

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'

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School or Organisation:

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Role:

Written evidence:

Summary

Though drawing on my professional role, this evidence is submitted in a personal capacity and the views are my own rather than those of the University of Nottingham.

This written evidence, which I hope will relate to your 'additional guidance' covers:

- the case for oracy (1-4);
- sources of good practice (5-6);
- implementation and possible barriers (7-12).

Many of the points are discussed in more depth in my forthcoming book (January 2020), taking an evidence-based look at classroom talk: <https://www.criticalpublishing.com/classroom-talk>

Evidence submission

1. Drawing on the extensive literature in this field, there seem to be three broad arguments for oracy education:

- (i) the cognitive argument, based on ways that learning is shaped by social interaction and the joint construction of ideas.
- (ii) the sociological argument, based on inclusion, identity and a democratic view of education
- (iii) the communicative competence argument, based on the idea that capability with spoken language is an essential skill for life.

I elaborate on these points in paragraphs 2-4 below.

2. The cognitive argument is based on a definition of oracy encompassing learning *through* talk as well as *to* talk. The role of spoken language in learning draws on many decades of research and is well summarised and evidenced in the works of key figures such as Neil Mercer and Robin Alexander (e.g. Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Alexander, 2017) and in research summaries such as Howe & Abedin (2013). Such works present a wealth of evidence for the benefits of learning through talk across the curriculum in terms of increased participation, improved reasoning and outcomes in standardised assessments. For a variety of reasons, much research has been relatively small-scale and qualitative and so

there is a need for more large-scale evaluations such as the recent EEF (2017) evaluation of dialogic teaching.

3. From a sociological perspective, an emphasis on pupil talk in terms of a dialogic and participatory form of education helps to fulfil aims of schooling that go beyond academic attainment. Lefstein & Snell (2011) are among those who have shown how typical classroom discourse can promote a narrow, uncritical acceptance of knowledge. This seems to be particularly important at a time when schools need to be tackling topical questions around democracy and 'fake news'. It also accords with Personal Development section of the latest inspection framework (Ofsted, 2019) and a focus on values and character.
4. The importance of communicative competence has been extensively argued by government reports (e.g. Bullock, 1975; Bercow, 2008) and recognised internationally as a skill for life (OECD, 2005). A number of organisations have produced data showing correlations between early spoken language deficiency and later outcomes in terms of education, mental health, economic wellbeing and criminal justice (see reports from: Early Intervention Foundation; Centre for Social Justice; The Communication Trust; The Sutton Trust; The English Speaking Union). Currently, there seems to be a particular emphasis in schools on a perceived 'vocabulary gap', often linked to a renewed focus on knowledge-rich curricula. While this is important, there is, in my view, a danger that this aspect of language becomes over-emphasised at the expense of the wider issues. For example, a recent study (Gilkerson et al., 2018) suggests that interaction or turn-taking is a stronger predictor of academic success than mere exposure to vocabulary.
5. I believe that high quality oracy education needs to infuse a school's practices, rather than be seen as an add-on. This means modelling, making time for and valuing this ethos from the top of the school by incorporating it into wider systems (e.g. appraisal) and creating a professional learning community geared to this. One school's approach to this is outlined in a video clip found in this blog:

<http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/primaryeducationnetwork/2019/01>

[/16/a-dialogic-stance/](#)

6. An obvious source of examples of good practice would be the Voice 21 network (<https://www.voice21.org/>) with their growing national network of trained teachers. School 21 in London has been a showcase for much of this work but it's good to see this now spreading through their Oracy Leaders programme, as School 21 - as a free school with this particular ethos – is bound to be somewhat atypical. More powerful testimony will come from teachers in a wider range of state schools and local contexts around the country. The other clear hub for good practice, from an academic perspective, is the University of Cambridge, where there is an active and internationally renowned research team. For example, they recently hosted their annual oracy conference: <https://oracycambridge.org/2018/12/22/the-2019-oracy-cambridge-conference-the-age-of-oracy/>
7. Barriers to the teaching of oracy are both explicit and implicit. Millard & Menzies (2016) have summarised teachers' views (including a lack of time due to perceived curricular pressures, concerns about behaviour and fears of a lack of support from school leaders). Another example of an explicit barrier would be oracy's relatively low profile in the current National Curriculum. For example, at Secondary level, spoken language is explicitly positioned as a skill 'to underpin reading and writing', rather than in its own right.
8. Beyond these everyday obstacles, however, are *implicit* messages from DfE and Ofsted which sometime signal a particular set of values that may be interpreted to be at odds with the learning *through* talk aspect of oracy. To take three examples:
 - (i) the Ofsted (2018) overview of research underpinning inspection reinforces a strong focus on memory, suggesting the importance of retrieval of learned facts;
 - (ii) tweets by the Schools Minister, at the time of 2019 GCSE results, share blogs and new stories about schools which have adopted knowledge-rich and so-called 'traditional' approaches to teaching (e.g.

<https://twitter.com/NickGibbUK/status/1164560215934734339>);
(iii) speeches by government ministers specifically promote, under the banner of evidence-informed practice, pedagogical approaches based on direct instruction and memorisation (e.g. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/nick-gibb-the-importance-of-an-evidence-informed-profession>).

While I would stress that none of the approaches alluded to above is intrinsically bad or inherently incompatible with oracy principles, the overall *impression* presented is of a narrow range of officially sanctioned and overtly promoted voices and approaches which – rightly or wrongly – may have connotations of a didactic, teacher-led approach with little room for pupil talk. For schools under immense pressure, attuned to the nuances in messages about national expectations, this may work against the adoption of broader forms of pedagogy that require more time and which develop a deep understanding and wider educational outcomes (rather than simply the regurgitation of knowledge for tests).

9. In general, there frequently seems to be a misinterpretation of the role of pupil talk in two ways:
 - (i) the association of pupil talk as pedagogical tool with a view of education as unstructured, child-centred, discovery-based, etc. This is not necessarily the case and a curriculum rich in pupil talk is entirely compatible with a focus on knowledge and a teacher's active guidance.
 - (ii) as discussed by Mercer (2018), a failure to distinguish between talk as *pedagogy*, as mentioned above, and talk as a set of skills (i.e. *content*) to be taught as part of a curriculum. Even if the former is a contentious issue for some, the latter need not be.
10. To enact oracy nationally, I would suggest that key figures in government and Ofsted need to endorse and promote this publicly. While Mr Gibb's recent comments on oracy (<https://schoolsweek.co.uk/oracy-fits-in-with-the-three-rs-says-gibb/>) are encouraging in this respect, it is notable that they are still positioned firmly, as part of 'knowledge-rich curricula', as skills that will support knowledge acquisition, rather than fulfil wider purposes. This also relates, of course, to the underlying problem of a narrow judgment of schools based on attainment, which will tend to lend itself to quick fixes geared towards exam results.

There are some encouraging signs that the latest Ofsted framework may be moving away from this somewhat.

11. I also feel that teachers require more training in this form of pedagogy. It is widely recognised that purposeful classroom talk and more 'dialogic' approaches are extremely challenging forms of pedagogy (Alexander, 2017) for teachers and a collection of cases (ideally video) exemplifying aspects of this would be very valuable. Related to this, the increase in school-based teacher education routes, while positive in many respects, may be in danger of perpetuating an increasingly narrow range of practices (e.g. a particular MAT's 'house style') while alternative perspectives and decades of expertise (e.g. from university Schools of Education) are marginalised.
12. Finally, I think it is important that, while valued and promoted at government levels (e.g. through inspection outcomes and ministerial pronouncements), oracy education is not seen as another top-down prescriptive burden, but rather an essentially school-led, bottom-up initiative. The most powerful tool will be practising teachers' testimony. The growth of organisations such as Voice 21 and ResearchEd shows the appetite for teachers taking the lead if empowered to do so.

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