Oracy APPG

Written evidence

Members of the Oracy APPG will consider written, verbal and audio-visual evidence and oversee oral evidence sessions. All evidence will inform the final report.

The extended deadline for submitting written evidence is 20th September 2019. We would appreciate if the submissions would follow the following guidelines:

- Be in a Word format
- No longer than 3000 words
- State clearly who the submission is from, and whether it is sent in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation
- Begin with a short summary in bullet point form
- Have numbered paragraphs
- Where appropriate, provide references

Please write your evidence below and email the completed form via email to inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk with the subject line of 'Oracy APPG inquiry'

Lance Hanson

Full name:

Stour Vale Academy Trust

School or Organisation:

Head of Teaching School

Role:

Written evidence:

- This is a report on a two-year oracy project called Voice Black Country, a collaborative project involving 30 schools across the four Black Country authorities (Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall, and Wolverhampton).
- The report is submitted by Stour Vale Academy Trust (based in Halesowen and Dudley) who launched the project at its Voice Black Country conference in July.
- The Black Country contains pockets of severe deprivation. Latest figures show that 17% of young people in the Black Country live in 'workless' households[1], and research shows that

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[1] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185537/report.aspx#tabempunemp

- increased oracy and literacy skills will improve the chances of young people in finding employment.
- The project's aim is therefore to improve the oracy skills of young people in schools across the area.
- All schools in the project will embed oracy as a learning process in their classrooms; oracy will form part of each school's improvement plans.
- We are working with Voice 21 who will provide training and support to 30 schools. Some funding has been provided by the local authorities.
- Each school will have up to four teachers who will be trained in delivering and leading on oracy within their school.
- Each local authority has nominated an expert hub school to provide area wide support and expertise, as well as training facilities and resources.
- A central steering group is leading the project and ensuring its financial, strategic and operational integrity
- The steering group will meet each month, along with the oracy leads from each school, to monitor the project's key performance indicators
- The project begins September 2019.
- An oracy conference will be planned for July 2020 to showcase the work done and the progress made.

1.0 Why is oracy important to Stour Vale Academy Trust and to schools in the Black Country?

1.1 As the headline figures showed, 17% of young people in the Black Country live in workless households; 15% of them leave with no academic qualifications. Traditional Black Country occupations, such as manufacturing, are being replaced by more jobs in the retail sector, human health and social work, and administrative roles which brings with it a greater emphasis on more precise verbal and written communication[2]. As Professor Neil Mercer puts it: "Skills in oracy (the use of spoken language) will be more important for most people when they leave school than, for example, skills in algebra"[3].

1.2 Whilst much has been made of 'work ethic' and the importance of effort and hard work to succeed in school, work and life, recent evidence has shown that 'literacy poverty' is an increasing barrier to, and even a determiner of, social and educational mobility[4]. By literacy poverty, we mean the failure of society (whether this is through family or school) to provide meaningful opportunities for all young people to interact with language at levels beyond what Isabel Beck refers to as tier 1, the level of communication characterised by concrete nouns and verbs which children encounter in their everyday lives[5]. Of course, these encounters are context-bound and so children from more affluent or educated families will be at an advantage from the outset which makes it the responsibility of educators to ensure that this vocabulary is gap is reduced and young people are raised out of literacy poverty.

1.3 We believe that improving oracy – the ability to communicate thought into speech – is vital for improving educational outcomes and to eventually provide young people with the social currency to succeed in the employment market. But to do so means that a more targeted approach to the explicit teaching of oracy (learning to talk) is as important as using talk as a vehicle for delivering and acquiring knowledge (learning through talk). To make this happen, we need to educate

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[2] https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/lep/1925185537/report.aspx#tabempunemp
[3] https://www.cam.ac.uk/research/discussion/why-teach-oracy
[4] EEF Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools (2019); Why Closing the Word Gap Matters (Oxford University Press, 2019); Millard W and Menzies L (2016) The State of Speaking in Our Schools. London: Voice 21/LKMco
[5] https://bep.education/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Bringing-Words-to-Life-Booklet.pdf

teachers and provide them with the knowledge and skills to plan for structured and meaningful opportunities for talk in the classroom.

2.0 Origins of Voice Black Country

2.1 Towards the end of 2018, several teachers from schools across Stour Vale Trust attended some oracy training facilitated by Voice 21. Following this, the Trust's teaching and learning group devised a Cross-Trust training day to disseminate this good practice to all teachers. The principles and practice of oracy are concomitant with those of the Trust which are rooted in a pursuit of excellence through vibrant and dynamic communication. The success of the training day was such that we decided to organise an oracy conference for July 2019 which would be a showcase for the good practice within the Trust, but interest grew and we decided to open up the conference to outside speakers and teachers from other schools.

2.2 Working with Voice 21, we were aware of their work with other 'Voice Areas' such as Voice Liverpool. Whilst planning the conference, we started to look even further beyond our Trust to investigate whether we could set up a new area called Voice Black Country. Discussions were held with key professionals from the four Black Country boroughs, along with representatives from Voice 21, to see whether such a programme was feasible. The project quickly gathered momentum and schools were keen to participate, partly due to Voice 21s good reputation in educational circles, but also due to the integrity of the project leaders whose prior work with schools had built a strong element of trust.

3.0 Talking Up: The Stour Vale Oracy Conference

3.1 At the conference at Halesowen College in July 2019, Stour Vale literally gave voice to the power of oracy by inviting presenters from across the area, and the country, to showcase the work they have been doing in oracy. Over 100 people attended and heard the Mayor of West Midlands, Andy Street, deliver a keynote address which highlighted the links between oracy and social mobility; Alan Howe discuss the power of oracy as an educational philosophy, and Professor Carl Chinn speak about the prejudices encountered by local those speaking in local dialects. Workshops from current practitioners provided professional development on a range of topics: setting up an oracy climate in schools; using oracy to deliver subject specific skills; closing the word-gap in early years, and using oracy as a tool with EAL students.

4.0 What will high quality oracy look like in Voice Black Country as the project develops?

4.1 Oracy is not just a vehicle to deliver knowledge, it is the power of transmitting knowledge and thought into words. It is a process: it cannot be delivered in stand-alone oracy lessons, nor can it be something that is added as a bolt-on to a lesson plan. Instead, oracy is a philosophy of education. It underpins the transmission of knowledge and so has to be structured in the same way any other part of the lesson is. 'Just talk' is not an option, but 'talk like this' is, and so opportunities for talk should be modelled and practised in the same way that written work is.

4.2 A school that embeds an effective oracy policy will exhibit some or even all of the following qualities:
- A variety of talk opportunities – from the exploratory to the presentational – will be offered to learners;
- They will be taught to deploy Alexander's five types of teaching talk: rote, recitation, instruction, discussion, dialogue[6];
- These conventions of talk will be shared, worked on, practised and honed so that learners become conversant with the different modes of talk;

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[6] https://impact.chartered.college/article/millard-importance-of-oracy-in-teaching-learning/

- Talk activities will be structured to enable all learners to contribute to their learning, and learners will exhibit metacognitive skill when discussing their talk;
- Teachers will be able to articulate their rationale for talk and identify how it impacts upon, and enhances, learners' knowledge acquisition;
- Structured talk will be used to explore, enhance and embed knowledge; we learn from each other as effectively as we do from 'the sage on the stage'. As Amy Gaunt (Voice 21) puts it, "We talk to discover, then we communicate what we have found out, backed up by the subject knowledge and key vocabulary that we have developed through talk. We are explorers together."[7]

4.3 Through the Voice Black Country project, a culture of oracy will exist in our schools:
- Pupils will talk with confidence in formal and informal situations; they will be cognisant of the best that is and has been spoken and will be able to replicate rhetorical and stylistic models;
- Oracy will be the glue that binds learning together across all disciplines; talk skills and strategies will be transferable and become embedded over time. Structured talk in English, for example, will look the same as it does in Maths, albeit with different subject matter!
- Schools will be given opportunities to share good practice; this will include learners and teachers modelling their work.

5.0 What are the barriers to good oracy and how will the Voice Black Country project seek to overcome them?

5.1 Some educators believe that oracy is another form of constructivist learning which puts the child at the centre of their knowledge acquisition and is essentially weak in cognitive challenge[8]. Its excision from the current National Curriculum has devalued it in the eyes of many, and consequently its deployment in the classroom is hindered by its perceived inconsequentiality. In a recent report[9], 31% of teachers surveyed cited 'a lack of time' as a key factor in relegating the importance of oracy and not spending the time necessary to improve learners' competencies, whilst others regarded the emphasis on high-stakes accountability as a reason for not doing something for which there was 'nothing to show'.

5.2 Voice Black Country will overcome these barriers using the following strategies:
- By putting the process of talk at the heart of teaching and learning, the project will enable schools and teachers to value talk as an integral part of learning and knowledge/skills acquisition;
- Through Voice 21 training, teachers will be given a plethora of effective strategies to implement talk in their lessons;
- Sharing good practice across the schools in the project – via video, training sessions and TeachMeet conferences – will provide concrete examples of oracy in action as well as exemplify its impact on learning;
- The use of scaffolding, modelling, setting ground rules for talk are all important factors for its success; by helping teachers to be conversant in these strategies, the project will ensure they are equipped to get the best out of their learners;
- By providing a safe, unthreatening environment for talk, schools can alleviate the 'fear factor' and assure teachers that student talk is not a by-word for lack of engagement.

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[7] https://impact.chartered.college/article/millard-importance-of-oracy-in-teaching-learning/
[8] Cambridge Primary Review of the Curriculum (2010)
[9] Millard W and Menzies L (2016) The State of Speaking in Our Schools. London: Voice 21/LKMco.

6.0 How will the Steering Group ensure schools' fidelity to the project?

6.1 It is incumbent upon the Steering Group to ensure that all schools in the project have the appropriate support, guidance and training to meet the aims of the project.

6.2 The Steering Group will, alongside Voice 21, carry out an oracy audit of each of the hub schools in the project. This will include 3 days in each school looking at how oracy is used in lessons, and how it forms part of its pedagogy. This audit model will be used then as a means for each of the area oracy lead teachers to carry out similar audits in other participating schools.

6.3 These audits will form the basis of an Oracy Programme in each school which will be an improvement plan against which schools will be able to assess their progress. This will form part of the monthly project reviews with the Steering Group.

6.4 Voice 21 is a high quality training provider and its courses are designed to deliver practical, effective strategies to use in lessons. Each school will have up to 6 days of training for up to 4 teachers. These teachers will be oracy experts in their schools and promote its use across their institutions.

6.5 A central commissioning body will be set up to manage the project finances and be a single point of contact for Voice 21. This will ensure the operational details of the project are adhered to and its legalities are in order.

6.6 A member of the senior leadership team from each school will be responsible for the oversight and administration of the programme at their school.

6.6 Finally, schools in the programme's first cohort will be required to share examples of good practice at a Voice Black Country conference in July 2020. Workshops will be delivered by teachers from each of the schools, and learners from each of the schools will also provide examples of their work.

7.0 How can central government help with raising the profile of oracy?
7.1 Provide more funding for schools to invest in bringing training programmes (such as Voice 21) into schools;
7.2 Provide funding to access the expertise of schools across the country who are seen as oracy champions;
7.3 As mentioned above in paragraph 5.1, accountability measures in schools are prohibitive to teachers who want to spend time raising the quality of oracy in their lessons. Whilst it is important for schools, through precise training and pedagogy, to instil in teachers and learners the importance of oracy, as long as numerical targets are used to measure schools there will always be a resistance to initiatives which are not explicitly measured;
7.4 With the above in mind, Ofqual should look to include a weighted assessment of oracy back on exam specifications – and not just for English.
7.5 Whilst vocabulary and knowledge are central to the new Ofsted inspection framework, it would be beneficial if oracy was also identified as a strand for inspection.