

To what extent does developing language skills, implemented for one hour a week for eight weeks, improve the ability to resolve playground situations?

Laura Fletcher | Wexham Court Primary School



Key Stage 1

Project rationale

Oracy underpins both academic and personal development in students and is therefore a vital skill for future employability. As a school, Oracy has become embedded within our day to day classroom practice, with students becoming more confident and improving their verbal communication. However, these skills have not yet fully transferred to a non-classroom scenario such as the playground or the dining hall.

I had noticed that for some pupils within our school, using their voice on the playground can be a huge hurdle and often results in conflict, some of this physical. As a member of the senior leadership team, I am regularly called upon to speak to those students involved and find solutions. Similar to most post-conflict conversations, after role playing the talk and explaining the why behind the student's emotions and actions, these were resolved. Structured conversations seemed to be the way forward so I was intrigued. I wanted to see whether it was possible for the students to now do this on their own.

Whilst working closely with Year 2, it was apparent that there were a small number of boys who were those 'repeat offenders', regularly involved in playground fall outs and unfortunately physically hurting each other. Some might say they just didn't know how to behave but I believed there was a deeper underlying problem: a lack of social and emotional understanding combined with communication barriers. In the report 'The State of Speaking in our schools' Will Millard and Loic Menzies summarise research into the social and emotional benefits of Oracy skills mentioning that: "Howe and Mercer suggest that collaborative verbal interactions in peer groups can promote opportunities for high quality discussion and negotiation amongst pupils".

For my project, I decided to research whether developing language skills amongst a group of students had an impact on playground conversations, resulting in a reduction in the number of incidents that occur.

Baseline data

At the start of the project, I decided to collect a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from the six boys. I asked them to complete a questionnaire developed by myself; gathered feedback from the class's lunchtime controllers, recorded the number of incidents which occurred in a week over a three-week cycle and documented a transcript of the student's conversations during conflict on the playground. This would hopefully, provide me with a range of information on their views/feelings of conflict, self-perfection of their own speaking and listening skills, the language and structure of conversations during conflict and how often incidents occur which may outline a pattern in their behaviour.

From these samples of data, I found that all six students enjoy their time on the playground but find conflict difficult to deal with. In their questionnaires 5/6 boys said disagreements often result in physical violence such as "kicking or punching and then running away". Interestingly, none of them said they manage to solve a disagreement or admit fault on the playground, as well as this, all of the student's emotions deteriorate during conflict: 4/6 feel happy before, 3/6 feel sad during, whilst the other 3 feel angry and then 6/6 feel angry afterwards.

Whilst analysing the record of incidents that occur in a week, I was surprised to see how frequently the student's were having disagreements but I did notice a pattern beginning to form: most incidents occurred

in the afternoon playtime rather than the morning playtime and on a Thursday afternoon (See appendix A – Baseline data of incidents Dec 2019). This could be for a number of factors such as; the time on the playground being longer than the morning or that the morning break is monitored by class teachers rather than lunchtime supervisors in the afternoon. As well as this, a Thursday afternoon is when the class teachers have their PPA time and have not dismissed the class for play or collected them afterwards.

The transcript also revealed that all six students were unable to structure a conversation therefore, they did not listen to each other much at all. On multiple occasions they began to argue, let their emotions take over the conflict and were unable to come to a shared agreement or solution. Student A appeared reserved throughout most of the conversation and tried to avoid the conflict whereas student C was becoming progressively frustrated with the outcome.

Extract from baseline transcript (December 2019):

Student D - 'No you're not'

Student C - 'Yes I am'

Student D - '(Child's name) you're out too'

Student E - 'How?'

Student D - 'Cos you are. You're cheating. You're cheating'

Student F - 'You're out. You're out'

Student C - 'No I'm not'

Student F - 'Yes you are. You're out and you're out'

Student A - 'No they're not, they didn't touch it'

Student D - 'Well I disagree with you'

Student C - 'I said, I didn't touch the floor. So I'm not'

Student E - 'You did and you are out'

Student B - 'Yeah you're out'

Student C - 'Why aren't you listening to me? (Shouts) I AM NOT OUT. I AM FOLLOWING THE RULES!'

Intervention

As the students were split across two classes, I was unable to provide the intervention as a whole class. Therefore, I implemented a targeted intervention once a week in the afternoon. From the baseline data, I studied the Oracy Framework (Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge), to identify which skills the pupil's needed to focus on. These most fell within the social and emotional strand. Then I created a way of monitoring these skills throughout the intervention, with a small assessment grid so I could measure the impact of each session, for each pupil, on each skill. Each session I would rate the skill for each pupil from 1-3 and create an overall assessment (See appendix B – Intervention log). This was inspired by an oracy assessment tool produced by Cambridge University & Voice 21 as part of the oracy assessment project funded by the EEF.

I planned for the eight-week sessions to focus on the oracy skills which the pupils were lacking in and taught these through role play situations/games similar to those that occur on the playground. Each week the skills would build on each other so that by the final week, the students could apply all 7 into a new playground game of their own.

I was aware that most of the student's needed gentle reminders on how to behave on the playground so this was a focus in our first week. I wanted them to identify the good choices that they should be making so they created a set of playground rules – similar to Voice 21's discussion guidelines. The students enjoyed creating these together and then each week, we referred back to them. They even asked to have them printed on their classroom doors so they can remind themselves during playtime!

The remainder of the sessions focused on a series of games to build on their interactions with each other; understand the skill of turn-taking as well as listening and responding appropriately. Some involved playground scenarios that were familiar to them: 'Someone takes a ball away from you during a game' or 'Someone wants to join in your game' and others were games taken from Transform Teaching and Learning Through Talk (Gaunt & Stott, 2019) such as 'Back to back' and 'Which emotion?'

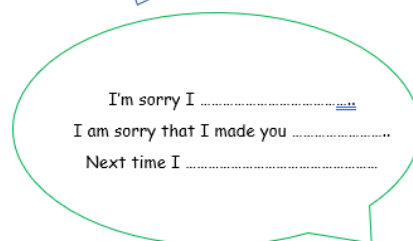
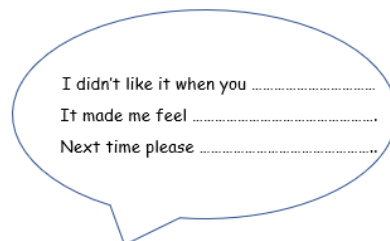
I also incorporated scripted sentence stems to help structure the student’s language in their responses during a conflict, this is following the research carried out by Paul Dix (2017) who believes that, “If we don’t address the language we use by default then we risk the greatest inconsistency of all: managing poor behaviour with improvised responses”. The children were able to use the scripts during the sessions to help manage those difficult situations when they weren’t quite sure how to approach the behaviour of each other. After the third week, one student asked to have their own copy of the script to use on the play-ground so they had pocket-sized versions (See scripts below).

Impact

The baseline measurements were repeated after the eight-week cycle of interventions, as a comparison to measure impact. The data revealed that on a whole, the project was proven successful, in reducing the number of incidents that occurred with an improvement in listening and understanding body language.

The number of incidents that occurred dropped significantly as a group but also for each individual student. Back in December, as a collective, the students had been involved in a total of 66 incidents where as in March there had only been a total of 29. Below is the analysis of incidents per pupil and I am really impressed with the results:

Let's talk it out!



	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
4th December 2019	1	5	4	4	3	5
9th December 2019	3	3	5	5	3	4
16th December 2019	2	4	7	3	3	2
Total	6	12	16	12	9	11

	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
2nd March 2020	1	5	4	4	3	5
9th March 2020	3	3	5	5	3	4
16th March 2020	2	4	7	3	3	2
Total	0	9	7	2	5	6
+ or -	-6	-3	-9	-10	-4	-5
% reduction	100%	25%	56%	84%	45%	46%

In the post-intervention questionnaires, students revealed that 5/6 felt they were able to solve disagreements on the playground and one mentioned this would happen by 'talking calmly and listening to them'. Interestingly, the disagreements that happen still involve shouting or pushing but they now feel they can solve these. This was supported by the question about their feelings, which showed that 6/6 now feel happy after a disagreement. All of the student's feedback was supported by the lunchtime controller's views as they both expressed there had been a decrease in the physical violence/arguments that were occurring but when they did occur students were now seen talking to each other to solve the issue themselves. They did check-in with pupils afterwards to ensure it had been resolved.

My assessment grid which was completed after each session, showed that each student was gradually improving on their social and emotional skills. After the first session, the average score was a 3 (rarely or never demonstrated) by the end of the last session the average score was 1 (consistently demonstrated).

When I listened to the final transcript, it was clear that there was a difference in their behaviour and the way they interacted. This time, the students appeared to be aware of each other's feelings and were keen to listen before reacting or playing further. I was impressed to hear Student C, who was frustrated in the baseline transcript, present much calmer this time round.

Extract from end data transcript (March 2020):

Student A – 'Now (child's name) pass to (child's name)'

Student C – 'Ok, watch out'

Student D – '(Child's name) don't forget, you can't go past this line'

Student E – 'Pass to me, pass to me'

Student C – 'Me now'

Student B – 'You're out now'

Student E – 'Yeah, you went past the line'

Student C – 'Ok, I will ref now'

Student E – 'Yeah, that's a good idea'

Student B – 'My go now'

Student D – 'Ok, you need to pass to (child's name)'

Student C – 'Be careful of the line!'

Student F – 'Woah that was close (child's name), pass to me'

Research ethics

At the start of my project, before I started my intervention with the students, I informed them of my role as Oracy Lead in the school and that I was working on a project which involved collecting data and recording their conversations. I emphasised that they were helping me and, in that way, helping other children across the school. I also stressed that if they were not comfortable with anything at any stage, for any reason, then it would be fine to withdraw. In addition to this, I used student A-F to anonymise the children and parents were given formal consent forms informing them of my research and permission to withdraw was offered. They could withdraw from the project at any time should they wish to do so. The students' identities have been anonymised in the data.

Evaluation

I have learned a lot on how to carry out action research and my findings have reinforced my belief in the positive impact of oracy pedagogy. It is difficult to conclude whether the student's behaviour improved because of the intervention or whether they just matured as the weeks developed. However, there was significant progress during this time, which leads me to believe that the intervention did have an impact. The students have developed their social and emotional skills and successfully applied these to playground situations. I know that if I hadn't carried out this intervention, the conflict would have continued, if not become progressively worse. However, this has been avoided and reduced.

I did not really encounter any challenges as I had planned the project in advance, using evidence from the previous session to build on skills. The students responded really well to these and were keen to be involved, subsequently when it was over they were genuinely disappointed.

The six students I had chosen were dominant within the year group, so the outcomes could be different if I was to choose other pupils and a mix of genders. Also, as the intervention was only taught for eight weeks the impact could have been different if I continued for a longer period of time. The results could have continued to have a positive impact or could have started to plateau, or even started to deteriorate as time went on.

My next steps are to share my findings with the year two teachers in the school and the rest of my senior leadership team. As a school, I believe we can learn from this research that there could be a possibility for oracy to have an impact on non-classroom situations. I would like to design a form of playground guidelines, co-created with the pupils of the school. I also think introducing them to scripts, to support conflict in the playground, could benefit many others who battle with these situations most days.

References

- Gaunt. A & Stott. A (2019) Transform Teaching and Learning Through Talk. London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Dix. P (2017) When the Adults Change Everything Changes. Wales: Independent thinking press.
- Menzies. L & Millard. W (2016) The State of Speaking in our Schools. Accessed 14/04/2020, <https://cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Oracy-Report-Final.pdf>.
- Ahmed, A., Mercer, N., Warwick, P (2014) Oracy Assessment Project. Accessed 13/01/2020, <https://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/tasks/>.

Appendix

Appendix A: Baseline data of incidents Dec 2019

	Names of pupils					
	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
Monday 9th AM	1	0	0	1	1	1
Monday 9th PM	0	1	1	1	0	1
Tuesday 10th AM	0	0	1	0	0	0
Tuesday 10th PM	0	0	1	0	0	0
Wednesday 11th AM	1	1	0	0	0	0
Wednesday 11th PM	1	1	0	0	0	0
Thursday 12th AM	0	1	1	1	1	1
Thursday 12th PM	0	0	0	1	0	0
Friday 13th AM	0	0	0	0	0	0
Friday 13th PM	1	0	0	1	1	1

Appendix B: Intervention log

Oracy skills	Student A	Student B	Student C	Student D	Student E	Student F
Social & Emotional						
12b) Turn-taking						
12a) Guiding or managing interactions						
13) Listening actively and responding appropriately						
14a) Self-assurance						
14b) Liveliness and flair						
15) Taking into account the level of understanding of the audience						
Overall assessment						

1 means 'consistently demonstrates skill', 2 means 'demonstrates this skill some of the time' 3 means 'rarely or never demonstrates this skill yet'