



Pathways
Do you prefer
reading fiction
or non-fiction?

What is your
favourite story?

Voice 21's Journal

The Talking Point

Summer
2026

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Introduction

This is a moment of change for oracy. It is Summer 2026, and a few weeks ago, Ofsted's Chief Inspector and the Minister for School Standards both acknowledged the foundational role that oracy education plays, in front of hundreds of educators at Voice 21's Speaking Summit. Their remarks come alongside real policy change, through both the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review and the Ofsted Education Inspection Toolkit.

Ten years ago, this was the change Voice 21 set out to make. We believed that by building a critical mass of teachers and schools delivering a high-quality oracy education, we could also build the case for oracy in every school, for every child. Now, one in ten schools has an Oracy Lead. The word 'oracy' no longer receives a blank stare – teachers and school leaders are coming to us knowing more than ever about what oracy is, and what oracy education will unlock for their students.

But at this moment of change, it feels more important than ever that we hold on to the values and principles that have defined 'oracy education' for us at Voice 21. We can't afford for it to be misunderstood, or watered down, as we enshrine an entitlement to oracy education for every child. We need to hold oracy research and oracy practice tightly to each other – just as the National Oracy Project did forty years ago. We need to listen to students, and we need to listen to teachers. We need to recognise that 'what works' is complex, and highly contingent on people and place – and our evidence base needs to reflect this complexity.

This year's edition of the Talking Point holds these principles dear. It approaches five topics, first through a theoretical lens, and then from a practical perspective. Taken together, our aim is to bridge theory and practice, building a research-informed understanding of oracy – in all its complexity – while also serving as practical inspiration and a guide for applying these concepts in schools.

We show oracy education's role in real schools, today, across five different topics: inclusion, employability, polarisation, the transition to Key Stage 3, and storytelling and narratives. These salient topics offer an opportunity to hear how schools are bringing the power of oracy to bear on today's

challenges – not as something 'extra'; not as today's initiative, forgotten tomorrow – but as part of the everyday business of teaching and learning.

The pairs of articles are each framed through a "*Talking Point*" – a thought-provoking statement designed to spark discussion. In our schools, talking points act as stimuli to promote purposeful exploratory talk. We hope that the talking points in this journal will promote meaningful professional dialogue and discussion about the next phase of oracy implementation, both in schools and at a policy level.

Our huge thanks to everyone who has contributed – teachers, academics, and colleagues at Voice 21 – and to the thousands of teachers in Voice 21 Oracy Schools who have pioneered new approaches, transforming teaching and learning through oracy. The research, evidence and ideas that are present in this journal are only possible because of the work they are undertaking. Theirs are the stories that must always remain at the heart of oracy education.

Amanda Moorghen
Interim Director of Learning
Impact & Influence, Voice 21



In theory Peter Swallow, MP for Bracknell

A universal approach to inclusion must be oracy-rich

As a former Classics teacher, I know the power of rhetoric and communication. Oracy is a foundational part of helping students learn to develop, understand and communicate ideas and arguments. Creating classrooms that are inclusive by design and equipping all students with the skills needed to navigate the increasing complexities of our world is essential today.

Schools are facing unprecedented challenges. Following over a decade of austerity, schools are now working hard to effectively provide support for the increasing number of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in an underfunded system.

Since 2014, the number of children and young people identified with SEND has surged from 1.3 million to 1.7 million. High among the challenges our young people are facing are difficulties with speech, language and communication. Developmental Language Disorder (DLD) is estimated to affect two children in every primary school classroom.

20% of pupils with an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) have an identified primary need which falls under this category. It is essential that schools are properly equipped to support every child, and oracy has a key role to play in setting schools up for success.

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Oracy has a key role to play in setting schools up for success





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It is vital that the chance is seized to deliver a truly inclusive, universal oracy-rich education

The Government's recently released Schools White Paper has outlined a simple but powerful vision – that our education system should be based around universally excellent provision, designed to enable every child, regardless of need or background, to thrive – and that inclusion and high standards should be two sides of the same coin.

As part of this, the Government has identified broadening the scope of what a knowledge-rich and enriching education looks like. Our young people need to be able to communicate confidently, express themselves and their opinions, and collaborate effectively. Only when schools are built on a foundation of inclusivity, not just as an afterthought, can they truly build an environment which supports and nurtures all young people, particularly those with SEND.

We must ensure that our education system is equipping young people with the essential skills they need to go out into the world ready to face its challenges and seize its opportunities.

Oracy has known benefits for all young people, including increased confidence and communication skills, improved critical thinking skills, and greater capacity for listening and empathising with others. But it also removes barriers which are highest for students with SEND – on a classroom level, consistent routines, appropriate support for individual students and reflection on classroom talk can all contribute to an oracy-rich classroom that particularly benefits those with SEND, whilst helping to provide a common ground on which support can be provided for both students with SEND and those without in mainstream classrooms.

By reforming the SEND system and the wider school system in tandem, we have an opportunity to embed greater understanding and recognition of a wide variety of educational needs in mainstream classrooms, as well as implement early and proactive support. Importantly, practicing oracy-rich teaching can also enable more observation of and closer listening to students as they communicate in the classroom. Early identification is key to ensuring young people get the support they need as soon as possible, and that this support can be tailored to their individual needs. Giving teachers the tools and the space to do this will enable them to identify specific young people who may be struggling with the reception or production of spoken language earlier, meaning intervention can be smoother and can happen before a young person reaches crisis point, as is so often the case in schools at the moment.

This Government knows the scale of the challenge our education system is facing, and the reforms outlined in the Schools White Paper are a welcome indicator of their ambition in meeting it head on. As the focus now shifts to delivering these reforms, as well as to developing the oracy framework set out in the response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review, it is vital that the chance is seized to deliver a truly inclusive, universal oracy-rich education.

Peter Swallow
MP for Bracknell



In practice Catherine Pass

An oracy education for every child: bridging the gap between specialist and mainstream

At Voice 21, we promote an expansive definition of oracy, one that insists oracy is accessible to all. We are continually developing our understanding of how oracy supports students with SEND to thrive. By placing oracy at the centre of learning, culture, and relationships, Voice 21 Oracy Schools build inclusive communities where all children belong, make progress and find their voice in and beyond the classroom.

East Whitby Primary's Targeted Mainstream Provision (TMP) is for children with significant Communication and Interaction (C&I) needs. It provides specialist targeted support that helps students access and thrive in the mainstream school community.

Because these challenges are rooted in communication, oracy removes rather than adds barriers for students with C&I needs. It ensures they receive the explicit teaching and purposeful, supported practice they need to make progress, whilst building the skills and confidence to interact with others.

What are Communication and Interaction (C&I) needs?

C&I needs affect how a person processes, understands and uses language to connect with the world around them. This varies in each individual but can impact:

Phonological awareness	Recognising and manipulating sounds, syllables and rhymes within speech
Working memory	Word retrieval, processing, verbal reasoning
Sequencing	Ordering sounds, structuring sentences and organising ideas into a coherent narrative or explanation
Speech Production	The physical ability to produce speech sounds
Social interactions	Following conversations, interpreting social cues or understanding abstract language



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Oracy removes rather than adds barriers for students with C&I needs

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Oracy is the responsibility of every adult and reaches every child



A shared vision for oracy at East Whitby

Oracy is the responsibility of every adult and reaches every child. Their oracy team of mainstream and specialist teachers ensures consistent expectations and shared practices, enabling students to transition confidently between the TMP and their mainstream class.

Central to this has been understanding and identifying the foundational communication skills underpinning those on the Oracy Framework. For example, being comfortable sitting alongside a peer, knowing that another voice carries meaning and developing joint attention are repeatedly practised in a range of situations before partner talk is introduced.

Supporting social interaction and navigating different perspectives

Understanding abstract concepts like preference and difference is important for building relationships but can be challenging for students with C&I needs.

Would you rather?

Using pictures and books as stimuli, “Would You Rather?” supports progression from an adult-led activity to reasoning with a partner. Students construct “I would rather... because...” sentences using Widgit as a shared language, before moving on to questioning each other’s likes and dislikes, often with humour. This activity develops social interaction skills like taking turns, active listening, and accepting different perspectives.

Learning to disagree

Short, daily sessions explicitly teach how to manage different perspectives. The teacher in the TMP supports students to share and categorise both sides of an argument before using these ideas to engage in a structured group discussion. To enable participation, scaffolds for talk adapted with Widgit symbols help students to move from stating an idea to probing their peers. The next goal is to gradually shift the management of talk from the teacher to the students. By developing empathy and critical thinking, this approach has transformed peer interactions, helping students anticipate a peer’s viewpoint and provide a reasoned, thoughtful response.

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[oracy is] when two people meet, like talking and chatting and you introduce yourself

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You can show how you’re feeling when you talk, like this [models facial expressions and gestures]

“

You should wait and listen when someone else is talking

Bridging oracy and writing

“ [oracy] helps me know what to write

High-quality picture books are an essential part of East Whitby's curriculum, providing a rich context for oracy. In the TMP, daily, structured “book talk” is an essential scaffold to support independent writing and subject knowledge.

Comprehension: The teacher reads aloud statements for the students to identify as true or false. They're then invited to flip the meaning, trying out grammar and vocabulary with their peers and teacher as a sounding board.

Step 1: “Robin Hood met Little John on a narrow bridge” (True or false?)

Step 2: “Robin Hood avoided Little John on the wide bridge” (Flipped meaning)

Shared writing: Planned teacher talk moves such as modeling thinking and asking probing or clarifying questions, support students to extend the true/false statements, further trying new word choices and reasoning aloud. This explicit teaching addresses misconceptions by recasting correct grammar or clarifying vocabulary, and models articulation and comprehension monitoring. It extends initial ideas into a shared sentence:

Step 3: “Robin Hood burst into laughter after he fell from the narrow bridge into the river. He said to Little John, ‘You are very strong! Would you like to join my Merry Men?’”

Independent writing: Because both linguistic demands and ideas have been explored and rehearsed through talk, the students transition to independent writing with greater confidence and enthusiasm.

Catherine Pass,
Head of Programmes at
Voice 21



Tips for practitioners

Comprehension monitoring

Students with C&I needs might not realise when communication has broken down or if they do, are unsure how to repair it. One of the key ways oracy supports inclusion is by explicitly teaching and modelling to students how to monitor their understanding, and praising them when they do this. Sentences with Widgit symbols remind students to self-monitor and provide a scaffold to ask for clarification.

“Can you say that again a bit slower”

“What does ... mean?”

“Can I check, do I need to do ... first?”

Modifying oral language

Intentional adult-student interaction is a core part of a strong oracy culture. Adults need to adapt their language in and beyond the classroom to support students with C&I needs to access learning and nurture belonging.

- 1 **Slow down** your pace of speech and add pauses to support processing.
- 2 Allow 10 seconds of **thinking time**. Repeat what you said to support understanding.
- 3 **Simplify your language** Instead of: “Let’s repeat that” Try: “Let’s do it again.”
- 4 **Re-phrase**, offering clearer or simpler alternatives; instead of “The witches made prophecies,” try: “The witches told Macbeth what will happen next.”
- 5 **Chunk information** to make long strings of information easier to remember.
- 6 **Be explicit**, use literal language and be cautious of idioms and metaphors unless these are being specifically targeted for learning.

With thanks to Laura Williams and the children in Pegasus class at East Whitby Primary.

With thanks to Sue Marr, Specialist teacher/trainer, Moor House Research and Training Institute.

This year, Voice 21 is exploring oracy practice in specialist and alternative provision settings and we’ve partnered with [NAPLIC and Moor House research and Training Institute to raise awareness of Developmental Language Disorder.](#)

In theory Luke Bocock

Oracy skills are increasingly vital for employability

Oracy skills have always mattered, but they will become increasingly critical for the future of work. As foundational skills for employability, they need to be developed consistently throughout young people's education.

Oracy is an Essential Employment Skill

Research from the National Foundation for Educational Research's (NFER) landmark study, *The Skills Imperative 2035*, identifies a set of six Essential Employment Skills (EES) that are already important today, but which will be increasingly vital in future, not least because they are more resilient to technological change and are used intensively in growing, high-skilled occupations.¹

The six Essential Employment Skills are:

- Communication
- Collaboration
- Planning and organising
- Information literacy
- Creative thinking
- Problem-solving and decision-making

Oracy lies at the heart of some of these skills (communication and collaboration), and supports the development of others (such as problem-solving and creative thinking). For example, strong communication and interpersonal skills help individuals articulate ideas and underpin effective decision-making in teams. Strong oracy skills will, therefore, be critical for young people to thrive in the future workforce.

Changes in the global economy are magnifying the importance of oracy skills

Technological, demographic and environmental changes are reshaping the labour market, far faster than previously expected. Research for *The Skills Imperative 2035* shows that the pace of change has accelerated in recent years, by up to three times in some occupations, and that up to three million jobs in 'high risk' declining occupations (such as administration and customer service) could disappear between 2020 and 2035.²

Job growth is concentrated in higher skilled professional and technical roles (for example, nurses, teachers and engineers), whilst most low- and mid-skilled occupations (for example, customer service and machine operatives) are declining. Consequently, it is imperative that more young people leave education equipped to enter, or progress into, high-skilled jobs – but, to do this, they need both the transferable and technical skills these jobs demand, which include socioemotional as well as cognitive skills.

Socioemotional skills are central to oracy – effective communication depends not only on expressing ideas, but also on listening, empathy, self-regulation and the ability to engage with and respond appropriately to others, as illustrated in the Oracy Framework, developed by Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge.

1. Bocock, L., Scott, M. and Hillary, J. (2025) *The Skills Imperative 2035: creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce*. Available at: nfer.ac.uk/media/4ulc0syg/skills_imperative_2035_final_report.pdf.

2. Ibid.



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It is imperative that all young people leave education with a strong base of the EES needed for both work and life

Young people need Essential Employment Skills to thrive

The scale and severity of employer-reported skills gaps are widely acknowledged, but minimal attention has been paid to the perspectives of individual workers, including young workers. Our *Skills Imperative 2035* research³ which involved estimating people's skill levels from their self-reported behaviours suggests that a significant minority of young people are entering the workforce without the EES necessary to succeed in their jobs. The same research also suggests that, without action, up to seven million workers may lack the EES they need to do their jobs fully by 2035.

3. Bocock, L., Scott, M. and Hillary, J. (2025) The Skills Imperative 2035: creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce. Available at: nfer.ac.uk/media/4ulc0syg/skills_imperative_2035_final_report.pdf.

The solution: A lifelong, oracy-rich approach to developing both transferable and technical skills.

It is imperative that all young people leave education with a strong base of the EES needed for both work and life. These skills must be explicitly recognised and developed, supported by a common skills framework and benchmarking tools that schools and colleges can use.

A system of lifelong learning is needed, with a continuous approach to skills development at its core, to ensure more young people leave education with a strong blend of the qualifications, technical skills and transferable skills they will need to compete for entry-level roles in high growth areas.

Greater emphasis on oracy is one way to ensure all young people leave education with a strong early base of EES, which the tertiary education system can then cultivate still further, regardless of which post-16 pathway young people follow.



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Importantly, the government and education system alone cannot meet the future skills imperative

Greater policy and funding focus should also be placed on supporting young people facing disadvantage to acquire these skills. Inequalities emerge early and widen over time, and growing numbers of professional jobs are dominated by young people from professional class backgrounds.⁴

However, until recently, the focus on disadvantage has been in decline; incentives for education providers to focus on students facing disadvantage have been reduced, family support services have been cut back to the bone, and there have been mounting barriers to high-quality childcare for families facing disadvantage.⁵ Remedying this is a crucial part of the collective response required to meet future skills needs.

Importantly, the government and education system alone cannot meet the future skills imperative. Employers also play a vital role in anticipating their future skills needs, redesigning roles, fully utilising workers' skills and investing in the development of workers' transferable as well as technical skills.

A joined-up, lifelong learning system – focused on developing EES and oracy skills as well as technical skills, whilst addressing skills inequalities and supporting young people facing disadvantage – is now more essential than ever for delivering economic growth that benefits everyone and ensuring no young person gets left behind.

4. Social Mobility Commission (2022) State of the Nation 2022: A fresh approach to social mobility. Social Mobility Commission. Available at: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/62b2e45b8fa8f5357a677f29/State_of_the_Nation_2022_A_fresh_approach_to_social_mobility.pdf.

5. Bocock, L., Scott, M. and Hillary, J. (2025) The Skills Imperative 2035: creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce. Available at: nfer.ac.uk/media/4ulc0syg/skills_imperative_2035_final_report.pdf.

Luke Bocock,
Research Director at
National Foundation for
Educational Research



In practice Amy Howe

An oracy-rich approach to careers education sets young people up for success in work and in life

In today's labour market, employers are actively seeking transferable skills to complement specialised knowledge. Oracy – articulating ideas, developing understanding and engaging with others through speaking, listening and communication¹ – underpins the Essential Employment Skills identified by NFER.²

A high-quality oracy education can greatly impact students' career prospects. Learning to, through and about talk supports students to develop a repertoire of skills that they can use and hone throughout their lives. Understanding how to use oracy skills in different contexts, with different audiences, and for different purposes could mean the difference between being employed and seeking employment.

1. The Oracy Education Commission (2024) We Need to Talk. Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England..

2. Bocock, L., Scott, M., and Hillary, J. (2025) *Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce*. National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER).

Without a focus on oracy in the education system, we risk widening gaps in opportunity and participation for students entering the world of work.

To understand how oracy could be harnessed to elevate careers education in schools and colleges, Voice 21 has been working in collaboration with Royal Holloway University London and the Windsor Forest College Group to identify key themes and skills that students need to feel career-ready.

Understanding the value of your voice

When more people participate in a discussion, a broader range of ideas and opinions are heard. Cognitive diversity – the inclusion of varied perspectives, experiences, and thinking styles³ – is essential in the workplace to avoid perspective blindness and spark innovation, but having the confidence to speak up in the first place is often a barrier for many students.

3. Syed, M. (2019) *Rebel Ideas: The Power of Diverse Thinking*. London: John Murray Press.



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When more people participate in a discussion, a broader range of ideas and opinions are heard

To set young people up for career success, they must be supported to understand what it means to use talk as a tool to participate in the wider world and understand the value of their voice.

Reflecting on authentic examples of oracy

Teaching students to deconstruct and reflect on authentic examples of oracy in “the real world” deepens their understanding of how these skills are not only useful but fundamental in work and in life, and can help them create a toolkit of skills that they can employ to make their voices heard. This could mean providing opportunities for students to reflect on the types of conversations they have in their own lives – the different contexts they are exposed to, the range of purposes for talk they engage with, and the audiences they encounter – and inviting them to consider which oracy skills they might use in different scenarios.

Students must learn to reflect on their own understanding of oracy, so creating opportunities for analysis and engagement with contrasting types of talk is essential. Using videos of formal and informal talk can be a stimulus for discussion, helping students to identify different oracy skills from the Oracy Framework⁴ (for example tone, structure and audience awareness), and how they can be harnessed for specific contexts, purposes and audiences. By building an understanding of oracy for varied purposes and contexts, young people can become more confident to use their voices in the workplace and understand the value that they can bring.

4. Mercer, N., Warwick, P. and Ahmed, A. (2017) ‘An Oracy Assessment Toolkit: Linking Research and Development in the Assessment of Students’ Spoken Language Skills at Age 11-12’, Learning and Instruction, 48, pp. 51-60.

Storytelling for interview technique

Interviews are integral to the employment process, allowing interviewees to create narratives which inform, engage, and persuade an audience that their skills and experiences meet employers’ expectations.

To feel prepared for interviews, students need multiple opportunities to practice using their oracy skills in these evaluative contexts for talk. Teaching students how to tell purposeful stories about their skills and experiences with confidence, while staying mindful of their audience and responding effectively to questions, is vital. Crucially, interviews are mutual evaluations; students need to feel empowered to ask clarifying or probing questions to gauge if a workplace is suitable for them.

Scaffolding storytelling using the STAR framework

In order to be successful in interviews, students must develop the skills of storytelling and questioning in both formal and informal contexts.

The STAR framework (Situation, Task, Action, Result) can help students to scaffold their cognitive oracy skills to structure and organise their personal narratives. Allocating time for students to practice their interview skills and experience pre-interview nerves in a safe space, such as tutor sessions, enables them to grow in confidence and build resilience.



Teaching students to deconstruct and reflect on authentic examples of oracy in “the real world” deepens their understanding of how these skills are not only useful but fundamental in work and in life



The use of a framework and regular practice can increase students' confidence, helping them feel empowered to ask the right questions and engage with their interviewers.

Working together through talk

Collaboration is essential in the workplace. Talking together to develop a shared understanding, to build trust and resolve conflict means listening actively to others and contributing thoughtfully to group discussions.

Students need authentic opportunities to engage in – and facilitate – meaningful discussions with people outside their close circle. Without these experiences, students limit their exposure to diverse perspectives and miss out on experiences that develop collaboration and leadership skills.

Understand and deploy purposeful exploratory talk

Supporting students to understand what constitutes a purposeful exploratory discussion, to learn to become a reflective speaker, listener and communicator is an essential foundation for collaboration in the workplace.

There are three key types of talk that students should understand and reflect on: disputational, cumulative and exploratory talk.⁵ By teaching the meanings and differences between these three types of talk, students can increase their knowledge of the hallmarks of purposeful exploratory talk in order to be able to replicate these skills in their own group discussions.

With regular opportunities to engage in exploratory group discussions, students' confidence to experiment using a range of oracy skills grows over time.⁶ A Harkness discussion is a great way to initiate students into the protocols of a group discussion. This structured talk opportunity encourages students to use specific oracy skills and provides them with a platform to express their ideas authentically whilst listening to and engaging with the diverse

5. Mercer, N. (2004) Sociocultural Discourse Analysis: Analysing Classroom Talk as a Social Mode of Thinking. *Journal of Applied Linguistics*. 1. 137-168. 10.1558/japl.2004.1.2.137.

6. The Oracy for Employability Toolkit pilot (254 Post-16 students) found that, following participation in the workshops, students' confidence in group discussions rose from 51% to 68% (+17 percentage points), while students reporting no confidence at all fell from 15% to 6% (-9 percentage points).



The opportunity to develop Essential Employment Skills through a high-quality oracy education should not be left to chance

perspectives of others. By giving students the tools to participate in purposeful exploratory discussion, they can develop the skills to engage meaningfully with others and foster a collaborative workplace environment.

Conclusion

Oracy is fundamental to career-readiness; it underpins each of NFER's six Essential Employment Skills. Speaking, listening and communicating (in different contexts, for different purposes, and with different audiences) are essential in today's labour market.

The opportunity to develop Essential Employment Skills through a high-quality oracy education should not be left to chance; it is crucial that both education and employment sectors work together to plan for career-connected learning and support the future job prospects of all young people, setting them up for success in both work and in life.

Voice 21 has worked in collaboration with Royal Holloway University London and the Windsor Forest College Group to develop resources for tutors and Post-16 students. These will be available for schools to use later in 2026.

Amy Howe, Learning and Education Lead at Voice 21



In theory Peter Hyman

Learning to disagree agreeably: how schools can start to heal a polarised society

In the past year I have listened to more than 1000 young people across the UK, first for our report Inside the Mind of a 16-year-old, second for our latest report Inside the Mind of a Young NEET.

What became clear is that discussion in schools is dwindling. We know why – and as a former headteacher I have some sympathy. The curriculum is crowded. Many teachers lack the confidence or the training to tackle the most controversial, sensitive, thorny, or urgent issues facing young people. There are big safeguarding worries if a young person expresses certain opinions.

But, with 16-year-olds about to get the vote, with society becoming more polarised, with the algorithmic world promoting conspiracy theories over rational argument, there is an urgent need for young people to be given the tools and the support to talk openly about politics, current affairs and the many pressures, conflicts, influences that help shape their identities.

Schools should be places where knowledge is not just handed down but questioned, interrogated, and

contested. Many classrooms are currently a long way from that ideal; the culture of school is too often one of compliance, with little time for digressions.

If we want to change this, there is a good body of research that shows how this might be done. And oracy is the key.

The deliberative classroom – setting up a climate for deliberative talk

The starting point is how the classroom is set up for deliberation. Studies using large international civic education datasets find that an open classroom climate is associated with higher civic knowledge, political efficacy, appreciation of political conflict and willingness to participate.

This is important because democratic citizenship is not just learned as knowledge about institutions. It is nurtured as a practice: speaking, listening, weighing evidence, seeing that disagreement is normal, and understanding that political opponents are not necessarily enemies.

Research by Diana Hess, Paula McAvoy and others argues that avoiding controversial political issues leaves young people less prepared for democratic life.¹ The best classrooms do not pretend controversy does not exist. They make controversy educative. Pupils learn that there are different kinds of disagreement: disagreements about facts, values, priorities, identity, trade-offs and trust. That helps

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Schools should be
places where knowledge
is not just handed down
but questioned,
interrogated, and
contested

1. Hess, D.E., McAvoy, P. (2014) *The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education*. New York: Routledge.

move debate away from “good people versus bad people” and towards “what evidence, values and consequences are at stake?”

Setting up the right classroom climate is important – and seemingly small things like having young people in circles not rows, creates a culture of respect, equal voices and focus. A successful deliberation is not one where everyone ends where they started. Pupils should be invited to refine, soften, complicate or change their view.

Research on the ‘Deliberative Classroom’ found a useful distinction between “cumulative talk,” which simply accepts everyone’s views, and “exploratory talk,” where pupils challenge, test and refine positions together.² What is needed here, therefore, is a robust form of oracy, based on respectful challenge rather than false consensus.

The classroom should be a safe space for debate but not necessarily a comfortable one – for the young people or the adults. This kind of talk develops the democratic muscles of humility, curiosity and judgement.

A report by the National Institute of Economic and Social Research on teaching controversial issues in UK schools argues that schools are one of the few places where young people from different backgrounds meet, and that they can play a key role in developing democratic knowledge and understanding – but teachers need support, training and senior leadership backing to do this confidently. That is especially important in polarised times, when teachers may fear complaints, accusations of bias, or losing control of the room.³

The teacher's role is central

Deliberation can depolarise, but the research shows that ordinary, unstructured discussion, can have the reverse effect and increase polarisation. That is the case for oracy, oracy protocols, and importantly, the facilitation of skilled teachers.

The teacher must not just be the neutral timekeeper or the guardian of politeness.

The teacher needs to become a designer of democratic conditions. The research suggests several important roles:

They choose issues that are genuinely discussable, not settled questions of basic rights or factual reality. They ensure pupils have enough knowledge before discussion, so the starting point is not ‘top of the head’ opinion but grounded in some information. They set norms for evidence, listening and respect. They protect minority voices. They challenge generalisations. They model intellectual humility. They distinguish between “all views can be voiced” and “all views are equally valid.” And they help pupils reflect afterwards on how the discussion went.

This is where schools often need more training. Many teachers are trained to manage behaviour and deliver content, but not necessarily to facilitate high-quality democratic disagreement.

The craft of deliberation

A good school model would have five practical elements.

First, teach the knowledge before opening the debate. For example, before discussing immigration, pupils need facts about asylum, migration, law, labour markets and human rights. Before discussing free speech, they need law, rights, harm, hate speech and historical examples.

Second, choose the right kind of question. They’ve got to be open-ended questions, not ones where you are debating something where there is an indisputable answer. I would include some questions that go to the heart of a young person’s life: social media usage, online content, identity.

2. Department for Education (2017) The Deliberative Classroom. educateagainsthate.com/resources/the-deliberative-classroom/

3. National Institute of Economic and Social Research. (2025) Supporting Schools to Teach Controversial Issues: Lessons from the Third Sector. niesr.ac.uk/projects/supporting-schools-teach-controversial-religious-issues-lessons-third-sector



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Skilled teachers can facilitate the kind of discussions that create greater understanding and bridge divides



Third, create a structured talk culture.

There are a wide number of strategies and techniques that can be deployed to structure meaningful discussion: citizen juries, jigsaw groups, mock trials, Socratic seminars, Harkness tables, Philosophy for Children.

Within these formats, sentence stems are important for reinforcing exploratory talk rather than performative talk.

“I agree with part of that, but...”

“What evidence would change your mind?”

“Can you explain why that matters to you?”

“Is there another group who might see this differently?”

“What are the strongest arguments on the other side?”

“Where is the trade-off?”

Fourth, train teachers to be non-partisan but not value-neutral. Teachers should not steer pupils to the teacher’s own political view. But they should defend the conditions of democratic discussion: truthfulness, equal dignity, rights, evidence and protection from intimidation. Hess and McAvooy make this distinction sharply: classrooms should be political in helping pupils ask “How should we live together?”, but not partisan in advancing a particular ideology.

Fifth, debrief the process, not just the issue.

This is perhaps the most important principle of all oracy teaching. A teacher who shows an interest in

the quality of teaching, and gets students to reflect on it, will develop the metacognition they need to do it well.

Questions like:

Did we use evidence?

Did anyone change or refine their view?

Whose voices were heard most?

What made the conversation more thoughtful?

What would we do differently next time?

How this counters polarisation

School cannot do all the work of countering polarisation. But it is a place where young people come together from all backgrounds. Skilled teachers can facilitate the kind of discussions that create greater understanding and bridge divides.

This can no longer be shoved in the “nice to have” pile but must now form a critical part of the new curriculum and be an entitlement for every young person.

This is urgent, if we are to safeguard our democracy for the future and bring up young people to thrive.

Peter Hyman, Co-founder of Voice 21, former headteacher and advisor to Tony Blair and Keir Starmer.



In practice Rebekah Simon-Caffyn

Case study: Madani Schools Federation Transformational Framework for Oracy

Madani Schools Federation comprises two secondary schools in Leicester: Madani Boys School and Madani Girls School. Madani Girls School is an Oracy Centre of Excellence, and both schools have prioritised their oracy provision over the last 10 years.

In 2022, school leaders identified polarisation as an issue that was having a profound impact on students. In response, they began working on an oracy-based framework for cultural literacy that would create opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with ideas that do not align with their own.

Madani's Transformational Framework for Oracy

The framework is based on the work of the research project: Dialogue and Argumentation for Cultural Literacy Learning in Schools (DIALLS)¹ and is blended with Madani's whole-school oracy approach. Madani's ultimate goal through the framework is to develop "students that make strategic contributions to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage."

The framework spans from Year 7 to Year 11, moving from lower stakes interactions and engagement in Year 7 to higher stakes interactions in Year 11 that engage with personal and identity-conferring beliefs, both in the context of students' own identities and in their engagement with the viewpoints of others.

The four threads of the Transformational Framework for Oracy

The first thread of the framework concerns personal identity and focuses on metacognition. Students are supported and encouraged to develop and express their own opinions, give reasoning to support statements, and also to contextualise their ideas in their own background and understanding of the world.

The second thread of the framework involves relating to others and is based on Neil Mercer's work on interthinking, or the process of thinking collectively through spoken language.² This thread helps students connect their personal identity and thinking with other students' thinking, and helps them understand the importance of generating new ideas through collaboration.

The third thread of the framework covers situating individual ideas within the ideas of others, and dealing with multiple competing perspectives. The outcome of this thread is enabling students to challenge ideas respectfully, to critically analyse and to openly discuss arguments.

Finally, the fourth thread is focused on community, and bringing personal identity, interthinking and empathy together to identify issues facing communities and make "strategic contributions to the greater social good."

1. Maine, F., Cook, V. & Lähdesmäki, T., (2019) "Reconceptualizing cultural literacy as a dialogic practice", *London Review of Education* 17(3), 383–392. doi: doi.org/10.18546/LRE.17.3.12.

2. Littleton, K., & Mercer, N. (2013). *Interthinking: Putting talk to work* (1st ed.). Routledge. doi: doi.org/10.4324/9780203809433.

Madani's Transformational Framework for Oracy

	7	8	9	10	11
Community anchoring – what is my identity	Giving opinions with reasons about subject content	- Reflecting on prior learning to offer views on cross-curricular links - Acknowledging that your opinions and views can change	Being able to contextualise knowledge based on a range of learning and general knowledge	Expressing openly with respect what your views are and why: understanding that these views may contrast with others and therefore consider sensitively how you word these	Having a clear sense of your own identity: who you are... what you believe... what you think... where you come from... what you want etc and being able to express, value and life that identity openly
Relating to others – incorporating ideas/ interthinking (collaboration generates new ideas)	- Learning and listening to the ideas of others - Respecting that other viewpoints exist	- Relating to other by engaging with their ideas and inviting them to expand - Empathising with ideas that are different to one's own - Building on the ideas of others to include them	- Probing someone to find out more about their alternative viewpoints - Building on the ideas of others towards new thinking	- Diplomatically or provisionally accepting the rationale behind opposing view points - Vocally disagreeing with prejudice against inviting opposing viewpoints	Diplomatically facilitating discussions between groups of people or individuals who do not agree with each other: establishing mutual respect, tolerance and empathy
Dealing with multiple perspectives	Recognising that others may not agree with us and vice versa	- Challenging ideas respectfully - Changing one's mind	- Acknowledging and explaining changes of position - Discussing alternatives to evaluate them - Linking ideas to synthesise them	- Understanding very clearly where viewpoints differ; being able to respectfully articulate that - Openly discussing and analysing arguments and viewpoints to critically evaluate them	
Transformational communities that work together	- Listening to each other (actively from the heart) - Joining in discussion by offering ideas - Encouraging non-speakers to contribute - Understanding and acknowledging that people come from a diverse range of backgrounds and can still exist in the same community	- Acting inclusively by inviting others to contribute - Working together to agree on an idea - Exploring differing ideas to seek common ground - Understanding the issues that some people in your community and others may face, even if they do not impact you and your family	- Negotiating differing ideas to seek agreement - Evaluating ideas and choosing a course of action - Identifying issues facing communities and discussing strategies to support those in difficulty	Students that make strategic contributions to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage	

The Oracy Benchmarks and the Transformational Oracy Framework

[The Oracy Benchmarks](#) articulate and exemplify a high-quality oracy education, creating shared expectations for how schools can approach oracy in their settings.

Whole-school implementation: meeting the Oracy School Benchmarks

Prior to implementing the framework, Madani Schools Federation set an ambitious vision and developed a strong culture of oracy across both schools. This supported oracy being put at the heart of the framework, underpinning each thread and linking the progression of the framework with the oracy skills that students gain as they progress through their education.

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With something as important as giving students a voice on polarising issues; it's not possible to move quickly. We often hold deeply entrenched views based on our own knowledge and experiences and it's only by slowly taking on board things that others are saying and allowing that to form part of our DNA that we start to think “maybe I was wrong about that.”

CHAITAN RAJANIA, SENIOR LEADER AND ORACY LEAD FOR MADANI SCHOOLS FEDERATION

The framework is deliberately designed to contribute towards Madani's culture of oracy by developing active and informed community members who can communicate across a variety of contexts and to different audiences. It is also deeply linked with the schools' curricula, informing approaches to teaching and learning across the federation.

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A shared pedagogy for oracy is essential for enacting the framework across the schools





We see this as a responsibility of every subject area. We know that if it isn't intentionally planned for, we leave it up to chance whether or not students are exposed to different viewpoints and given the tools to understand and engage with them.

CHAITAN RAJANIA

Classroom implementation: meeting the Oracy Teacher Benchmarks

A shared pedagogy for oracy is essential for enacting the framework across the schools. Curriculum leaders understand how to maximise opportunities for debate and discussion within each subject area in line with the development areas of the Framework, placing oracy at the centre of teaching and learning. All teachers are given the tools to use the Framework in their subjects and adapt it accordingly.

Teachers have high expectations for students' oracy skills, which creates an environment where students are expected to contribute and use their voices in the classroom, laying the groundwork for the successful implementation of the framework.

Teachers also ensure that all students' voices are heard and valued, creating a culture of inquisitiveness, curiosity, and willingness to challenge, disagree and listen to the voices of others.



Madani's ultimate goal through the framework is to develop "students that make strategic contributions to the greater social good and prioritise support for those experiencing disadvantage"

This culture of valuing every voice is an essential foundation for engaging with others' ideas and perspectives respectfully and meaningfully.

In order to support the practical application of the framework, Madani utilises a short debating format that ensures that all students have the chance to participate, allowing students to learn through talk using oracy approaches that deepen and enhance students' knowledge and understanding.

In French lessons, students focus on giving opinions and showing the reasoning behind their ideas while debating controversial topics, working towards the first thread of the framework.

A Year 8 history debate focuses on the question "should Britain apologise to former colonies?" In this debate, emphasis is placed on evaluating the strength of the evidence and understanding why perspectives on Britain's colonial legacy remain divided today. This provides an early foundation in understanding and weighing different perspectives, and on respectful disagreement.

Conclusion

By developing the Transformational Framework for Oracy and linking it with the schools' whole-school oracy approach, Madani Schools Federation have created opportunities and provided the tools for students to engage meaningfully with people and ideas that don't necessarily align with their own views. Through this work, Madani hopes that students leave school with the ability to empathise, analyse and engage with views that are different from their own, equipping them with the skills to contribute positively, both in their communities and beyond.

With thanks to Chaitan Rajania at Madani Schools Federation.

Rebekah Simon-Caffyn,
Research and Policy Lead
at Voice 21



In theory Dr Laura Kerslake and Dr Victoria Cook

The importance of oracy for supporting primary to secondary school transitions

The transition from primary to secondary school is a complex process, often regarded as one of the most challenging periods in students' educational careers.¹ Transition is influenced by a myriad of social, cultural, and relational factors in addition to individual student characteristics.²

Students predominantly face three interconnected areas of adjustment during the transition from primary to secondary school: academic, emotional and social.³ Transition interventions therefore need to focus equally on students' academic and pastoral needs to ensure that all students are supported to make successful adjustments to secondary school.

The provision of a high-quality oracy education can support students' academic, emotional and social adjustment in different ways. For example, research suggests that students encounter a significant increase in the quantity and complexity of vocabulary in secondary school and this may present a barrier

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Students predominantly face three interconnected areas of adjustment during the transition from primary to secondary school: academic, emotional and social

1. Zeedyk S.M., Gallacher J., Henderson M. et al. (2003) Negotiating the transition from primary to secondary school: Perceptions of pupils, parents and teachers. *School Psychology International* 24(1): 67–79. 2. Holt D., Hardley S., Gray S. et al. (2022) Facilitating a positive transition: A case study exploring the factors that support social, emotional and mental wellbeing from primary to secondary school. *Pastoral Care in Education* 41(3): 1–19.

2. Holt D., Hardley S., Gray S. et al. (2022) Facilitating a positive transition: A case study exploring the factors that support social, emotional and mental wellbeing from primary to secondary school. *Pastoral Care in Education* 41(3): 1–19.

3. Harris J. and Nowland R. (2021) Primary–secondary school transition: Impacts and opportunities for adjustment. *Journal of Education & Social Sciences* 8(2): 55–69. 4. Deignan A., Candarli D. and Oxley F. (2022) *The Linguistic Challenge of the Transition to Secondary School: A Corpus Study of Academic Language*. London: Routledge.



to learning.⁴ Adopting a talk-rich approach to vocabulary instruction may help support students with the linguistic challenges they face as they move from primary to secondary school.

Talking about feelings in preparation for transition is also important. Research suggests that coping strategies can be inhibited by a failure to talk or translate anxieties into language.⁵ A high-quality oracy education develops a school culture where students feel comfortable to talk, knowing that they are listened to and understood.

Perspectives on transitions and oracy

Transitions are difficult for many learners, particularly between primary and secondary schools. One reason is that secondary schools tend to plan their curricula backwards from GCSE requirements rather than building on from Key Stage 2 learning. This does a disservice to both high-prior attaining pupils, who can find themselves repeating work, and pupils who have struggled in primary school, who may find the work inaccessible as they enter Key Stage 3.

Learners' engagement in education tends to decrease across the primary to secondary transition and their perceptions of the value of education

4. Deignan A, Candarli D and Oxley F (2022) *The Linguistic Challenge of the Transition to Secondary School: A Corpus Study of Academic Language*. London: Routledge.

5. Pennebaker, J. W., Colder, M., & Sharp, L. K. (1990). Accelerating the coping process. *Journal Of Personality and Social Psychology*, 58(3), 528.

decreases. In addition, certain groups of pupils, such as those from areas of socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to experience this disengagement.⁶

Better oracy skills could also help learners to communicate their need for help, which in turn could support academic work. For example, it's not possible for a primary school to teach students every piece of vocabulary they will need for secondary school, but if students are able to ask for help and communicate when they don't understand a new word, this will prevent them from falling behind. Asking for help when learning to navigate unfamiliar settings may also help to reduce some of the anxiety around transitioning between schools, whilst better oracy skills could help learners to form new friendships and better relationships with peers and teachers.

Improved oracy skills could benefit formative assessment through more effective classroom questioning. If teachers know that students have good oracy skills, then if a student can't answer a question it's more likely that they don't know the answer rather than they don't know how to communicate the answer. This would give teachers greater understanding of what learners know and can do, reducing gaps in learning between KS2 and KS3.

Oracy is also strongly indicated as a key employment skill.⁷ If it is integrated into both primary and secondary education it may prevent some of the

6. Department for Education. (2024). *Factors influencing secondary school pupils' educational outcomes. A literature review supporting the Growing Up in the 2020s study*. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/publications/factors-influencing-secondary-school-pupils-educational-outcomes.

7. NFER. (2025). *Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce*. Retrieved from: nfer.ac.uk/publications/skills-imperative-2035-final-report/.



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Improved oracy skills could benefit formative assessment through more effective classroom questioning

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If oracy is integrated into both primary and secondary education it may prevent some of the loss of value of education that students perceive as they enter and progress through secondary school

loss of value of education that students perceive as they enter and progress through secondary school. It is important to integrate oracy into the broader secondary curriculum, including careers education, PSHE and citizenship, to ensure that this value is recognised.

Whilst evidence from research indicates the importance of oracy for supporting transition, the recent Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR)⁸ and policy paper⁹ have once again brought transition and oracy into the policy spotlight.

The future

While the final curriculum revision is still underway, the CAR states there will be a “new primary oracy framework, and a new combined secondary oracy, reading and writing framework so these are embedded across the whole curriculum.”¹⁰

The new primary oracy framework will hopefully provide an opportunity for students to learn to talk and listen in a range of contexts. This includes whole class discussions, groupwork and presentational talk. If they are able to do this by the end of Key Stage 2, then this can support their learning across

8. Department for Education. (2025a). Curriculum and assessment review: final report. gov.uk/government/publications/curriculum-and-assessment-review-final-report.

9. Department for Education. (2026). Every child achieving and thriving. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving.

10. Department for Education. (2025b). New curriculum to give young people the skills for life and work. Retrieved from: gov.uk/government/news/new-curriculum-to-give-young-people-the-skills-for-life-and-work.

the curriculum when they transition into secondary school. For example, if students are not given sufficient opportunities to practice skills such as carefully listening to and building on each other's ideas when in primary school, it could be difficult to access learning through group work in secondary school.

Teachers may need additional support and CPD to deliver a broad and high-quality oracy education which identifies progression in oracy and opportunities for formative assessment. This is recognised in the government's most recent policy paper, which states that, as part of the new curriculum, teachers will be provided with “evidence-based guidance on how to formatively assess and support children's oracy.”¹¹ It is also important that students with additional needs are able to access oracy embedded into the curriculum: a greater focus on oracy could help to highlight speech, language and communication needs, but these students may need additional support.

The current policy landscape offers schools a valuable opportunity to rethink how a high-quality oracy education can help students to successfully navigate the primary to secondary transition, supporting students' academic, emotional and social adjustments. Ultimately, this will hopefully not just support students, but enable them to thrive.

11. Department for Education. (2026). Every child achieving and thriving. gov.uk/government/publications/every-child-achieving-and-thriving.

Dr Victoria Cook, Lead Researcher and Dr Laura Kerslake, Teaching and Assessment Research Specialist at Chartered College of Teaching



In practice Kathleen McBride

Reimagining transition: case studies of innovative practices

Let's Talk at Transition, a project designed to support schools to develop a new approach to the primary to secondary transition, placed students' voices at the centre of oracy-rich provision in Year 7.

Funded by Worcestershire County Council, seven schools across the area reimagined transition, treating it as an extended phase spanning the whole of Year 7.

Participating teachers share their experiences of innovating at transition and the impact of these new approaches on their students.



Oracy-rich introduction to secondary

Connecting Year 6s with older students, designing discussion-based taster lessons, creating continuity between July Year 6 and Year 7



Explicit oracy teaching

Building on KS2 oracy provision, identifying opportunities to teach oracy explicitly, planning for progression in oracy skills across KS3



Oracy in subjects

Understanding the role of talk in different subjects, planning regular opportunities for disciplinary oracy, assessing learning through talk



Platforms for oracy

Supporting students to speak to authentic audiences, providing exciting contexts for talk, raising expectations and aspirations



Professional development in oracy

Assigning oracy leadership, delivering whole-school and departmental CPD, sharing best practice



Planning an oracy-rich introduction to secondary

At Wolverley CofE Secondary School, summer transition visits were redesigned to connect with a new Year 7 scheme of learning in English titled: *Dear Younger Me*. Lessons were planned for the summer term, culminating in students crafting and recording spoken letters where they reflected on how their feelings about secondary school changed over the course of Year 7.



Year 7s responded brilliantly to this scheme of work and we wanted to provide them with the additional challenge of positioning them as role models for the incoming Year 6s. By redesigning our summer transition lessons, we opened up time and space for oracy assemblies where Year 6s and Year 7s discussed moving to secondary school. The Year 7s were positioned to offer insights and guidance based on their own experiences and the Year 6s were able to ask questions of students who had just experienced what they were about to go through.

SOPHIE CARTWRIGHT, ORACY LEAD

Teaching oracy explicitly

Teachers at Bishop Perowne Church of England College identified tutor group lessons as an ideal context for delivering a programme of explicit oracy teaching – ensuring that all Year 7 students developed their understanding of oracy and that all teachers had the opportunity to build their practice.



We redesigned tutor lessons to include a sustained oracy focus as part of students' character education. We listened carefully to feedback from Year 6 students which cited making friends and getting along with teachers as key concerns about moving to secondary. We recognised that a focus on oracy would support students to build relationships with both teachers and peers. Our transition tutor time programme extends across the whole of Year 7. Over the course of the year students are introduced to the concept of oracy and are exposed to a range of contexts and purposes for talk.

SARAH BONES & JAMES CAMERON, ORACY LEADS

Developing oracy in subjects

In project schools, teachers increasingly recognised oracy as central to learning. At Baxter College, teacher, Tayla Reynolds, describes a lesson where students developed their geographical understanding through talk.



In a recent lesson, I showed two images of the local area, one image from the 1900s and the other taken recently. I gave them time to notice similarities and differences independently before asking them to share their ideas with a partner. Following their partner talk, I opened up a whole-class discussion where I encouraged students to listen carefully and either build on each other's ideas or challenge appropriately. In these discussions, students demonstrated their geographical thinking – showing how they make connections between new and previous learning.

Creating platforms for oracy beyond the classroom

When planned as part of a multilayered approach to oracy education, school-wide events enable students to develop a range of oracy skills and encounter different audiences for talk. Oracy Lead, Amy Dalton, explains how a deliberate focus on oracy in the classroom equips students with the confidence to participate in wider school life.



The oracy work students have been doing in tutor time and across the curriculum has given students who might not normally participate in events beyond the classroom the confidence and belief to participate. As a response to the project, we planned our first poetry slam this year where students were invited to write and perform an original poem. We were encouraged to see that some of our most vulnerable students chose to take part.

Providing professional development in oracy

Teacher access to continuous professional development (CPD) in oracy is key to ensuring every student benefits from a high quality oracy education. However, polling conducted in January 2025¹ highlighted that there is not yet consistent access to oracy CPD across the sector with just 28% of secondary teachers receiving training on oracy in the last two years at the time of polling.

Project teachers share how placing oracy CPD at the centre of implementation supports all staff to develop their practice.



Oracy has become a significant focus of our professional development time and teachers' confidence with planning and delivering oracy in the classroom has significantly increased.

KIRSTYN MINCHIN, ORACY LEAD



Throughout the project, schools noticed a positive impact on behaviour, engagement in learning and the progress and participation of vulnerable students



For us, each half term has a different oracy focus but the same structure which involves a whole- staff input session followed by a reflection session a few weeks later where teachers can share what they've trialled, how they've adapted approaches for their subject areas and celebrate any impact they've noticed as a result.

SOPHIE CARTWRIGHT, ORACY LEAD

A promising approach

Throughout the project, schools noticed a positive impact on behaviour, engagement in learning and the progress and participation of vulnerable students. Positioning transition as the gateway to an oracy-rich KS3 allowed schools to create better continuity with KS2 pedagogies, provide engaging platforms for student development and thread oracy throughout the curriculum – ensuring every student has access to a high-quality oracy education at this pivotal point in their lives.

Kathleen McBride,
Head of Learning at Voice 21



1. Teacher Tapp, 2025.

In theory Charlotte Bourne and Dr Mariah Whelan

Taking an oracy approach to poetry

Poetry's Spoken Roots

Today, most students experience poetry as something printed on the page. However, this has not always been the primary way that humans have encountered poetry. One of the oldest poems, the *Odyssey*, was developed as a spoken performance for audiences. In Old English poetry, performance poets called “scops” wrote and performed for their communities. In the 1990s, studies of rural Somalian communities showed that poetry was a communal practice used to record history and law, as well as for entertainment.¹ Since its inception, poetry has been rooted in practices that are oral, aural and communal.

When we ask a child to share a poem aloud in class, we're asking them to undertake an act of creative translation. The young person transforms a printed poem that is page-bound, literacy-mediated and an individualised experience into an oral/aural experience for an audience. The three step Poetry By Heart process (Choose a poem; Learn it by heart; Perform it for others) creates an opportunity for young people to embark on a process that is highly complex and creative but also deeply inclusive and empowering.

1. Rirash, M. (1992) Somali Oral Poetry as a Vehicle for Understanding Disequilibrium and Conflicts in a Pastoral Society. *Nomadic Peoples*, no. 30: 114–21. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43123361>.

Poetry and the Oracy Framework

When we think about the relationship between poetry and oracy, we need to think about oracy skills across the whole 3-step process of performing a poem. Much more than “just” a performance, each stage of the process of choosing, learning and performing provides opportunities for rich exploratory talk that enables students to develop the skills set out in the Oracy Framework and beyond.

The cognitive, linguistic and social/emotional strands

At first glance, it might seem that performing a poem well is mostly about developing presentational skills. However, a great performance starts with a young person's deep understanding of their poem. Poetry is a multilayered medium; Glyn Maxwell describes poems as having a ‘sunlit’ and a “lunar” side.² The sunlight side is the poem's literal meaning (who is speaking, what they are saying), while the lunar side is the deeper, figurative meaning. The lunar side in particular relies on the interpretation of the reader/

2. Maxwell, G. (2013) *On Poetry*. London: Oberon Books.

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When we ask a child to share a poem aloud in class, we're asking them to undertake an act of creative translation





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Poems can act as rich “talk stimuli,” creating opportunities for cognitive engagement with its meaning and analysis of language choices and vocabulary

performer, and is where the cognitive, linguistic and social and emotional strands of the Oracy Framework are most important.

Interpreting the lunar side of the poem creates rich opportunities for exploring language and meaning in class. Poems can act as rich “talk stimuli,” creating opportunities for cognitive engagement with its meaning and analysis of language choices and vocabulary. The real richness is understanding the contingent nature of a poem’s meaning and the collaborative relationship between the poet, performer and audience to create it.

The physical strand

Once a young person has deeply understood a poem, they can begin working on their performance skills. A successful poem performance differentiates clearly between different voices. Sometimes this is a basic delineation of different characters, but it can also include a subtle awareness and manipulation of the shifting voices of speaker, poet and performer. From subtle facial expressions to gesture and movement, appropriate deployment of body language is also incredibly important to communicate a poem’s mood and tone. How that mood then shifts during a poem is very often communicated through a speaker’s intonation and effective use of silence, key aspects of the physical strand of the Oracy Framework.

Finding Your Voice

As well as developing oracy skills, poetry helps young people find and develop their sense of self and voice. It does so in three main ways by:

Enabling young people to see life experiences and ways of communicating (vocabulary, syntax patterns etc.) that are close to their own, validating and reinforcing their existing sense of themselves

Letting young people encounter experiences they haven’t faced and language they don’t habitually use, opening up new imaginative territory and vocabulary

Asking them to make creative choices about poems (e.g. when to pause, how to handle line breaks etc.). Seeing that there is more than one option helps young people understand that there are multiple interpretations that are not only valid but often happening simultaneously and that meaning is a co-construction that requires them, the performer, just as much as the poet and poem.

When a young person fully “owns” their poem, they develop agency and self-efficacy over their narrative. If the poems we offer are diverse and inclusive, then this ownership offers a powerful form of participation in cultural life.³

3. Blake, J. (2025). booktrust.org.uk/resources/find-resources/the-benefits-to-children-of-learning-a-poem-by-heart/.

Diversity of Experience, Englishes and Forms

To participate in the co-creation involved in communicating a poem well, young people need to encounter poems with a diversity of experiences, Englishes and poetic forms. One helpful way to think about building diversity into young people's poetic diet is by applying Rudine Bishop's theory of windows, mirrors and "sliding glass doors."⁴ When applied to poetry, "windows" are poems that look into someone else's world, "mirrors" those that reflect their own world and "sliding glass doors" poems that immerse the young person in someone else's world. Poetry is wonderfully efficient at offering this variety of worldviews because of its shorter form which means you can feature more of each type in a tighter timeframe.

Poetry also has a particular place here because it is a form that often celebrates linguistic diversity and "non-standard" Englishes, and is therefore more likely to offer mirrors to underrepresented children. At Poetry By Heart, we value every voice and it's a core part of our work to showcase and celebrate poems that encompass a diversity of languages and experiences, opening up a new world to young people.

4. Sims Bishop, R. (1990) Mirrors, Windows and Sliding Glass Doors Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books in the Classroom. Ohio State University.

Conclusion

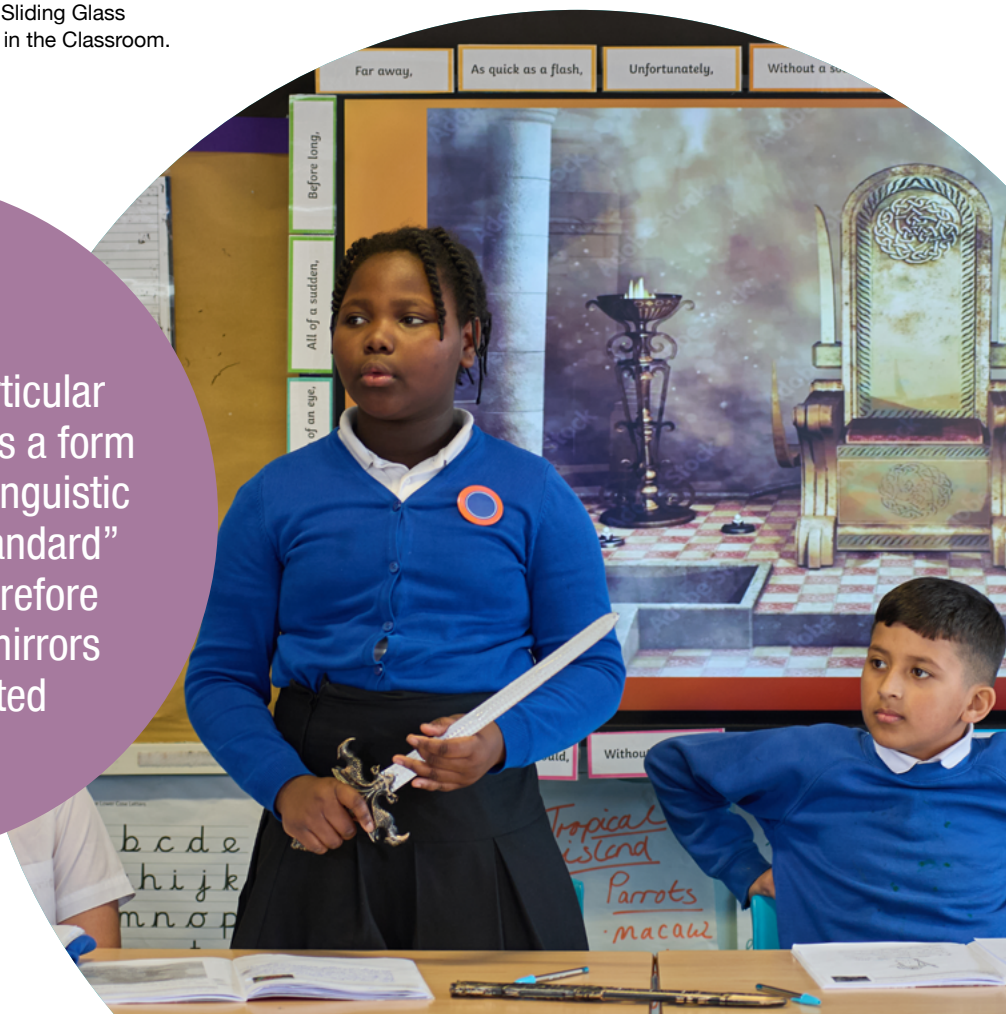
The Poetry By Heart approach – choose, learn and perform a poem for others – offers schools the opportunity to embrace all strands of the Oracy Framework. The choosing and learning processes hold equal transformative potential for oracy development as the performance itself. It's an approach that values every voice, celebrating poetry's oral, aural and communal origins while also creating space for young people to explore other communicative strategies.

Charlotte Bourne,
Head of Learning and
Engagement and
Dr Mariah Whelan, Poetry
and Digital Content Editor
at Poetry by Heart



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Poetry also has a particular place here because it is a form that often celebrates linguistic diversity and "non-standard" Englishes, and is therefore more likely to offer mirrors to underrepresented children



In practice Sally Edwards

The impact of oral storytelling on written narratives



Rationale

Oral storytelling is essential to support students’ writing, enabling them to internalise narrative structures, enrich vocabulary and develop sequencing skills fundamental to written composition.¹ Charter Primary observed that their Year 3 students produced fragmented, list-like narratives rather than stories with coherent structure. In order to address these concerns and improve students’ written composition, the school ran a research project testing the question “to what extent does a six-week oral storytelling intervention improve written narrative outcomes among Year 3 Pupil Premium students and students with SEND?”

The intervention

The intervention was a six-week sequence that blended oral rehearsal, physical storytelling tools (e.g. story dice, shakers) and modelled story structures. Other key strategies were also utilised to scaffold students’ writing: explicit sentence stems promoted more complex and varied sentence structure,² and visual story-mapping supported coherence and setting development.³

The progressive six-week framework was implemented and taught by two teachers to 40 Year 3 students as a replacement to their usual writing curriculum.

Data and findings

1. Low prior-attaining pupils showed accelerated narrative development

The group of students who began “Below Standard” in the teacher assessment baseline, improved by an average of six positions in No More Marking (NMM) cohort rankings (the cohort includes 40 students).

Pupil	No More Marking Baseline Position (Lower = weaker)	No More Marking Final Position (Higher = stronger)	Positions Gained
SH	1	17	+16
KK	5	18	+13
QR	3	5	+2
ER	6	8	+2
MS	13	10	-3
Avg	5.6	11.6	+6.0

1. Tomasello, M. (2018). How children come to understand false beliefs: A shared intentionality account. PNAS Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 115(34), 8491–8498. doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804761115.

2. Myhill, D. and Fisher, R. (2010). Writing Development: Cognitive, Sociocultural, and Functional Perspectives. McGraw-Hill Education.

3. Grainger, T., Gooch, K. and Lambirth, A. (2005). Creativity and Writing: Developing Voice and Verve in the Classroom. Routledge.





2. Group Performance Comparisons

Pupil Premium (PP) students advanced an average of 3.8 positions more than their non-PP peers in NMM rankings. Their storytelling scores rose by 9.0%, compared to 4.7% for non-PP pupils. These improvements were most apparent in character development (+1.9).

Metric	PP (n=19)	Non-PP (n=21)	PP Advantage
NMM Position Gain	+3.2	-0.6	+3.8 spots
Storytelling Gain	+9.0%	+4.7%	+4.3%

SEND pupils showed storytelling growth of +7.8%, slightly outpacing non-SEND peers (+6.3%), with the most significant gain in cohesion (+1.2). However, their NMM ranking improvements were modest (+0.5 positions), indicating that while creativity and structure improved, other elements may have been lacking (e.g. handwriting, spelling and punctuation).

Metric	SEND (n=14)	Non-SEND (n=26)
NMM Position Gain	+0.5	+1.5
Storytelling Gain	+7.8%	+6.3%

3. Prolonged Engagement and Progress

The use of interactive storytelling tools, such as the story shaker and storytelling dice, has sparked a newfound enthusiasm for storytelling among students. By prioritising imagination, creativity and endless possibilities over “perfect grammar and spelling” children have shown deeper engagement. The comparison of oral storytelling skills before and after the project reveals significant improvements in both confidence and complexity.

Discussion and Implications

The intervention was successful in helping students move from oral storytelling to written composition. Its structured progression enabled children to externalise and sequence thought before transcription.

This project offers two clear directions for future refinement of how we use oracy to support written composition:

- 1 Integrate grammar into oral rehearsal:** Embed spelling and grammar strategies throughout the sequence, encouraging pupils to identify punctuation and syntax opportunities during oral storytelling.
- 2 Reinforce setting description:** Increase opportunities over time for children to learn and apply vocabulary related to rich, detailed settings.
- 3 Scale vertically:** Adopt a school-wide storytelling curriculum that deepens narrative sophistication across year groups – from foundational structures in Year 2 to complex forms in Year 6.

Following the success of the research project, Charter Primary School scaled the project from September 2025, and now has a storytelling curriculum that goes from Y3-6.

Conclusion

While our education system often prioritises technical writing skills – spelling, grammar and transcription – this intervention has shown us the transformative power of play, imagination and creativity in literacy. By embracing these elements, we engaged all learners in the journey to becoming confident storytellers.

Not only did children’s narrative skills flourish, but we also witnessed deeper engagement, stronger self-assurance and a newfound willingness to take creative risks. These outcomes – though harder to measure – are, in our view, just as vital as technical proficiency. Moving forward, we hope this approach inspires a broader shift in how we nurture young writers, balancing skill-building with the joy of storytelling.

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