

## **Submission to APPG on Oracy November 2020**

Below is the concluding part of a chapter from a forthcoming Open University Press book called 'Bringing the Curriculum to Life: Engaging Learners in the English Education System, by Janice Wearmouth and Karen Lindley. It describes the development of the oracy programme at Biddenham International School in Bedford and is entitled: 'Oracy, Dialogic Learning and Education for Democracy' by Mike Berrill and Dr Neil Hopkins.

The extract comes after a lengthy description of the development of a student voice programme at the school between 2012 and 2018, and a section on the theoretical collaboration between me (the school's Executive Principal at the time) and Neil (a Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Bedfordshire)

The section relates to the oracy programme that has been developed at the school as a result, and the research programme that is being conducted alongside it. It calls heavily on the theoretical work of Dewey, Alexander, Mercer, and Dr Hopkins himself (see references at the end).

Neil and I, and other colleagues at the school would be happy to provide further evidence to the APPG, especially on the research project if requested.

Mike Berrill and Neil Hopkins

### **Extract**

#### **The School Oracy Programme**

From our work with the Student Forum we knew that effective dialogic group work was important for developing the skills, values and dispositions associated with personal agency, civic engagement and collaborative problem solving. Though these are seen as unimportant in relation to the intense individualism of GCSE and A levels examinations, they are nevertheless essential for a flourishing economy and a vibrant democracy. Despite the significant time pressures that the school was under, the SLT recognised that these should become an integral part of the curriculum.

The theoretical consideration above and our wish to extend the work of the Student Forum to the whole school, quickly took us to the concept of 'oracy' and to the work of the 'Voice 21' organisation. This was set up by Peter Hyman and grew from his pioneering work on oracy as the Head of the newly formed 'School 21' in London.

From the beginning, the work of Voice 21 was built on the Cambridge Oracy Skills Framework created by Neil Mercer and his team at Hughes College, Cambridge. What began with a sense of inspiration from the work of Dewey and Alexander brought us to Mercer's concept of 'exploratory talk' and his detailed practical framework of skills. (<https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/oracyskillsframework/>)

A simple definition of oracy suggests that it is merely the ability to express oneself fluently and grammatically in speech, but Mercer's framework clearly incorporated the multi-level social, emotional and

cognitive skills that underpin dialogic group learning. His team had mapped out four practical dimensions of oracy which were seen as being the:

**Physical** - relating to the voice, its fluency, pace, tonal variation, clarity and projection; and body language including gesture, posture, facial expression and eye contact;

**Linguistic** - relating to the appropriate use of vocabulary, register, grammar and structure; and the use of rhetorical techniques, such as metaphor, humour, irony and mimicry;

**Cognitive** - relating to the conveying of meaning and intention, building on the views of others, seeking information and clarification through questioning and summarising; the focus on task, time management and giving reasons to support views; critically examining ideas and views expressed and taking account of the level of understanding of others.

**Social and Emotional** - relating to guiding or managing interactions; turn-taking, active listening and responding appropriately; self-assurance, liveliness and flair.

From the school's work with Voice 21, Mercer's framework and the authors' own experiences, five simple guidelines were formulated:

- unstructured and poorly planned talk in the classroom is often worse than no talk at all and potentially a waste of valuable time;
- effective classroom talk, and the dialogic learning that grows from it, does not happen naturally or by accident; its basic elements have to be taught, discussion has to be well facilitated and classrooms must have the right ground rules;
- achieving all of this takes time, and the development of high-level planning and facilitation skills;
- oracy and dialogic learning cannot simply be tacked on to a lesson (the 'oracy bit'); they need to infuse a teacher's whole approach to lesson planning, teaching and learning.
- although the various elements of oracy can be taught and practiced separately, like sports skills, they only become fully embedded as an active skill set through extended practice in real discursive activities.

#### **Vignette: Oracy-based curriculum development**

With the above guidelines in mind, the staff and students began to develop their own skill levels by introducing a dedicated oracy lesson into year 7 and 8 in September 2018. This involved using a range of discursive group games and activities to introduce the basic vocabulary of oracy with terms like:

- 'active listening' - showing through voice cues, gesture, posture, facial expression and eye contact, and by probing and clarifying that you are both listening and seeking to understand;
- 'turn taking' and 'courtesy' - the importance of equity, 'sharing the air', rule following and avoiding aggression in effective group work;
- useful 'sentence stems' for clarifying, probing, challenging and summarising (e.g. sentence openings that build on previous speakers like, 'Picking up Halima's point, I'd like to add...' or to probe like, 'Can you tell me a bit more about...').

In year 7, the curriculum is built around a real-time activity with the charity ‘First Give’ (<https://firstgive.co.uk/>) that involves developing student advocacy and social action. Basically, over a term they explore the local charity landscape, form into groups, each choose a charity, contact them and arrange a visit. Ultimately, with guidance and training, each group creates a ‘pitch’ which they present to parents and an outside panel to win a sum of money for their chosen charity. This involves oracy milestones like making a telephone call to the charity, organising a meeting, researching a presentation and ultimately presenting to an external panel.

In year 8, the oracy curriculum is built around the Pixl ‘Up for Debate’ programme (<https://upfordebate.co.uk/>) which provides detailed training on effective forms of argument and presentation. It engages the students in researching and planning a debating position against other teams in the school and ultimately locally and regionally. Further up the school there are special focus weeks which provide opportunities to reinforce these skills by considering and debating issues relating to the 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations’ ‘Agenda 2030’ (<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/development-agenda/>)

As this chapter is written, the school is moving into the third year of its oracy and dialogic learning strategy which involves an upward roll-out from this strong and developing year 7 and 8 base. All departments are now required to indicate in their development plans how they will access and use the growing database of ideas and resources, including suspended timetable days, to introduce oracy groupwork activities into their particular subject areas across years 9 - 13; not as a 'bolt on' but as an integral part of their teaching and learning. An innovation this year is to encourage greater parental involvement by sending out 'nudge texts' suggesting topics for discussion at home. No doubt this will all change and develop over the coming years as we gain experience and feedback from our research, but a strong and resolute start has been made.

## **Evaluation of developments in oracy**

The authors and Professor Mercer, collaborated to create a research tool designed to help us map - and feed back into - the longer-term growth and development of oracy and dialogic group work across the school. This is based upon the ‘Oracy Skills Framework’ and involved turning each of the skill elements into a competence statement with an assessment grid alongside to score skill levels on a five-point scale. It yields both individual and cohort scores (tutor group, year group and school) so that we can make formative judgments about how skill levels are changing over time. Following a year of trials in 2018/9, this was introduced to year 11 teachers in 2019/20 and, following the disruption of the Covid 19 pandemic, will hopefully be repeated in the 2020/21 academic year.

## **Conclusion**

Significant progress has already been made with the oracy programme at the school. Using materials from Voice 21 and additional stimulus materials from ‘Just Give’, Pixl’s ‘Up for Debate’ and the UN’s Agenda 2030, we are slowly developing an exciting and innovative oracy curriculum framework. The research tool,

devised with support from Professor Mercer, has provided staff and students with a comprehensive vocabulary around oracy and an overview of its key competences. It has also enabled both staff and students to identify specific aspects of practice that are already sound and areas for improvement such that students can steadily become more aware, articulate, expressive and confident as emerging adults and citizens. As this is a project that is in 'mid-stream', we are still in the process of finding new results and refining our approach both on the basis of what the staff and students are telling us and what is seen from our own observations. We hope that other schools, colleges and educational providers may be able to adapt and develop the framework around oracy presented in this chapter to enhance their own practice regarding speech, dialogic learning, curriculum development and citizenship education.

## References

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