children experience some confusion? This might be particularly the case when some educationalists have used the terms 'little raised comma' (Moughton, 1925, p.67) and 'lifted commas' (Ballard, 1954, p.36) to designate the apostrophe. In passing, it is interesting that the speech mark seems to be the only punctuation mark that has developed a manual version, as when people lift their fingers in the air, although this is usually used to designate emphasis rather than speech.

Despite these issues, England's *National Literacy Strategy: Framework for Teaching* seem to operate as if there is no problem at all. The document demands that even six-year olds can 'identify speech marks in reading, understand their purpose, use the terms correctly' and that seven-year-olds can 'use the term speech marks' and 'use speech marks and other dialogue punctuation appropriately in writing and to use the conventions which mark boundaries between spoken words and the rest of the sentence.' (DfES, 1999) Are these assumptions valid?

THE STUDY

Almost all previous studies of children's punctuation behavior have been based on strategies that make children's own perspectives on punctuation invisible. Within the limited pool of studies on children's punctuation development, the majority are based upon retrospective analysis of children's marks in their writing, although sometimes with the aid of some teacher or researcher notes (Cordiero et al., 1983; Cazden et al., 1985; Wilde, 1996; Ferreiro and Zuccheromaglio, 1996). Some studies have adopted a more experimental and statistical approach based on written data (Bryant, Devine, Ledward and Nunes, 1997; Bryant et al., 2000 and Stuart et al., 2004), while another group are essentially observations of single children, either

by a teacher (Anderson, 1996) or a parent (Ruiz, 1996). It is only in a series of studies carried out within the remit of *The Punctuation Project* based in the Faculty of Education at Manchester Metropolitan University that the research focus shifted towards much greater observation of and sustained conversation with and between children (see Sing and Hall, 2009).

The principal reasoning behind the approach of *The Punctuation Project* lay in the strong belief of the project team that young children did have the ability to talk freely about punctuation in ways that would offer insights into how they thought about it. Hearing what they had to say about it was critical to understanding how they made sense of it. The methodological problem was to find ways of allowing children to voice opinions within school environments where typically children's behavior and language are carefully managed to suit the pedagogic process. This kind of social and hegemonic positioning, where the adult's role affords them the power to define the limits of 'acceptable' child behavior (e.g., see Edwards and Mercer's work in this area, 1987; Mercer, 1995) invariably situates children subordinately and in a position of compliance and obedience.

The critical technique developed for the project was to have children in groups of three who then had to make an agreed decision about whether or not punctuation was needed in a text. The group faced a large whiteboard on which was a short, simple text. Inserted into the text were some blank boxes (see below) and if the children thought a punctuation mark was needed they could write it in, but only if they all agreed. Thus the children had to discuss and debate their choices. It did not matter whether their decisions were right or wrong; what mattered was how they were arrived at. A much fuller discussion of the methodological rationale for this project can be found in Sing and Hall (2009) and evidence of its success can be found throughout this article. The project involved children from 7-11 and texts contained possibilities for a wide range of punctuation marks. Only the responses of the 7 and 8-year olds related to speech are dealt with here (for detailed discussions of other areas see Sing, 2006; Wassouf, 2007).

The study was based in four English primary schools and from each of the four participating schools four classes were selected from each of the four Key Stage 2 year groups (Years 3-6), forming 16 classes in all and a total of 408 children. All children first took a simple punctuation insertion task and the scores were used to select two groups of three average scoring children in each class (one of girls and one of boys). The task was explained to all the children and they were asked individually if they wanted to participate. All children were eager to do so (possibly partly because it got them out of a class lesson for half an hour). Sessions

were videoed and a back-up audio recording was made. Each group came out of the classroom to another space in the school and sat around a semi-circular table facing the whiteboard with the text. On the table were whiteboard pens for the children to use when they had made their decision. The atmosphere was deliberately very relaxed and there was quite a lot of laughing as the children discussed the task. A researcher, whose role was to facilitate discussion if necessary and respond to any procedural questions, sat with them. The researcher never answered a question about their choices, but simply reminded them that it was their choice to make any decision they liked. They children were never told if they were right or wrong and any decision they made was affirmed.

In the rest of this article we first discuss the responses of the Year 3 children and then the Year 4 children.

YEAR 3

According to England's *Framework for Teaching*, on entry to Year 3 (around seven years of age) all children should be able to "...identify speech marks in reading, understand their purpose, and use the terms correctly." This would appear to imply that the children will know what speech marks looked like, will understand their function and will know when to use the term 'speech mark' correctly. How did the Year 3 children in this study match up to these expectations?

The data used in this paper derives from the discussions of the seven- and eight-year-old children as they completed the task. As indicated above the children were asked to look at the boxes (*figure 1*) and come to a joint decision about whether or not a punctuation mark was required at these points.

Some of these boxes offer the opportunity for the children to consider the punctuation of speech. The extracts used below mostly relate to discussion about what should go in box 7 (although this then leads to discussion of adjacent or related boxes). In the following extracts R represents a researcher, while the other initials represent individual children, except for C, which represents more than one child answering together. Any text that is underlined is a quotation from the task text, and all italicized text represents nonverbal behavior. The turn numbers refer to the turns in the complete transcripts.

We will begin by using several extracts from the single long discussion of one group; this illustrates a number of issues in relation to the Year 3 children's thinking about speech marks. This is a very typical example of how the Year 3 discussions

Simon was having a bad day.
First, he had a dream ¹
about some things he really
didn't ² like ³ carrots,
wet ⁴ sloppy kisses ⁵ and
early morning ⁶s. Then,
he heard his mum shouting,
⁷Get up ⁸ Simon ⁹ Do
you want a lift to Tom ¹⁰s
house ¹¹”

Figure 1: Text as arranged on the exercise sheet.
The number identifies the box in the main text below.

proceeded, although it is slightly longer than most. The discussion starts with trying to respond to box 7, ran for eight minutes and contained 94 turns. It starts at turn 163 of the complete session:

(A-Y3-Tb/Ex. 1)

- 163 R let's carry on then/ "Then, he heard his mum shouting, □⁷ Get up Simon □^B /
so what have we got/we've got loads of boxes here/E
- 164 E full stop (*referring to box 7*)
- 165 R E thinks it should be a full stop
- 166 E yeah/because that's a capital letter (*pointing to capital 'g' on 'Get up'*) /
yeah that's right/...
- 167 S ...there wouldn't be a full stop after a comma
- 168 Re oh yeah there would/well how come there's a that there then (*points to the capital 'g' on 'Get up'; E laughs*)

Despite having read the text aloud twice with the researcher, having reread the whole text several times, despite forward reading being experienced several times previously during this discussion and despite the researcher reading forward to the end of the first part of the direct speech, the children stop dead at box 7. By failing to read or think further forward they ignore the possibility that a punctuation mark might affect what comes after it, and as a result do not even link it to the speech that follows. They do however see something only very slightly forward—the capital letter—and like the children in most of the Year 3 groups, automatically assume that anything before a capital letter has to be a full stop. This is something they have learned from teachers who tend to ritualistically reinforce over and over again that a full stop needs a capital letter following it. It is not surprising that children can see how that should work both ways. There is a preoccupation with the mark rather than with the relationship between the mark and text. A few turns later one of the children seems to be getting closer to recognizing speech:

- 173 Re ...is it because we start shouting it and it put a capital/...
- 174 E ...no actually/...
- 175 S .../yeah/yeah
- 176 R what's S saying/what are you saying 'yeah' to? (*all three children laugh*) /
you tell me in your own words S
- 177 S well isn't it like she's shouting it

- 178 E full stop/ □⁷ Get up □⁸
 179 S so it's a capital letter

This is a rather ambiguous extract, for Re notices that there is shouting going on, and S agrees with Re, adding 'so it's a capital letter.' Does S mean that the capital letter is there because it is speech and therefore is not necessarily preceded by a full stop, or is S reverting to the claim that all capital letters are preceded by a full stop? Certainly there is no suggestion here that any special mark other than a full stop might be placed in box 7. It is not until 15 turns later that one of the children suddenly realizes what is needed with speech:

- 201 Re ...or should that be one of them/I can't remember what they're called
 202 S number nines
 203 Re yeah 'cos like shouting/like that/no 'cos there's one there/you wouldn't have three/...

Neither of these two children say 'speech marks'; they instantly go along with the more graphic notion of 'nines.' Thus we see a second issue, for these children, despite the demands of the National Curriculum documentation, there is a lack of a shared technical term for the mark that denotes direct speech. It might be argued that this does not matter. After all if the children understand what they are, does it really matter what they call them? The two problems with the lack of technical knowledge are (a) that communicating an idea becomes more difficult if children do not share precise terminology, and perhaps more significantly (b) that some of the child-based terms for speech marks may lead to or derive from confusions with other punctuation marks that do not denote direct speech. Within twelve turns a different term is introduced:

- 215 R forgetting what they're called/we won't worry about what they're called/but should they go in there? (*R asks, pointing to box 7*)
 216 Re no/'cos there's one there/...
 217 E ...yeah so/commas /...
 218 S ...they're not commas/...
 219 E ...they are/...
 220 S ...they're not/...
 221 Re ...they can't be commas because she's not speaking it/it's telling you what she's saying (*all three laugh*)

- 222 S they're not meant to be commas
 223 R hang on/let Re say something/hang on a minute
 224 Re well I think those shouldn't go there because you only put them/'cos there should
 be two there if she was speaking so there can't be two there/'cos that's when
 they're speaking and it said Then, he heard his mum shouting and that's not people
 saying it
 225 E yeah/that's telling what his mum said to him

This represents a potentially significant move as Re is beginning to sort out the boundaries between speech and other text. She clearly understands that it is speech that needs the 'commas' and that there needs to be two of them. However, we still see the term 'commas' being used instead of the prescribed term 'speech marks.' Twenty-five turns later, these three children are still debating:

- 254 Re saying □⁷ Get up □⁸
 255 E but that's a name isn't it? (referring to 'Simon')
 256 S oh yeah
 257 Re and the mum's saying □⁷ Get up □⁸ /commas/exclamation mark and commas
 'cos there would have been two there/ wouldn't there/oh God

One can feel huge sympathy with these seven-year-olds getting exasperated, but Re, while getting some things right, introduces yet another conundrum for the group. If we consider her use of 'commas' as meaning speech marks, she successfully surrounds some direct speech with marks, but what she still fails to do is recognize that the speech continues until the end of the end of the passage.

Somewhat unusually for the seven-year-old groups this group of children did not, like many other children, use the terms 'ninety nines' and 'sixty sixes' to designate speech marks (although 'nines' was used). Across this age group the term 'speech mark' was only used successfully a few times, while the terms 'ninety nines' and 'sixty sixes' were used thirty-one times. The children in another Year 3 group were also very oriented to the visual appearance of the marks:

- 314 N I'm putting '66' in this color/do a '66' and then color the little thingies in
 315 J what?
 316 N color them little things in
 317 D color them little dots/those little things in the middle 'cos you normally do that

When children were not using number names to denote speech marks, they mostly settled on the names of other punctuation marks such as the comma, but sometimes even made up their own.

If the children were finding some of the issues complex while discussing them as a group, how did they cope on their own? At the beginning of the year all the Year 3 and Year 4 children individually responded to a short task of inserting missing punctuation in a text. This text provided two instances of direct speech. The ends of both instances were fairly clearly marked textually—in the first instance the direct speech was followed by the reporting clause ‘asked Jane’ and the second by ‘shouted Spot’:

jane and spot sat looking at
a tiny bit of cheese shall i
eat it asked jane a tear ran
down the dogs face the dog
looked so sad sobby and
gloomy jane let him have
it im so happy now shouted
spot

The 24 Year 3 children took the test twice, once at the beginning of the academic year and once at the end. On the first administration 19 children failed to insert correctly any punctuation of speech. Only one child of the 24 correctly marked the speech in both places in the text, and four marked one of the two examples (in all cases the first of the two examples). The percentage success rate across the whole year group was 12.5%. On the second administration at the end of the year, after a lot of classroom teaching about the punctuation of speech, 13 children still failed to mark either of the speech items, six marked only one example and five marked both, giving a success rate across the whole age group of 33%. While this is clearly an increase in the success rate, it still leaves two-thirds of the group failing to mark any of the speech in the text, despite it being clearly flagged by reporting clauses.

YEAR 4

The Year 4 groups worked with the same text used by the Year 3 children. As with the Year 3 children, we will start by examining the discussions of one typical group to illustrate their thinking about speech marks. This group had by far the longest discussions relating to speech, over one hundred turns. At first their response was to see box 7 as a trick:

- 166 A it's tricky
167 R could there not be anything in there/nothing?
168 C no (all said in unison)

However, when asked if they were sure, one child realized that speech was involved, but like many of the Year 3 children they confused the name of the required mark:

- 175 R "Then, he heard his mum shouting, Get up Simon"
176 N is that apostrophe there like that because it's saying "Get up" but just adding the name on?
177 L no/ I don't think it's an apostrophe there
178 N I'm not sure now/think it could be but...

A few lines later child L comes up with the correct term, but the response of the other two children is to make claims for different punctuation marks:

- 188 L I know what could be there (*pointing to box 7*)
189 R go on L
190 L could have speech marks
191 R speech marks?
192 N question mark/his mum shouts/no
193 L no
194 N exclamation mark

At this point they revert to a tried and tested formula and invoke '66' and '99,' but recognize that they need a pair of marks:

- 196 A '66' and a '99' (*points to boxes 7&8, for open and closed speech marks*)

- 197 L&N yeah because
- 198 N she's shouting/his mum is shouting and I think there should be a question mark
- 199 L no because it isn't a question is it?
- 200 R ah/so what d'you think L?
- 201 L I think it's got speech marks
- 202 N yeah
- 203 R think so?/why's that then?
- 204 A because you've got...
- 205 L I think it's got them there (*points to box 7*) /that is a trick box (*points to box 8*)
/and then it's got them there (*in box 9*)

One child having earlier confidently identified the need for speech marks and using the correct term, now shows less confidence when it comes to writing them:

- 210 N how do you do speech marks/I've forgot how to do speech marks
- 211 L&A '66' and a '99'
- 212 N oh yeah/that's it/like that (*roughly points towards the board, but at no punctuation mark in particular*) /where does it say the others? /where does it say '66' for there? (*pointing to the speech mark at the end of the story*)

The child is also confused about where they are to go, has seen the speech marks at the conclusion of the piece and recognized that they come in pairs, but is unable to locate where they should go at the start of the speech. The group think about box 9 but are temporarily corrected, until the association between full stops and capital letters interferes:

- 215 N '66' there because it's...
- 216 L no/ that should be there (*pointing to box 7*)
- 217 N no/ that should be a full stop shouldn't it because that is a capital/that should be a full stop 'cos that's a capital
- 218 L yeah 'cos that's the end of the sentence

They appear to have made up their minds, and seem to agree:

- 220 R OK/shall we do this one first (*referring to box 7*) /and then we'll do the others/
yeah?
- 221 L '66'

- 222 A '66'
223 R yeah?/do you agree with that N?
224 N yeah

But later, when thinking about box 9:

- 349 N I think it's a '99'/'66' and/no/'cos there's a '99' isn't it? (*here she points to box 7, saying there should be speech marks here, and the same for box 9, but then changes her mind when she sees the speech marks at the end of the story*)
- 350 L no it could be there because/ "Get up Simon"/it's still saying it
- 351 N that's what I thought/I think a '99' now
- 352 R do you?/so you've gone from full stop to a/to a '99'?
- 353 N a full stop or a '99'
- 354 L yeah
- 355 N '99' I think
- 356 A "Get up Simon" (*said quietly*)
- 357 L I know but...
- 358 N '99' I think
(*Pause 1*)
- 359 L but how come them ones are there then? (*pointing to the speech marks at end of story*)
- 360 N yeah/that's for there/I think it's a full stop again because '66' (*for box 7*) and '99' now (*for box 9*)
- 361 R you're not sure are you N?
- 362 N no/ because/might be for there
- 363 L no/ but I know what it could be
- 364 N a full stop I think again
- 365 L would she say "Get up Simon"/'cos if she did that could be '99' there (*for box 8*) / if she didn't/then it could be 66 for there (*for box 9*) /and then that's a '99' (*points to the speech marks at end of story*)
- 366 A that can't be a '99' 'cos then she's still saying it (*pointing to box 9*)
- 367 N a full stop I think that is now
- 368 R right so that can't be a '99'
- 369 N a full stop
- 370 L I know but why are them there then? (*again pointing to the speech marks at the end of the piece*)
- 371 A because "Get up Simon Do you want a lift to Toms house"

Discussion in the other Year 4 groups was similar, although not quite as long, and in many groups there was at least one child able to call up the term 'speech mark.' Nevertheless, still mostly used were the terms '66' and '99.' One group was adamant that it was OK to use '66' and '99' and were not bothered about having the correct term:

- 205 R do you remember what a '66' is called?
206 K no/haven't got a clue
207 S we just call it '66'
208 K yeah/that's what we do in our class/we just put a '66'/say '66'/we don't say the word

And seek to use the teacher as a justification for their choice:

- 210 K we don't even say '66'/we just put
211 N two '66s'
212 K yeah/if she's asking us we'll just say '66'
213 N we don't have a name for it/we just call it '66'
214 C we don't use the name/we just call it '66'

Four of the eight groups used only the terms '66s' and '99s,' although one group believed the box was a trick box and so failed to recognize the speech at all. On the other hand only one of the remaining groups used the term 'speech mark' regularly and naturally through their discussion. The other two mostly pointed or used more general terms: 'them,' 'those' etc. It would seem that even in Year 4 instinctive use of the correct terminology is a long way off.

The confusion of the group seen in the longer extracts was more extended than that exhibited by most other Year 4 groups. However, the issues they discussed were reflected in the discussions of all the other groups. In several groups there was a much greater recognition than in Year 3 groups that speech marks existed at the end of the piece, so they need a corresponding set somewhere else. But in these cases such discoveries did not necessarily lead to insertion of speech marks in box 7, or if they did, other marks were strongly considered, possibly because of the presence of boxes 8 and 9.

In another group it needed recourse to other knowledge about punctuation to sort this out:

- 175 Ay "Then, he heard his mum shouting"/ and then full stop (*takes a deep breath*) /
 "Get up"
- 176 Ac yeah 'cos.../it doesn't make sense
 (*Pause 1*)
- 177 Ac yeah 'cos/ no because you take a breath there don't you?
- 178 Ay and then a big breath (*laughs*)
 (*Al takes really deep breath*)
- 179 Ay not that big
- 180 Ac "he heard his mum shouting" (*takes breath*)

The 24 eight-year-old focus children in Year 4 did the same punctuation insertion test as the younger children, and did so twice, once at the beginning of the academic year and once at the end. On the first administration only five children successfully marked both speech items. In all, 15 children failed to mark the first item and 19 failed to mark the second item, giving a success rate across the whole year group of 31%. On second administration at the end of the year 11 children failed to mark speech item 1, and 18 children failed to mark speech item 2. Still only five children successfully marked both, but rather surprisingly four of these were not the children who achieved this on the first administration of the test. The success rate for the year group on the second administration was 40%.

DISCUSSION

The Year 3 children approached the problem-solving with considerable enthusiasm. They argued with each other and searched for evidence in the text but for them there was a more graphic focus in the way they approached the task. They rarely used the technical term they were being taught, preferring to represent them by their visual similarity to numbers and had considerable problems with the boundaries between speech and the other parts of the texts. All the time they are brought up against things that are for them contradictions and they lack the technical knowledge to find ways round them. An example of this is the children having been taught that after a full stop you always have a capital letter. Thus when faced with a capital letter at the beginning of speech they are in a dilemma. Should box 7 contain a full stop? This may seem a bizarre example but it occurred as part of several groups discussions. The children are not being stupid; the fact that they debate it at all is

evidence that they realize there is an issue here, but they lack the experience to weigh the different possibilities. Time and time again the children are caught in dilemmas that would not for the most part even have been recognized as dilemmas by more experienced, older children. The younger children do not always have ways of balancing competing claims because of lack of experience rather than stupidity. They draw on their experience but that experience lets them down.

The Year 4 children mostly appear to recognize that speech marks need to come in pairs, but having spotted the final speech mark, seem uncertain about where the other one should go. Attempts to put it at the beginning of the speech meet the problem of the capital letter. Even when there are some decisions that box 7 is the correct place for the opening speech marks they cannot decide whether they are related to the final pair or whether additional speech marks are needed. They still seem somewhat uncertain about recognizing that there is a continuous run of speech and that other punctuation marks may be inserted in this run. Hypothesis gets set against hypothesis, and the children often seem to be going round in circles and revisiting issues. This time the cause cannot be failure to look and read ahead as there are several comments about the speech marks at the end of the text. The children do sometimes get there in the end and the debate, in exploring so many possibilities, eventually moves towards clarification.

Clearly the Year 4 children were more successful at reasoning about punctuation than the Year 3 children. However the task results, especially those of the end of year task did not show a huge difference from the results of the Year 3 children, and overall there did not seem to be large gains made. The children were still largely locked into descriptive language, and while more successful at recognizing the full length of the speech in the text, many groups still sought for other places to close the speech marks they inserted into box 7. The main difference between the Year 4 children and most of the Year 3 children is that the older children were sometimes able to persist beyond the confusions and eventually generate a correct response based upon good reasons. With an extra year's schooling they were able to draw on a wider range of linguistic resources and display greater certainty in justifying their decisions.

The major background context for this project was the punctuation demands made by England's National Curriculum. This meant that across the four schools involved all the children were receiving explicit teaching designed to achieve the targets set by *The Framework for Teaching English*. All the schools involved followed the specifications of this document, and punctuation, and particularly the

punctuation of speech, was a highly visible curriculum element in all the classes, a statement that could not have been written a few years earlier when the teaching of punctuation was either very vague or left until much later in school life. Thus the children in this project were being explicitly and regularly taught about punctuation for its duration. The research project was not set up to evaluate the success of this teaching, but to try and explore how young children were thinking about punctuation. Nevertheless, this teaching was a major information resource for the children, and there is clear evidence in the data of this, both directly and indirectly. There were some explicit references to children having been told specific things by teachers and some more implicit references, such as when the children worked backwards from teacher reminders that full stops were followed by capital letters to extrapolate that capital letters therefore always need a full stop before them, a strategy that could be very misleading.

However, the influence of explicit punctuation teaching does not and could not create for the children a clear and systematic understanding of punctuation. This is partly because punctuation, as in the punctuation of speech, involves issues that are probably not even thought about by teachers, but also because teachers have to face the problem that the language needed to fully explain punctuation often depends upon concepts that the children have yet to learn.

One of the most revealing aspects of this study was the persistence of these very young children when working on the tasks. The average time spent by each group was around twenty-five minutes and in many cases the activity had to be drawn to a close by the researcher. This was not because the children had run out of things to say but because of promises made by the researchers to teachers that the children would not be kept away from the classroom for too long. The discussions were extremely vigorous and dynamic, and always utterly focused on the topic of punctuation. They also contained a lot of humor and far from having the dour characteristics of more formal teaching sessions there was real interest in the problem-solving demanded by the tasks.

Early on in this article it was suggested that the punctuation of speech may be more complex for children (and some adults) than has generally been considered. In particular we asked whether the assumptions and expectations about learning to punctuate enshrined within the English National Curriculum were valid. There is also a long history of people writing about how punctuation should be taught and overwhelmingly they have proceeded on the assumption that punctuation, and in particular the punctuation of speech is relatively unproblematic (Hall, 1996). This

is despite the fact that complaints about people's ability to punctuate go back several hundred years.

Our study demonstrates clearly that punctuation of speech is complex and it is risky practice for adults to make claims about how easy or difficult it is to learn; after all, these claims are nearly always made by people who succeeded with learning, rather than those who had difficulties. It is certainly clear that the expectations of the English National Curriculum relating to rate of learning about the punctuation of speech were not going to be met by many of the children studied as part of this project.

The majority of children in Years 3 and 4 in this study clearly did not have the term 'speech mark' as a regular part of their vocabulary. It was much easier for them to continue with '66' and '99' as they had such great graphic power and other children knew exactly what was meant. Despite often resorting to these number terms they would sometime invent terminology (for instance 'speech comma' and 'flying comma' which were coined by children in this study). It might be argued that it doesn't matter that children fall back on '66s' and '99s'; after all the children know them and there is no communication failure from using them. But, the English National Curriculum says that by the end of Year 3 they must be using the term speech marks. So entrenched are these number names, that we even found many ten and eleven year-old children using them.

Many of the children in Years 3 and 4 in this study clearly did not have a clear idea of the boundary between speech and other parts of the text. There was usually one child in a group who had some sense of these boundaries but they often had to work hard to try and convince the others. Working out who was 'saying' something was not easy for many of the children, thus using capital letters for introducing direct speech becomes rather difficult.

Not only were children largely ignoring the term 'speech mark,' in many cases they were unsure what it looked like, and children found themselves asking the others for help. The naming of the mark was often confused with two other punctuation marks—the comma and the apostrophe. This is not really surprising as all of them are pretty small and they all have a comma-like quality (hence the term 'speech comma' noted above).

It is clear that in several ways the issues examined in the introduction to this article do intrude into the children's thoughts about the punctuation of speech, and certainly contribute confusion to the task. It is also clear that the level and timing of expectation in the English National Curriculum may not be helpful to many children who have justifiable reasons for decisions that ultimately turn out to be incorrect.

We need to make clear that we are not arguing that teachers avoid teaching children aged 7 and 8 about punctuation. It is clear from this study and others that even younger children can be fascinated by punctuation and what it does (Hall and Holden-Sim, 1996; Hall, 1999). However, there must be recognition that learning about the punctuation of speech is more complex than has been previously recognized, and that allowances must be made for children approaching the task with conflicting evidence. Attaching arbitrary ages to learning particular elements of punctuation fails to reflect the huge efforts that children are putting into making sense of speech punctuation and the amount of time they might need to be comfortable in conquering the task.

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