



# Great Discussions

“How does the explicit teaching of group discussion skills impact participation and the quality of group discussion in Year 8 iThink lessons?”



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## Background Literature

The **Education Endowment Fund (EEF)** suggests that students gain both academically and socially when they have opportunities to work with others to accomplish shared goals. Although the literature suggests that the impact of collaborative approaches on learning is consistently positive, the size of impact varies. Effective collaborative learning requires much more than just sitting pupils together and asking them to work in a group; the EEF highlight approaches *which promote talk and interaction between learners* as those that result in the best gains. This reflects the thinking by **Robin Alexander**. He advocates dialogic teaching; teaching that harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students' thinking and advance their learning and understanding. **Neil Mercer** is another key thinker on promoting talk and interaction between learners. He suggests that children learn more effectively, and intellectual achievements are higher when they are actively engaged in pedagogic activity, through discussion, dialogue and argumentation, he highlights the need for pupils to develop the critical reasoning and inquiry skills. His research suggests that there are three types of talk displayed in classroom discussions; *disputational talk, cumulative talk and exploratory talk*. Promoting exploratory talk is seen as an essential part of dialogic teaching. However, Mercer appreciates, and stresses the importance of, the need for scaffolding to promote this exploratory talk, especially when pupils are first introduced to the concept.

With this evidence in mind, the **GREAT Discussions** intervention attempts to encourage and embed exploratory talk through providing scaffolding to pupils through the use of sentence stems.

## ETHICS

Ethical approval was granted by the **Research and Ethics Committee of the School of Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint Davids** in May 2018. Informed consent was obtained at the school level from headteachers and teachers. Written information and opt-out consent forms were sent home to parents /carers of all pupils in the intervention lessons. Parents / carers were also given the opportunity to contact the research team for further information. Pupils involved in the semi-structured focus group interviews completed an opt-in consent form prior to the interview. Pupils could not opt out of the series of the teaching and learning that was occurring as this was normal practice for pupils, but, all pupils were given a meaningful option to opt out of any data collection. Pupils were informed in advance of any data collection and were introduced to the research team members carrying out the data collection.



Figure 1. Discussion Mat

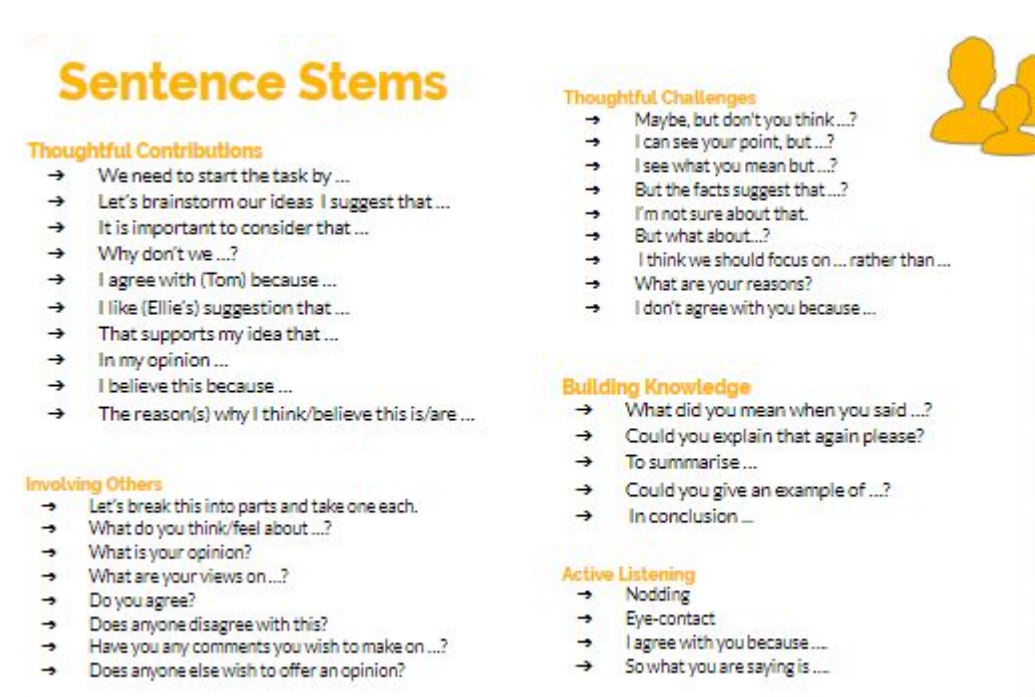


Figure 2. Sentence Stems

## Methods

The intervention involved three mixed ability Year 8 classes giving approximately 90 pupils in the study.

The study took a pre-experimental design. All three groups were observed and data collected prior to the intervention and again after a six week period. The intervention was conducted on all three groups with no group acting as a control. Whilst the questionnaire data and lesson observation data could be analysed with comparisons being made between pre and post intervention data, much of the analysis has taken a qualitative approach.

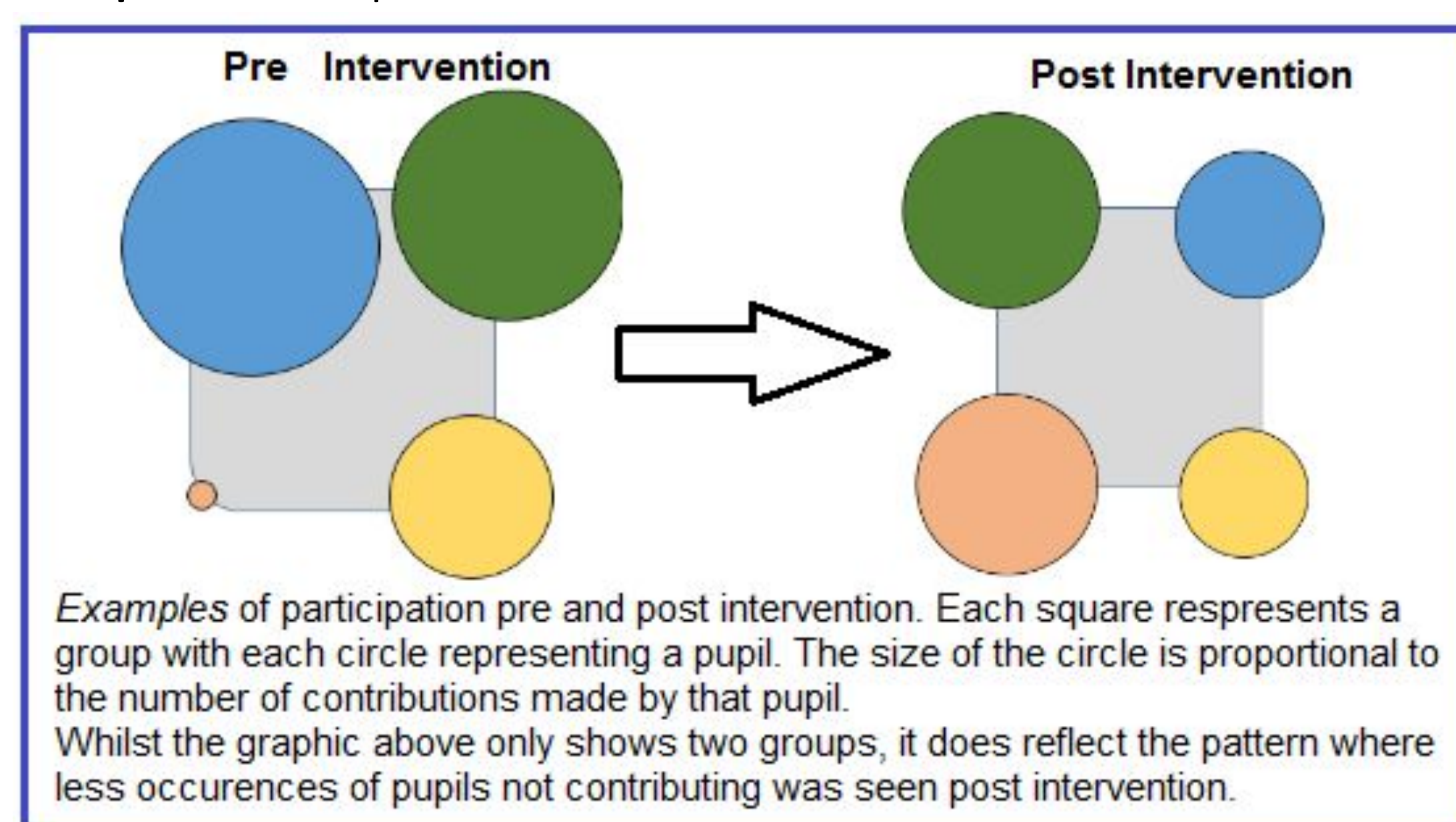
Triangulation of data came from pupil questionnaires, pupil interviews, lessons observations and interviews with teachers. Data collected was examined against the behaviours that were identified in the literature as to what the evidence states to be qualities of effective group discussion. These were recorded through an observation schedule.

## Results

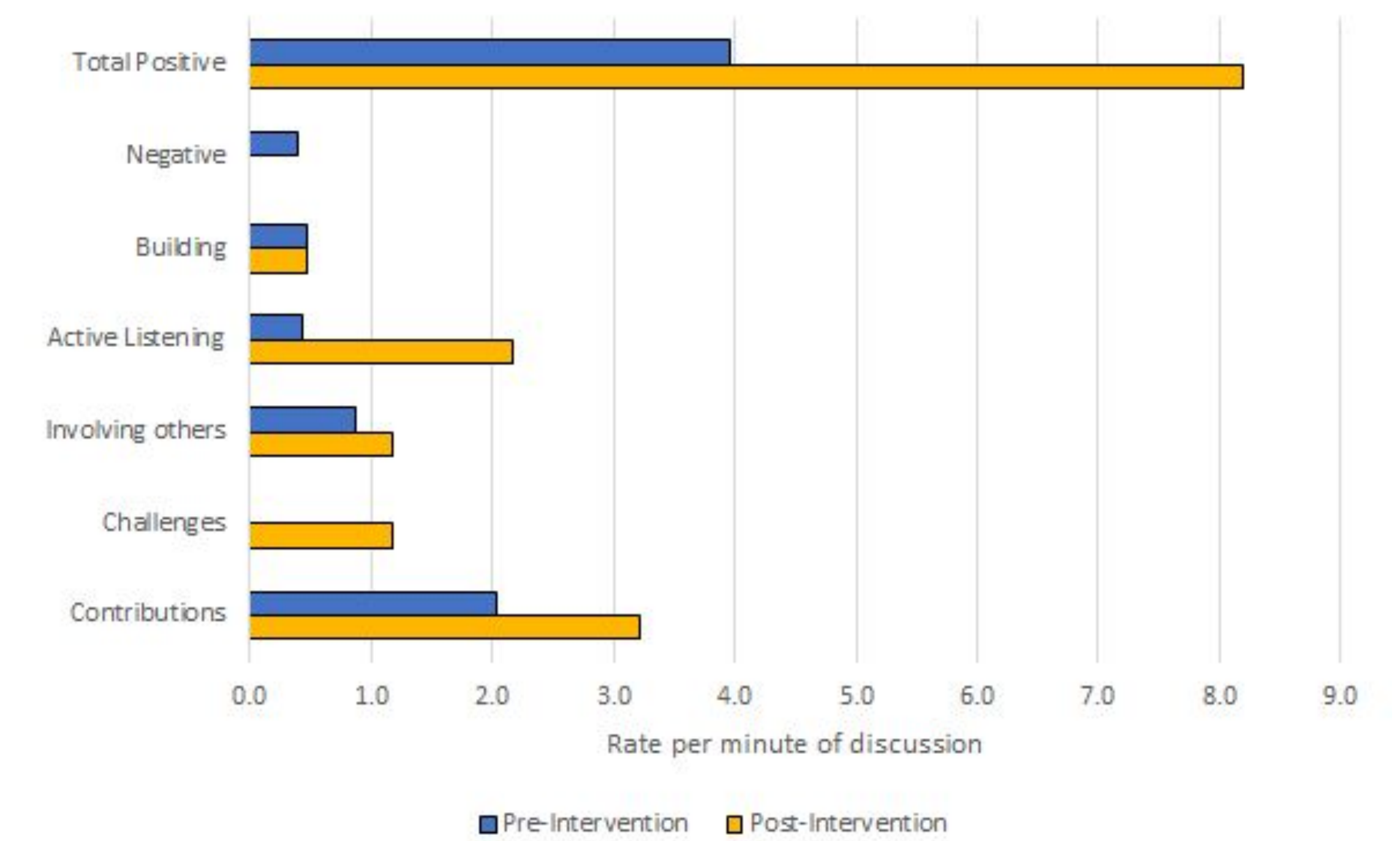
Through an analysis of pre and post data collected during the **GREAT Discussion** intervention, we can assess the extent to which the explicit teaching of group discussion skills has impacted on:

- Pupil perceptions of group discussion among Year 8 pupils;**  
Pre-intervention 76% of students asked agreed with the statement - *I believe group discussions are important in iThink*. Pupils were also able to highlight both academic and social advantages of group discussion. There was little change in pupil perceptions of group discussion post intervention.
- Pupil participation rates in group discussions in Year 8 iThink lessons;**  
Participation circles suggest that post intervention participation is more equally distributed amongst group members. Whilst we are unable to quantify rates of participation, post-intervention there are no incidences of a pupil not contributing towards the group discussion and there are less occurrences of domination by a single group member.
- The quality of group discussion in Year 8 iThink lessons;**  
Observed increase in duration of groups discussions from around 2 minutes to around 5 minutes. Post intervention data shows an increase in frequency of positive contributions and a reduction in negative contributions. Large increase in active listening and a significant increase in thoughtful challenges was also observed. No change in building knowledge. Pupil and teacher post-intervention interviews corroborated the observation data.

Graphic 1: Participation Circles.



Comparisons of Pre and Post Group Discussions



## Discussion

Observation data suggested that participation had become more equal amongst groups; however, most insight was gained from pupil interviews. The following quote was typical of what pupils were saying post-intervention:

“There was also, if people were quiet in your group, sentence stems to get them involved, not just say to them ‘why aren’t you speaking, just say something’. You could say ‘Would you like to say something now?’ and I think that is good as it doesn’t force them to do it, it gives them an option.”

The sentence stems were highlighted by both pupils and teachers to be the ‘tool’ that helped less confident pupils participate.

The chart above shows the pupil behaviours pre and post intervention. Increases in pupils challenging each other were seen, with this corresponding to responses given in the pupil questionnaire where there was a significant increase in pupils saying they were confident to challenge each other.

Staff experience: post-interventions reflections by staff showed a positive response to the project. All four staff said that the experience will alter how they teach group discussions in the future. Staff commented that it was good to have the theory behind a resource so that they could understand why they were being used.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the **GREAT Discussions** intervention attempted to encourage and embed exploratory talk through providing scaffolding to pupils through use of sentence stems and the explicit teaching of group discussion skills. The evidence suggests that both participation rates and the quality of discussion in Year 8 iThink lessons in Olchfa School has improved and there has been a move towards more exploratory talk in classrooms. The challenge now is to build on this success to further enhance the process of jointly constructing and building knowledge.

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