

Oracy APPG's Inquiry: Speaking for Change

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This submission is sent in a personal capacity, although it is informed by my research carried out at Manchester Metropolitan University.

My response centres around the relationship between spoken language and identity, and the importance of promoting oracy in the classroom in order to allow young people to fully develop. I make the following key points:

- Spoken language and identity are inextricably linked. In many ways, language can be seen as a means of enacting or performing our identities.
- Young people are at a crucial time in their lives with regard to the negotiation and development of their emerging identities.
- If we want our young people to be able to develop and express their identities in as full a way as possible, it is essential that we give them the tools with which to make this achievable.
- Oracy is more than learning how to 'speak properly'; it is understanding the relationships between how we speak, the context we are in, how we are likely to be perceived, and how we would like to be perceived.
- Learning by doing is vital in this situation – we need to give young people as much practice in using and developing the tool of spoken language as we can.

1. Spoken language and identity are inextricably linked. There has long been an understanding in areas of sociology, anthropology, sociolinguistics, and other related academic disciplines that identities are constructed socially. Sociolinguistics research, in particular, focuses on the role of language in this construction, demonstrating how we use our voices, both consciously and subconsciously, within interaction in order to enact our identities within a given context.
2. Young people are at a crucial time in their lives with regard to the negotiation and development of their emerging identities. It is a period in which they are quite rightly expected to be exploring, and testing the boundaries of, different behaviours and different ways of presenting themselves. They will be experimenting with different types of music, different attitudes and opinions, different ways of being in the world. They will also be experimenting with language. They will be learning the powerful effects of using their spoken language in different ways, and how this helps to make them who they are. This is vital knowledge, which should be given the space to develop.
3. We can't always be there to support experimentation with behaviour, but we can be there to support and encourage the development and negotiation of young people's various identities through language. They will learn so much more, and have so many more linguistic tools at their disposal if we provide a space in the curriculum within which to develop these vital skills, supported by expert staff. If we accept the link between language and identity, then it stands to reason that a curriculum with no oracy provision is quite simply restricting the linguistic development, and therefore the identity development, of young people.
4. Contrary to popular discourses that exist around the use of spoken English in schools, teaching is not about getting young people to 'speak properly'. Good oracy education recognises that there is no such things as 'proper' spoken language; there is simply language that is more or less appropriate in any given context and for any given purpose. Ideally, it should go even further and start to question who actually sets the 'rules' with regard to appropriateness? Whose values are we being guided by? Spoken language cannot be separated from issues of power, and this should be acknowledged and addressed. We are

meant to be preparing our young people for life in the 'real world'. In this world they will face judgement on the basis of how they speak and communicate. One response to this is to train them to speak in such a way that society deems acceptable, in order to give our young people every opportunity to achieve their potential. This is oracy: basic level. An additional response to this is to educate our young people to be so aware of the ways in which language is used to judge others, that they leave school with the knowledge to be able to challenge such prejudice. This is oracy: expert level.

5. It is extremely difficult, and even impossible, to acquire a skill without practice. Imagine trying to become fluent in another language without being given the opportunity to practice speaking. The same is true for mastery of spoken English. Good, meaningful oracy provision gives young people the opportunity to put into practice what they have learned with regard to the power of spoken language. As with any skill, they need to be given the space to experiment, to make mistakes, and to try again. If we provide young people with this opportunity to speak, we are providing them with that little bit more power to be who they want to be, and achieve what they want to achieve.