

The importance of oracy education

As EMA coordinator in a large inner city school I believe it is crucial that we have a strong focus on the development of oracy in our school. Being able to understand and be understood orally is the key to success later in life but also in learning; if you can't say it, you can't write it.

We work in large multi-cultural school in which more than 43 languages are spoken and more than 81% of our children are classed as being EAL. More and more children in UK schools are now classed as being EAL (21% in primary schools nationally and this figure has more than trebled in the last 12 years) and although each of those children's experiences of English can be vastly different, for many children it is only in school that they have the opportunity to hear and speak English with good role models.

Although the focus in the National Curriculum is just on reading and writing, if we want our children to achieve and do well, it's really important that we work to develop their oracy skills first. Children aren't going to be able to read for meaning or understand nuances of texts if they can't talk about language and hear and use it in specific contexts. We also need to make sure we develop children's academic language and subject specific vocabulary and register so they can write formally but also know how register changes depending on who are audience is and they need experience of doing this. It is crucial that we do this if we are to offer children the same life chances as their peers.

In recent year the school has seen a very large increase in the number of children arriving with little or no English. The reason for this is two-fold; either they are children who are born in this country but have had no exposure to English at home or they are a child who has recently arrived from another country. Last year alone we had over 48 children arrive when only 5 years ago the figure was as low as 3 all year. That meant we had a total number of 91 children who were classed as RAFA (Recent Arrival From Another Country). Schools have 2 years to get those children up to the standard of their peers before their data begins to count in terms of school performance tables and they need to take the end of KS assessments. Obviously this has a massive effect on the school and how we can best meet those children's needs.

For children arriving in the Early Years, we make sure that we adapt our curriculum to take into account all of these needs but that isn't enough, we need to make sure we design specific interventions to address these needs and that requires funding. For children who start later on in school the hurdles they face are even bigger because their gaps in learning are bigger. Children's educational experiences are vast, some will have had prior schooling but many of the children who arrive will never have been to school before; will not know how to behave in a school setting and lack basic skills such as reading, writing and basic number facts, even in their home language. Many of the children arriving from Eastern Europe arrive in Year 3 and have never been to school before but we need to be able to get them up to standard by Year 5 so they can sit their SATs in Year 6. Without the right support these children simply will not get there.

Our first job is to help these children feel safe and settled in school and this is done by providing interventions to develop their speaking and listening skills. We also need to provide them with in-class support to help them access their learning with their peers. Research shows that it takes 1-2 years to develop social language but takes between 5-7 years to develop the cognitive and academic language necessary for learning. We need to provide these children with on-going support to get them to where they need to be, to help them to access texts and understand nuances of language, to be able to express themselves appropriately and in the right context and provide class teachers with support.

Spoken language is the key to working together. It's important that we teach children how to express their ideas and emotions and how to listen to others because when they cannot this can lead to frustrations and feelings of isolation. This is why we always first focus on developing the speaking and listening skills of our RAFA children as we know the rest will follow and first we want them to feel happy socially but it is also an important lesson for all children that we teach. We need to be able to express ourselves appropriately and listen to others if we are to get on in life, to avoid confrontation and miscommunication. It's an important life skill so we make sure that in our lessons we include lots of group problem solving and discussion. If we want our children to become productive members of society we need to be able to give them the tools to do this.

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