

The Plymouth Oracy Project: Its impact on non-academic measures of pupil success

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Introduction

The Plymouth Oracy Project was designed to develop theoretical and pedagogical understanding of dialogic talk for learning amongst school staff, with a particular focus on improving the oracy development and educational outcomes of pupils falling into the 'disadvantaged' category. This article reports on the impact of the Plymouth Oracy Project, rather than the methods applied in improving 'other measures' of student success, and presents two case studies exploring the impact of embedding oracy on confidence, conflict resolution, emotional literacy, prosocial behaviours and attendance.

The importance of oracy in the classroom

Oracy is the confidence to express oneself in speech using physical, cognitive, linguistic, social and emotional skills. Research stresses the reciprocal nature of oracy and therefore the important role that adults, such as teachers, play in supporting oracy (Alexander, 2012; Nichol and Andrews, 2018; Millard and Menzies, 2016). Alexander et al. (2017) argue that it is through the teacher's talk >

- › that the pupil’s talk is either confined to recitation or encouraged through discussion and dialogue, enlarging discursive and semantic repertoire. These studies call for specialist oracy teaching to be part of the overall school culture and environment.

Oracy is argued to reduce the attainment gap of those most disadvantaged pupils (Alexander, 2017) and is essential for effective learning (Nichol and Andrews, 2018; Alexander, 2012). Central to this is the role of school staff in helping pupils to gain a broad repertoire of talk (Alexander et al., 2017). There is much theory and evidence to show that for the children who persistently experience poverty, 75 per cent arrive at school below average in language development. As Mercer (2018) asserts, ‘if they are not getting it in school, they are not getting it’. Gross (2018) supports this in his suggestion that attainment, wellbeing and life chances are all improved through improved speech and language.

Vygotsky (1962) stresses the links between language and thought, interaction and development and argues that the use of language to communicate is key to the development of new ways of thinking. Alexander (2012, p. 4) states:

Pupils... learn how to use talk to narrate, explain, speculate, imagine, hypothesise, explore, evaluate, discuss, argue, reason and justify.

Prosocial behaviours and emotional literacy

Banerjee et al. (2016) suggest that there has been a significant move to develop discrete school-based strategies for addressing the emotional wellbeing needs of pupils. This has been most recently reinforced with the publication the Education Inspection Framework (Ofsted, 2019), which reduces the emphasis on academic data, especially internal data, puts the curriculum at the heart of the framework and increases the emphasis on personal development and behaviour and attitudes to learning.

Resnick (2005, p. 398) has argued that schools can and should be involved in the ‘intentional, deliberative process of providing support, relationships, experience and opportunities that promote positive outcomes for young people’.

The oracy development outlined above highlights the importance of pupils gaining a broad repertoire of talk to support their learning, including aspects such as emotional literacy and prosocial behaviour. Emotional intelligence has been defined as:

... the ability to perceive accurately, appraise and express emotion, the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought, the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Salovey and Sluyter, 1997, p. 10).

Prosocial behaviour is the ability to maintain the relationship with others. According to Porkodi and Vasimalairaja (1991), a number of skills contribute to the development of prosocial behaviour, such as perspective-taking, empathy and self-regulation. Prosocial skills involve regulating negative emotions, taking turns and sharing, and support orientations to others that are fair, just and respectful.

Research methods

The Plymouth Oracy Project was a DfE/SSIF-funded project involving 31 eligible schools (DfE guidelines), each with a target class of pupils between 20 and 35 in size across Plymouth, in which two teachers from each school were part of the training. In addition to six CPD days, eligible schools had a named SLE who visited the school five times during the first year to support with action-planning, assessment and project development, including development of oracy across the wider school. Qualitative and quantitative data was collected through surveys, interviews, meeting reports, action plans, CPD evaluation and attendance data. The project had an 18-month timescale, so the significance of reported impact will need further exploration as it is still in the initial stages in the schools.

Research impact

The data from this evaluation suggests that the Plymouth Oracy Project has contributed to improved pupil attendance and harder-to-measure impacts such as pupil confidence, voice and social emotional wellbeing, illustrated by two case studies.

Plymouth schools: A case study of improved confidence and conflict resolution

When children receive a good education, they want more education; to empower our students, promoting curiosity and providing challenging expectations, is a key driver for pupil learning and wellbeing. The Plymouth Oracy Project recognised the importance of teaching teachers to make that difference. It is well known that those that change children's lives are those that work with children each day, not policy strategists. Within the Plymouth area, data and outcomes highlighted that there was an increasing concern about pupil language and vocabulary efficacy, impacting on the capacity for pupils to learn. This project is a celebration of the impact that oracy can have on improving all children's life chances, providing equity that transcends gender, disadvantage and social circumstances.

Through the Plymouth Oracy Project, 31 schools developed secure understanding and approaches to developing the dialogic classroom within their school settings. There were a number of positive outcomes of improving oracy skills within the school setting. These included pupil confidence, improved behaviour outcomes and an improvement in emotional literacy.

Focusing on a school for high-attaining pupils, a student provided an explanation of how and why Oracy had impacted their confidence:

Oracy is how well one's ability is to speak in front of an audience. In class, I can speak more confidently because I know that the class is listening to me. In my class, I feel like people can speak more expressively to an audience, which has changed the way people speak.

From a different setting, another staff member commented:

Oracy had a big role to play in unlocking his confidence and encouraging him to try new things. He had stopped trying because he had previously failed.

Attendance is one of the most direct and visible indicators of behavioural engagement

Further evidence from teachers shared:

It is a delight to see the confidence it has given our pupils. The agency in children when they are able to express themselves with clarity. Having a stem sentence... is dignifying... they sound like anyone else... they speak with clarity and confidence.

We've been surprised by the effect it's had on the classroom... emotional climate... it's been impressive... pupils are so much calmer.

The children in my class do not get on but they're so much better at hearing each other's opinions and listening to each other that it doesn't become a major issue anymore, as in their talking lessons they're used to disagreeing with each other... partly accepting that other people have a different opinion, which was difficult for some of our students.

The Plymouth Oracy Project suggests that when we teach children how to speak, have expectations for their dialogue and provide real opportunities for discussion, debate and sharing of their voice, children achieve better socially and mentally.

Plymouth schools: A case study on improved attendance

Reid (2013) argues that teachers and governments all agree that to raise educational standards it's imperative to improve school attendance. Recent research has found that school engagement is a multi-dimensional construct (Christenson et al., 2012), and the tripartite model of behavioural-emotional-cognitive school engagement suggests that students exhibit certain physical behaviours, a sense of belonging and learning behaviours when engaged in school. Attendance is one of the most direct and visible indicators of behavioural engagement.

Attendance data (**Table 1**) suggests good improvements in attendance; it is, however, important to note that there was only one special school involved in this project and therefore it is a limited sample size. It is also noted that other factors may have played a part in improving attendance.

The focus on engagement is clear in the qualitative data collected through case studies, quality assurance reports and action plans: >



TABLE 1:
ATTENDANCE TARGET GROUP AVERAGES

	2016–17 academic year	2017–18 academic year	Improvement
Primary schools	94.68	94.76	+0.8
Secondary schools	93.24	94.41	+1.17
Special school	85.7	95.3	+9.6

Student engagement has been really good. Boys presented with such maturity for their age. (Secondary)

Students were willing to engage with the delivery of their speeches, staff involved were positive about the skills the students had used/embedded. (Secondary)

Pupil participation in learning – improved dramatically. (Primary)

Boy-heavy class – boys really engaged... once they understood what was expected. (Primary)

One aspect that was evident through both case studies and action plans was an increased focus on parental involvement and engagement once the Oracy Project became embedded. Bempechat and Shernof (2012) suggest that creating authentic partnerships between parents, children, schools and communities provides a useful bridge towards the goal of stemming the tide of underachievement and disengagement. This will also support with pupil attendance and the expectations required for parents and students.

Another INSET has been planned for next week and the parents are coming into school to talk through oracy this week, alongside the children. (Primary)
Oracy is to be included in parents' evening, students 'showcase' invite to parents to come in to see poetry work and ignite speeches – the parents were extremely positive at the Year 7 open evening. (Secondary)

Conclusions

This article reports on the initial outcomes rather than the methods of the Plymouth Oracy Project, which show improved attendance, increased pupil confidence, a marked impact on creating a calmer school environment for pupils and the beginnings of impact on parents/carers. Although it is still in the initial stages and further monitoring is required to show the significance of this impact, this is an area that schools are planning to expand on. **i**

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