

Talking Mats' Response to the Oracy APPG 2019 Inquiry

Speaking for Change

Introduction

1. Our Talking Mats vision is to improve the lives of people (including children) with communication difficulties, and those close to them, by increasing their capacity to think about and communicate effectively about things that matter to them. We are a not-for-profit social enterprise organisation. Our innovative, award-winning communication symbols tool is based on extensive research and designed by Speech and Language Therapists.
2. The Oracy APPG is committed to helping every child to be a confident communicator and find their voice, in order to succeed in school and life. (Oracy APPG Terms of Reference)
3. The Talking Mats approach can help children, both with and without diagnosed communication difficulties, to be confident communicators and find their voice, in order to succeed in school and life.

Summary (from Oracy APPG Terms of Reference)

4. The ability to speak eloquently, articulate ideas and thoughts, influence through talking, collaborate with peers and have the confidence to express your views, are fundamental skills that support success in both learning and life beyond school.
5. Building young people's oracy could help us create a happier, fairer and more productive society.

Value and Impact

Q1 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 should have the same status as reading and writing in our education system. Under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), every child has the right to give their views in matters affecting them. This right applies to all children, without exception (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>).

That view should be listened to by those who can influence and bring about the change required to maximise wellbeing. Children can use the Talking Mats approach as a way of having a visual conversation, providing support for thinking and self-expression, in line with the Laura Lundy model of participation (https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/lundy_model_of_participation.pdf)

Having a conversation with a teacher, looking at issues together, and jointly agreeing an achievable challenge is a powerful process. The pupil feels listened to and supported to set learning goals; and the professional skills of the teacher can usefully refine that goal to be challenging but achievable¹

¹ ('Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval, p.4).

Q2 What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?

If children do not receive oracy education they will struggle to be confident communicators and have their voice heard, through childhood and into adult life. This could impact on their ability to make choices/decisions both in education and in life in general, as well as their ability to share their feelings and views on a wider scale. If children do not have the ability to express themselves this could potentially lead to low self-esteem and confidence.

Q3 What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at different life stages/ in different settings/ on different types of pupils (for instance pupils from varied socioeconomic backgrounds or with SEN?)

Children with SEN and/or who are growing up with adverse childhood experiences (ACES) often struggle with both receptive and expressive language skills. Using a visual approach like Talking Mats can support understanding of abstract concepts and provide a neutral, non-threatening 'thinking space' in which children can share their thoughts and views.

Children are at the heart of the SEND process and need to be able to think about and share their aspirations as part of joint planning including in terms of Education, Health and Care Assessment/Planning (add reference). It is essential that children have the ability do this effectively as all targets within the SEN/EHC plan should be clearly linked to their aspirations throughout (add reference). Having a visual record of a child's view has been shown to add weight to a child's perspective during multi-agency meetings ².

Q7 What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/mental health?

If children feel valued and listened to this is likely to have a positive effect on their own wellbeing and mental health. Genuine CYP Participation supports learning and enhances wellbeing ³.

'Allowing a child to exercise some control over what is happening to him or her will in itself have psychological benefits for the child's development' ⁴.

² ('Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval, p5).

³ ('Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval, p.3)

⁴ (Thomas N.C.S., 2009 Steps to Effective Engagement with Children and Young People).

Q8 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?

Every child has the right to express a view and this requires that practitioners adopt a range of creative techniques to help them to elicit the views of a CYP with communication support needs. It is the responsibility of everyone working with the CYP to build capacity for decision-making, starting from an early age ⁵. Ways in which this capacity can be built through setting outcomes are described in the Preparing for Adulthood Outcomes Tools document ⁶.

Provision and Access

Q9 What should high quality oracy education look like?

High quality oracy education should incorporate UNCRC Article 12 in practice – a rights based approach - throughout schools.

It should also be in accordance with developmental/cognitive stages, to ensure that the curriculum and targets are set with realistic and achievable levels for every child. Outcomes tools, in particular the Preparation for Adulthood (PfA) ‘Outcomes across the age ranges for Children and Young People with SEND’ document ⁷ can support this.

Q12 Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?

High quality oracy education should incorporate UNCRC Article 12 in practice. Good Practice examples from education as well as health and social care setting, are described in ‘Can Scotland be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice’ (Mackay and Matthews, to be pub. 2020).

The report describes how the Scottish Government is committed to incorporating UNCRC into law as early as 2021: ‘The ultimate goal of incorporating the UNCRC into domestic law is to improve outcomes for children and young people in Scotland. That goal will not be met simply by an increase in the amount of litigation relating to children’s rights. It will happen through our public bodies working with and listening to children and young people and finding innovative and engaging ways to respect their rights’ ⁸.

⁵ (‘Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval p.8).

⁶ <https://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/SiteAssets/Downloads/yeded5wb636481748062535810.pdf>

⁷<https://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/SiteAssets/Downloads/yeded5wb636481748062535810.pdf>

⁸

<https://www.gov.scot/publications/childrens-rights-consultation-incorporating-uncrc-rights-child-domestic-law-scotland/>

Barriers

Q15 What are the barriers teachers face to providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?

15.1 Attitudinal Barriers – a reluctance to open up discussions with children for fear of what it might lead to.

15.2 System Barriers – procedures that inhibit, rather than enhance, multi-agency working.

15.3 Cultural Barriers – belief systems that fail to give CYP opportunities for participation because adults retain control, ask directive questions and prescribe solutions.⁹

Q16 What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?

There is a need for non-specialist tools (such as Talking Mats) that can be assimilated into standard practice across services without having to rely unnecessarily on specialist intervention¹⁰

Q18 What is the role of the government and other bodies in creating greater incentives and how can this be realised?

As the report (Mackay and Matthews, to be pub. 2020) referred to throughout this response describes, government can have a clear role in terms of making a commitment to incorporate UNCRC into law.

Both Government and local authorities can have a role in raising awareness and encouraging schools to become part of the UNCRC Rights Respecting Schools award scheme <https://www.unicef.org.uk/rights-respecting-schools/>, as well as to follow the information and guidelines from the Department of Education 'Preparing for Adulthood' team <https://www.preparingforadulthood.org.uk/>.

Government support and funding for projects and initiatives such as those described in the Mackay and Matthews report is essential to ensure teachers have the skills and opportunities to use non-specialist tools, such as Talking Mats, to improve the delivery of high-quality oracy education.

Margo Mackay, Talking Mats Deputy Director

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⁹ ('Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval, p.7).

¹⁰ ('Can Scotland Be Brave? Incorporating UNCRC Article 12 in Practice – Talking Mats/Scottish Government Project Report – awaiting publish after ministerial approval, p.12).