

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'

Laura Wallis on behalf of Debating Mental Health Ltd.

Full name:

Debating Mental Health Ltd.

School or Organisation:

Founder and Director

Role:

Written evidence:

Notes

This submission contains direct quotes from young people, please do not publish these without seeking prior permission. Other content may be utilised in the final report.

We would welcome the opportunity to attend an oral evidence session, along with some of the Debating Mental Health Young Leaders.

Introduction

This evidence has been prepared for submission by Laura Wallis, Founder and Director of Debating Mental Health, in partnership with Alex and Rebekah, two of our Young Leaders, who have participated in Debating Mental Health training and presented at events, including the Global Ministerial Mental Health Summit, 2018. They have provided direct quotes and have also fed into the core body of our response, having written and shared their own responses to some questions, which are integrated without direct citation.

Debating Mental Health coaches young people with mental health support needs to debate, enabling them to determine and advocate for what is important to them in mental health. We predominantly work outside of formal education settings.

In support of our submission, we refer you to our recent impact assessment, which provides evidence in support of the below:

<https://www.debating-mh.co.uk/testimonials-and-impact>

Summary

- Our oracy education work is focused on mental health settings; specifically working with young people who have mental health support needs;
- Effective oracy education is supportive of positive well-being, academic attainment and the development of social skills;
- Oracy education can be supportive of young people with mental health support needs, as it helps them to pursue varied life opportunities;
- It develops the ability to engage critically and reflectively with difficult topics, including themes in mental health.

1. *Value and impact*

1.1 Given many teachers recognise the importance of oracy, why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing in our education system? Should it have the same status, and if so why?

Oracy doesn't have the same status as literacy within our education system, because it has traditionally been described as a "soft skill" and thought of as something beyond the remit of the education system. Independent schools have recognised the important role that the development of "soft skills" has to play in a young person's confidence, self-belief and ability to pursue and accept new challenges and opportunities, but the state sector lags behind.

1.1ii

Within our work at Debating Mental Health, we are beginning to understand that the development and practice of oracy skills is seen as "brave". Public speaking consistently rates as one of the top fears in the UK and USA and we believe this fear is projected onto young people, serving as a barrier to their access to quality oracy education. To overcome this, we need to develop oracy skills in professionals, just as much as we do in young people. The teaching and coaching of oracy skills is a skill-set within itself. There is a skills gap in the UK that needs to be addressed.

1.1iii

Outside of the independent education sector, the one area of education where this is different is in higher-level language teaching, where a great deal of importance is placed on oral skills and, indeed, these skills are tested and count towards final grades. This demonstrates that we understand the value and importance of verbal communication and highlights an area from where expertise could be drawn.

1.2 What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?

1.2i

Oracy education is essential in building confidence, supporting academic development and fostering strong social skills. In the young people we support through Debating Mental Health, this is especially important, as their experiences of poor mental health are likely to have impacted their confidence, self-esteem and friendships, which in turn may impact academic and non-academic achievement and confidence to pursue opportunities.

1.2ii

If these skills are not learnt, and opportunities to practice oracy are absent for young people then it is likely to be harder for them in adulthood. With life being so competitive these days, anyone lacking in any skill is more likely to be left by the wayside, and potentially miss out on opportunities in and out of employment.

1.3 What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils (for instance pupils from varied socioeconomic backgrounds or with special educational needs)?

1.3i

Our work takes oracy education out of the classroom and into mental health settings. Sometimes we work formally with mental health services, but often, we don't, because we recognise that not all young people who are struggling with their mental health will be able/want to use a service. Taking our work beyond the school environment is essential, as it allows us to work with young people who are very often not attending school, because of their struggles with mental health. The young people we work with have all told us that participating in our training programmes and learning and practicing oracy skills has been supportive of their mental health and has helped them develop the confidence to participate in further opportunities outside of our work, for example, university and job applications.

1.3ii

We have recently undertaken a project working with young women who have ADHD. They have collectively told us that formal debate training has helped them to focus, order their thoughts and know how to control their impulsivity and body language. These are all things that young people with ADHD may struggle with. Learning to control these things will help them, not only when presenting or debating, but moving forward in their lives.

1.3iii

“What I learned from debating and oracy training broke down a lot of my barriers concerning mental health stigma. It gave me confidence and encouraged my assertiveness. Without that training, I wouldn't be able to raise my voice in teams, I wouldn't be able to be a strong leader, and I wouldn't be able to enter jobs that require personal influencing skills.”- Alex, co-author and Debating Mental Health Young Leader

1.4 How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?

1.4i

Many of the young people we support are in further, or higher education, but they often report the impact their oracy skills have had on their wider attainment.

1.4ii

“The skills that I have gained through [Debating Mental Health] have also positively affected other areas of my life too. Currently I am studying history at university and a big part of my degree is being able to argue my opinions both in person and in essays and use evidence to support my arguments. Therefore there is an obvious link between the debating skills gained with Debating Mental Health and my degree.”- Rebekah, co-author and Debating Mental Health Young Leader

1.4iii

By promoting oracy skills training, you help to expand a person's vocabulary and encourage them to delve deeper into arguments. This helps the humanities. History, at its core, teaches the baseline analysis of fact. English asks you the same, but of how and why we use language. Oracy training, as opposed to normal class presentations, allows students to engage with arguments as opposed to reading them out. For the sciences, a lot of STEM graduates enter into the services sectors after university. They lack the non-technical skills to gain these jobs, like time management. STEM students learn through rote memorisation as opposed to creative problem solving. Oracy training can help close the skills gap, and ensure that STEM students gain the same experiences as those trained in the humanities, where oracy education is more common.

1.5 What is the impact of quality oracy education on future life chances? Specifically, how does it affect employment and what value do businesses give oracy?

1.5i

At the core of social mobility is the need to ensure that young people aren't intimidated to apply for high-level jobs that the working classes are shut out from. One of the reasons why we are shut out are the small and covert differences a middle-class upbringing can give you. Being able to control your inflection, being able to use an expansive vocabulary, and being able to reflect on social cues come far more naturally to middle class people than working class.

1.5ii

"I believe that the combination of oracy education, and the chance to practice this, has massively benefitted my skills. When I was in secondary school, the thought of standing up and speaking even to my class made me physically shake in fear. I don't think that some people would recognise the person who has spoken on live television to thousands, or at conferences to specialist mental health professionals! In terms of employment, my oracy skills have enhanced my interview skills – I know I come across as confident (even if I don't feel it!), yet also polite and respectful. "-Rebekah, co-author and Debating Mental Health Young Leader

1.6 What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/ mental health?

1.6i

An important aspect of oracy education is that the skills gained can easily be transferred to any situation. People can use those skills in all areas of their life, from work and school, to things that they are passionate about, to needing to advocate for themselves and others. Lately in terms of mental health there has been a big push to try and encourage the conversation to be more open and the stigma to be reduced. People who have better oracy skills are much more likely to be effective in contributing to this because their skills will allow them to speak appropriately for the situation. They can also help by being advocates for those who are unable to communicate for themselves in any situation, not just mental health. The benefits of oracy education are therefore not always just to be reaped on a personal level. Many stories that make the news are not those where someone has written an eloquent letter advocating for change; they are people who have stood up and spoken publicly for change. Therefore there is evidence that this is effective and will at least make other people listen to you. If Greta Thunberg had just written a letter to world leaders then nothing would have likely ever come from it because it would likely just be one letter among thousands, but because she spoke up people can't not stop and take notice. She is just one example of how powerful the voice of a young person is.

1.6ii

Furthermore, oracy facilitates critical, empathetic and respectful engagement with difficult, or contentious subjects. It teaches children and young people to engage with the issues around

them, to reflect on them and to formulate their own well-balanced opinions. In addition, it supports the development of logical, reasoned arguments, rather than those driven purely by emotional reaction. While facilitating critical, reflective engagement with difficult subjects, oracy education also promotes the development of social skills, including effective listening and turn-taking, which can be supportive in establishing and maintaining friendships and support networks.

1.6iii

Effective oracy skills enable young people to articulate their opinions in a way that means they will be heard. This is powerful, as it helps young people understand that what they have to say is important and matters. Young people we work with have told us that being heard, helps them to feel seen and valued as active, contributing members of society. In mental health settings, this is not simply about activism and being heard across a range of platforms, but, perhaps more importantly, it is also about giving children and young people the confidence to speak up in appointments, or to provide feedback on service design and delivery, so that the services working with children and young people improve and are effective for those who need them.

1.6iv

“When I first met you (Debating Mental Health) I honestly felt like I had nothing to give and that I was not as useful as the other members of my team. After doing the Debating Mental Health training I honestly knew I had to continue being part of something important and that although I had no experience I could use my voice to make a difference, and that what I had to say was just as important as anyone else.”- Natalie, Debating Mental health Young Leader

1.6v

“Through engaging with Laura at Debating Mental Health, including taking part in a debating workshop and attending and presenting at the Global Summit for Mental Health 2018, I have hugely grown in confidence and rather than feeling like a vulnerable patient because of my difficulties, I feel like a strong young woman with valuable experience that can be used to help bring about change for the better.” -Lucy, Debating Mental Health Young Leader

1.7 How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens, participating fully in social action and public life as adults

1.7i

Debating Mental Health was set up to support young people with active or historic mental health support needs to become active citizens. We use formal debate and oracy coaching to support them to speak out on, be heard and lead change on what matters to them in mental health. For some of our Young Leaders, this is at the personal level (in their own clinical appointments), or at the local service design and development level (engaging effectively with service design and consultation), but for many, this means speaking out on the national, or international stage.

1.7ii

The young people we work with have spoken at professional, academic conferences, including for the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal College of Paediatric and Child Health; led their own mental health debate on the use of the Mental Health Act on under 18s; shared their opinions on various mental health topics through social media, blog posts and videos and; led the 'Children, Young People and the Now Generation' work stream at the Global Ministerial Mental Health Summit 2018. Young people were able to participate in these opportunities to lead social change, as they had developed effective communication skills, enabling them to feel confident in addressing large rooms of highly regarded delegates.

1.7iii

"Participating at the Global Ministerial Summit for Mental Health, as a young person, with Debating Mental Health, was empowering and eye-opening. It was a fantastic platform upon which to use my voice and expertise, alongside that of other young people, and I felt privileged to be able to work with leaders in their field and ministers from around the world. The Summit also put my campaigning aims into perspective; I am fighting for improvements in services, when at the same time there are people in countries across the developing world who are fighting for services in themselves and who are facing terrible mistreatment and injustice for being mentally unwell."-Lucy, Debating Mental Health Young Leader

2. Provision and access

2.1 Can you provide evidence of how oracy education is being provided in different areas/education settings/extra-curricular provision, by teachers but also other practitioners that work with children?

2.1i

Debating Mental Health works to develop oracy skills in young people with mental health support needs. The context and settings we work in are varied. We do occasionally work with/in schools, but our work is primarily delivered in mental health settings. We use interactive training sessions, that combines games and activities with formal and informal discussion on both mental health and wider themes. We have supported the delivery of training for youth boards, youth mental health activist groups and groups of mental health service-users. We have also worked with specific needs groups, such as ADHD Richmond, to deliver training for young people presenting at conferences and events.

2.2 What factors create unequal access to oracy education (i.e. socio-economic, region, type of school, special needs)? How can these factors be overcome?

2.2i

In the mental health sector, there is a misconception amongst professionals, that there is a certain "type" of young person who would "be good" for speaking or activism opportunities. These young people are often white, middle-class, articulate and academic young people, who are managing their mental health well. There is an idea that young people who are actively mentally unwell are "too vulnerable" to speak out and be heard, which can deny these young people the opportunity to even receive training in the first place.

2.2ii

In addition, the scope of our work is often limited by funding. There is demand for our work across the country and we regularly receive requests from young people, asking us to visit their area, however, without appropriate funding in place, it can be difficult to reach some of these areas from the South East of England. Fundamentally, this comes down to demonstrating impact in our work. Coaching oracy skills in the mental health sector is quite a new idea-one that feels different, or strange to the sector as a whole. It has discernible positive impact on the well-being of children and young people, but we need to be able to demonstrate this more fully.

2.2iii

Having said this, we do work hard to ensure we are engaging a wide range of young people and voices in our work and use digital tools, including social media, video conferencing and chat platforms to do this. We are particularly keen to investigate the development of digital training resources to support the training of young people in geographical regions that are currently difficult for us to physically access. In the meantime, we will continue to use our digital engagement to support and work with young people across the country and from diverse backgrounds, because we believe every young person has something important to say and the potential to say it well.

2.2iv

“Some of the opportunities I have had through Debating Mental Health are not usually available to people of my background. It is not every day you get to present in front of HRH The Duke & Duchess of Cambridge or invited to Downing Street. I have made long term friends including a friend in India!”-Kirsty, Debating Mental Health Young Leader

Words: 2, 995

Additional guidance:

Value and impact

1. Given many teachers recognise the importance of oracy, why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing in our education system? Should it have the same status, and if so why?
2. What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?
3. What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils (for instance pupils from varied socioeconomic backgrounds or with special educational needs)?
4. How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?
5. What is the impact of quality oracy education on future life chances? Specifically, how does it affect employment and what value do businesses give oracy?
6. What do children and young people at school and entering employment want to be able to access, what skills to they want to leave school with?
7. What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/ mental health?

8. How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens, participating fully in social action and public life as adults

Provision and access

1. What should high quality oracy education look like?
2. Can you provide evidence of how oracy education is being provided in different areas/education settings/extra-curricular provision, by teachers but also other practitioners that work with children?
3. What are the views of teachers, school leaders and educational bodies regarding the current provision of oracy education?
4. Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?
5. What factors create unequal access to oracy education (i.e. socio-economic, region, type of school, special needs)? How can these factors be overcome?
6. Relating to region more specifically, how should an oracy-focused approach be altered depending on the context?

Barriers

1. What are the barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?
2. What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?
3. What accountability is currently present in the system? How can we further incentivise teachers to deliver more oracy education to children and young people?
4. What is the role of government and other bodies in creating greater incentives and how can this be realised?
5. What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?
6. Are the speaking and listening elements of the current curriculum sufficient in order to deliver high quality oracy education?
7. What is the best approach – more accountability within the system or a less prescriptive approach?
8. Are there examples of other educational pedagogies where provision has improved and we can draw parallels and learn lessons?