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Oracy (Pilot) 2024

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Summary and Key Findings:

This pilot project within two Nottinghamshire primary schools sought to improve and instil a range of oracy¹ related skills for pupils in years two and three² (the schools suggested these age groups). There is considerable evidence to show that many pupils struggle with oracy related skills (Oracy Education Commission, 2024). The scheme was delivered in partnership with [Go M.A.D.](#) – who helped to develop a range of interactive materials (see Appendix Three).

The respective teachers highlighted the pressing need for oracy related support, a key development need that underpins all types of learning. The majority of pupils, of all abilities, engaged with the scheme and exhibited a range of positive outcomes, evidenced through self-reflection and teacher observation. However, the lower than anticipated starting points for many of the children may necessitate re-thinking in relation to course structure and delivery. Whilst the evaluation can be made more sophisticated in the future it will always remain problematic to assign causation to any assumed attainment gain. Overall, the project shows considerable promise in helping to address a critical development need.

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¹ Oracy is the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through spoken language (Voice 21, 2024)

² Key Stage One: Ages five-seven, years one and two; Key Stage Two: Ages seven-eleven, years three, four, five and six

1. Introduction & Context

Oracy is key area of skill development in a young pupil's educational and interpersonal journey. There is considerable evidence to show that widening participation pupils lack basic oracy skills, compared to their more affluent peers (Voice 21, 2022; Cragan, 2019). The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) report that oracy programmes can effect considerable improvement on learning outcomes (EEF, 2024). A Core Theory of Change (CToC) is available in Appendix Two.

2. Methodology

Developing an Oracy programme pilot and its evaluation has been included within NTU's Access and participation Plan (APP) 2025-29. Pertinent elements are included within Appendix Two, for ease of reference. The evaluation methodology is also somewhat exploratory due to the difficulty in assessing programme value related to the subject matter - made doubly problematic in consideration of the age group(s). The evaluation received a favourable ethics opinion from the relevant NTU ethics board.

The aims of the evaluation were to assess, primarily through stakeholder voice:

- programme engagement (appropriateness),
- outcomes,
- issues of context,
- need,
- evaluative approach (and learning)

Whilst a worked through assessment framework has been established for older children, none are available at this level (Mercer et al., 2017). A mixed methods approach was adopted consisting of:

- teacher observation feedback through a survey tool based on the Voice 21 benchmarks (Gaunt and Stott, 2019) (6 individuals per session plus group). The teachers were paid a small retainer to complete this work.
- teacher interviews (x2)
- pupil focus groups (x2)
- outreach coordinator interviews (these are the staff who deliver the programme in the classroom) (x2)
- findings discussion

After report compilation a steering group meeting (incorporating delivery, coordinating, managerial and evaluative staff) fed back on the report findings, and these are included within the final section. Whilst there is no expectation of double or triple loop learning (fundamental or deep learning with commensurate change) establishing what can be learnt (or not) from the findings, and reporting back on them, is a change from normal practice and a positive development (Tosey et al., 2012).

3. Results

Need

Both teachers highlighted the **overwhelming and increasing need**³ for the programme. Oracy skills were considered low and becoming worse. However, articulating specific cause was problematic. As stated by one teacher:

“when the children came into reception, we did a cultural questionnaire a couple of years ago...and the percentages of children that were coming in below the baseline for speech and language and reception was really high... so at the beginning of this year my class would come in - and you say good morning and they would just look at you and walk off, some of them look quite puzzled. So, we talked about the fact that if somebody says good morning, you say good morning back, then we moved on to how are you?” (teacher one)

The need for further work in this area, from the classroom observations, was highlighted across a range of benchmarks:

“Some children struggled with eye contact, facing each other and showing that they are listening. This is typical of what I see in class daily. Vocabulary choice was fairly limited as a whole. In the 'describe the object' challenge [a pilot activity], many children found it tricky to describe the objects using appropriate vocabulary (without naming the object/giving it away). Many children [were] not actively listening or responding appropriately, rather they are waiting for their turn to speak. It was evident that the children lacked the very, very basic speaking and listening skills. Being able to look, sit still, not fidget, and actually listen is a big challenge for many pupils”. (teacher two, week one observation)

Outreach delivery staff also commented on the lower-than-expected oracy levels:

“I think it was prevalent across the whole class that they lacked the sort of speech and language skills required for that year group for that age... they're obviously not getting that kind of exposure to these sorts of skills at home.”

Context

Whilst somewhat **varied** in terms of background and ability the pupils themselves were broadly well behaved and attentive, as reported by the teachers and interaction within the focus groups. The children themselves:

“don't have an awful lot of experience of certainly speaking publicly... but also conversations generally” (teacher one)

³ For ease of reference, key issues are highlighted

“You have a range of Indian families with very high academic expectations. We do have a lot of asylum refugee families. So just very, very, very mixed, which is a challenge, but they're gorgeous and bright” (teacher two).

In addition, broader experiences are often limited, however oracy skills or lack thereof was **consistently poor across cultural** and ethnic backgrounds:

“they're very used to adults being at home. If you talk to them about what you want to be, which job do you want to do when you get older? Yeah, very often it's gaming. Or I'm not going to work. I'm going to stay at home because you don't have to go out to work to get money... so in school we worked really hard to balance out being realistic about what the children experience and what they need from our input... also seeing who they are, getting to know their families and getting to know all the positives as well” (teacher one).

Engagement

Session delivery was implemented by teacher trained staff with classroom experience. Pupil and teacher comments highlighted the respective skills sets related to the creation of a positive and friendly atmosphere where **rapport was quickly built** – critical in a short programme covering potentially difficult material for some pupils. The **pace** and length of lessons were also mentioned as a strength, as was taking the time to afford every child a chance to speak (not always possible in regular lessons) along with mixing up the children relative to their ability level.

The **physicality** of some of the interactions seemed to work particularly well. As mentioned by teacher one:

“There are quite a lot of children who struggle in terms of concentration. They find it difficult to concentrate on looking at visuals or reading texts or listening, certainly. And so having the activities where they would pull an object out of a bag and talk, taking the onus off them in terms of reading and writing. Not having to record anything, that was a relief for quite a few of them”.

Use of the **confidence cards** (see appendix three) was mentioned by several of the pupils as their favourite aspect of the programme.

The way the sessions were structured also helped to support some lower (oracy) ability pupils, in that: *“I think it just helped to really structure what they wanted to say and broke it down into no more than **four steps** and you don't need to do all of those four steps if you don't want to do - I think that's been quite empowering for the less able children” (teacher one).*

NTU to school engagement was non problematic. As a potential **marketing** point both teachers agreed that their comments could be used for future scheme promotion. Outreach delivery staff noted the importance of improved teacher liaison before programme commencement to better gauge (oracy) ability levels. Teacher involvement/engagement was recognised as critical by the outreach staff:

"I was really grateful for having the teacher's involvement...for the behaviour management, she got involved with all of the activities, but she was able to [support] a table that weren't doing it or I don't know, being a bit cheeky or something. She would be on them and dealing with that. And she was able to able to tell me who to work with, who she felt like needed support".

According to the classroom observations the activities in the first week engaged the children, even though they were of varying difficulty, *"this did not cause them to opt out or lose confidence"* (teacher one). Variability in ability was also noted:

"The children who spoke at a suitable pace of speech, with tonal variation, clarity of pronunciation, tended to be the more able readers. They are more able to 'read the punctuation' and correctly place pauses in their speech pattern. Voice projection seemed to be more linked to personality than reading skills. Some children had to be asked again for their idea to be heard and understood. A few children spoke with gesture and posture, but not many. Similarly, when presenting to the whole class, many of the children looked up into the air, rather than at the person to whom they were speaking. This was across the range abilities" (teacher one).

Outcomes

The majority of pupils fully engaged with the scheme and developed through its course (evidenced through all methods). As noted by teacher one:

*"The **presentations** at the end were something that a lot of them enjoyed, but also it was really good to see children who maybe don't speak quite as confidently in a group to sit and listen to others and then you see them put their hand up and they'll have a go. And that was great to see".*

The pupils themselves reported that whilst at first several of them were nervous, their **confidence grew** as the programme developed (along with the 'confidence cards, they particularly enjoyed the, 'staring out' session). Reservations about looking silly did not materialise - indeed several enjoyed the process of getting to know their peers at greater depth.

Outcomes were noted across **ability ranges**, in different ways, as noted by teacher one: *"I think there are some children who you would expect to speak and would want to speak, but the way that they structured their sentences, and they structured their presentation was amazing".*

Several examples of change were offered (and or/increased appreciation of pupil ability):

- *"(in week one) because she wanted to give more details, she very often repeated what she was saying. So, there's a lot of repetition in what she said, whereas today [presentation week] it was really clear and she moved on into*

the next comment that she wanted to make. So that was really lovely to hear” (teacher one).

- *“She’s really enthusiastic when she’s telling you ideas, and they sometimes get a bit jumbled up and then she’ll just stop mid-sentence and look at you for help...I think it was week two when they had to talk to their partner and then introduce their partner to the class...and it got to the third point, and she forgot what she was going to say...and she just slowly leans across her partner, she is still speaking, and the partner whispered the answer to her and she carried on and I thought, wow, that is seamless and I didn’t know that you could improvise like that. That is fantastic” (teacher one).*
- *“I think I definitely noticed some children in session one were really reluctant to say anything but all bar one stood up and did that presentation at the end, which was really good. And I’ve tried to sort of reflect. I’ve taken on board a couple of the things that were said about how lots of our children were fidgeting on the carpet” (teacher two).*
- *“I think it’s tricky because some of the children who are academically, in reading and writing are sort of my highest, aren’t necessarily always the most confident speakers. I’ve got a few on my, you know, top table so to speak that that are very shy and quiet. I have to drag answers out of them. But, you give them a reading comprehension or writing thing and they’re flying so that was good for them to be out of their comfort zone. A bit uncomfortable, right? I want to hear your voice... Whereas those boys that maybe sometimes less want to pick up a pencil and write are getting this chance to stand in front of their friends and do their thing” (teacher two).*
- *“[There was] some progress over the four sessions on active listening skills [amongst] most children, and most children listened to other presentations” (teacher two class observation).*

Both teachers reported how useful the process had been to **observe classroom interactions** and had subsequently referred back to the sessions within normal practice. They also both agreed that there was little chance of causing **harm** – due to the voluntary nature of participation, no one is forced to speak if they don’t want to.

Development Issues

Delivery consisted of four interlinked one-hour sessions. As ever, extending the programme for another couple of weeks was considered beneficial in terms of practising what had already been learnt (not introducing new material) – potentially involving other year groups re the presentation phase. However, the main learning point re course content and/or appropriateness relates **to the low ability levels** in general. Both teachers mentioned that a concentration on the absolute basics (look, listen, turn take and speak) then practicing these areas, would be more beneficial.

Evaluative Issues

Due to the speed with which the programme was developed and carried out, ethical approval was not released until week two of the programme. This was problematic

in relation to the classroom observation process, where parental consent was deemed necessary to observe pupil interactions. As expected, and as commented upon by one of the teachers, the parents giving consent were from the already able in oracy terms. **For the next iteration opt-out consent needs to be sought and teachers given the latitude to select and observe the pupils in most need of development.**

Teacher feedback on the process highlighted the need for **more basic headings** rather than the benchmarks (developed for more older children). Class and individual pupil observation was possible (max five – six). However, clarification needs to be made that in relation to reporting not simply, ‘what is’ in relation to the benchmarks but also how this compares to ‘normal’ behaviour and most importantly **how this improves** or otherwise week by week. The frequency of teacher observations are reported in table one (below), which is somewhat variable.

Table One - Classroom Observations		
School one	Class	Individuals
Week one	yes	0
Week two	no	6
Week three	no	6
Week four	no	0
School two	Class	Individuals
Week one	yes	no
Week two	no	3
Week three	no	3
Week four	yes	3

Issues in assigning change need to be further thought through. For example, in relation to confidence, this needs to be determined in relation to skills/behaviour development - and not as a simple reflection of becoming more comfortable with a new class teacher.

It can also be noted, related to the subject matter in question, it was not always easy for the young people to express their attitudes and opinions in a coherent form. This is, potentially, a reflection on them and/or an indication the researcher needs greater training and experience when interacting with this age group.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In relation to evidence of need both from the wider literature and context, the scheme is highly relevant to a young person's development. The scheme itself, following teacher feedback, would likely benefit from a degree of re-focusing on core essentials – which would be of benefit to the young people involved and facilitate an improved and streamlined evaluative process. It has to be highlighted however that it remains virtually impossible to confidently assign cause to any perceived (attainment) impact. What can be done is a more fully thought through Impact and Process Evaluation (IPE) (TASO, 2024) taking forward some of the processes developed here and potentially consideration of 'small n' evaluation methodologies (Crockford and Rain, 2023).

5. Report Feedback

Appropriateness – need to pitch at a lower level with more concentration and practice simply on the fundamental issues of: speaking/voice; eye contact; turn taking; listening; confidence (in giving a presentation/speaking to a group)

Evaluation – develop a more fully considered IPE. For classroom observation have five individual and class reporting for each session. Pursue ethics change for opt-out consent and teacher choice for individual reporting - and adopt a five-point scale covering the above five issues (rather than the voice 21 benchmarks) to identify change week by week. Further research to establish why oracy levels are low and declining would be beneficial.

Expansion – deliver the scheme within four schools (including the two within this iteration). There is also possible cross-over with the Getting Schol Ready (GSR) initiative, which could be explored.

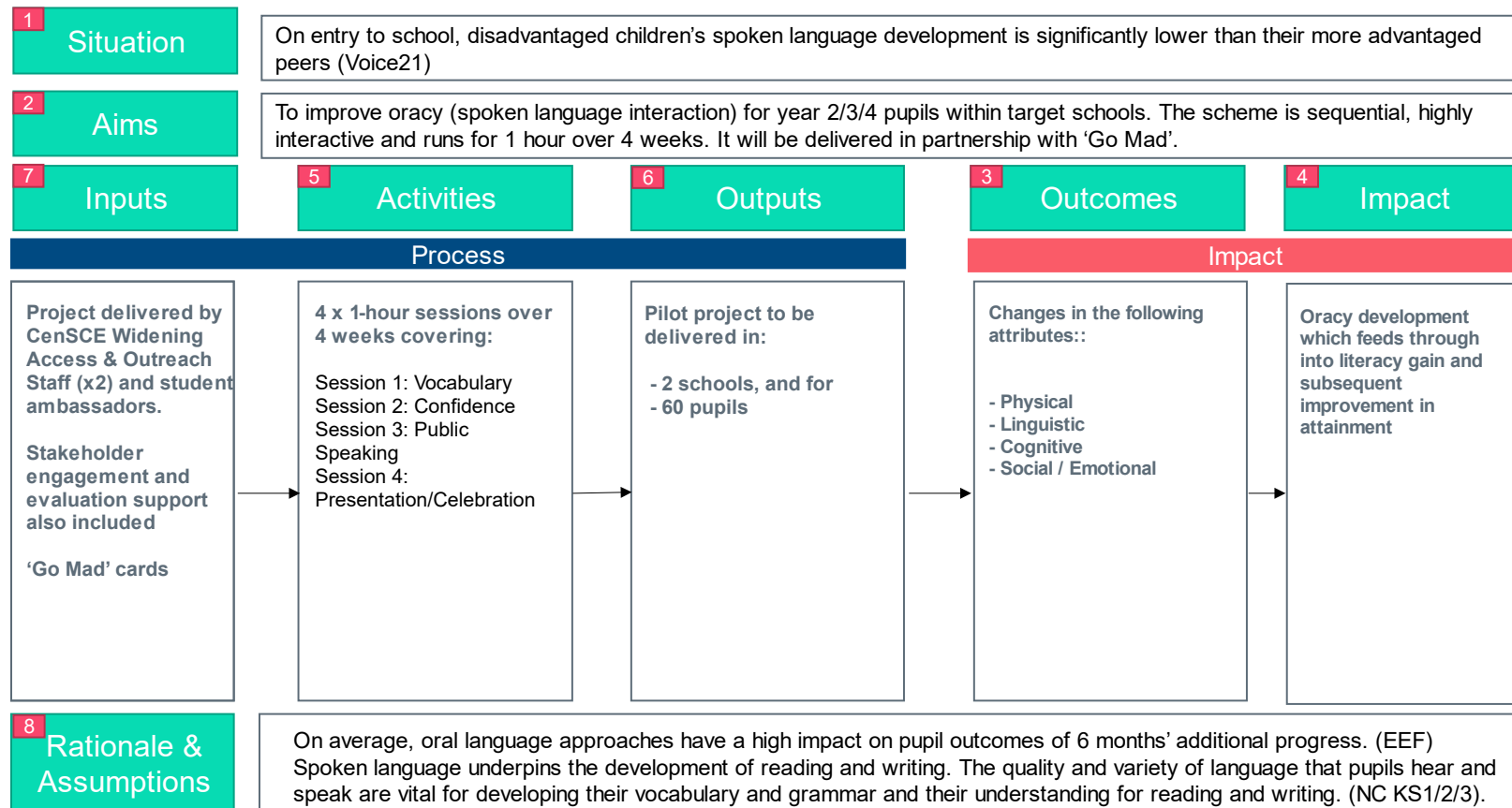
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Appendix One – Access & Participation Plan (APP) 2025-26 to 2028-29: Oracy related content

SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES OUTREACH PROGRAMME – ACTIVITIES, INPUTS AND OUTCOMES (p5)			
Activity	Inputs	Outcomes	Cross intervention strategy?
Oracy (Objective 1, Risk 1) Oracy is a new initiative set to be designed and developed with the charity Go Mad Thinking and a Multi-Academy Trust. This new intervention emphasises the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom. Stakeholder engagement has indicated strong interest in this subject from schools. This will be a sustained intervention over several weeks and is likely to focus on younger primary aged pupils. Anticipated number of schools for the 2024/25 pilot: 2 schools; 60 target pupils. Expansion would depend upon evaluation findings.	Staff time, travel and delivery costs	Outcomes are likely to be attainment / skills based; but details are still to be confirmed as this is a new initiative.	N/A
ANNEX B: EVIDENCE BASE, METHODS OF EVALUATION AND PUBLICATION PLAN INTERVENTION STRATEGY 1: SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES OUTREACH PROGRAMME (p1)			
Activity	Evidence base	Method(s) of evaluation	Summary of publication plan
Oracy	Oracy On average, oral language approaches have a high impact on pupil outcomes of 6 months' additional progress. Impact in early years (+7 months) and primary schools (+6 months) tends to be higher than that secondary schools (+5 months.) Source: EEF toolkit.	A Theory of Change will be developed during the design of the programme, from which specific evaluation methods will emerge. We anticipate this will include both Type 1 (narrative) and Type 2 (empirical enquiry) evaluation standards, with the latter specifically focusing on the impact of participant attainment, compared with suitable comparator group.	We are developing a dedicated website for publishing all of our evaluation reports. We also envisage sharing these with an external 'clearing house' to build on existing sector evidence toolkits.

Appendix Two: Core Theory of Change



Appendix Three – Go MAD ‘Confidence Cards’

<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>If I could talk to animals, I would say to them...</p> 	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me a short story about a snowman on the beach.</p> 	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>If I could change one thing about the world, it would be...</p> 	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me a short story about an elephant in a swimming pool.</p> 	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>
1		2		3		4	
<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me about someone who is important to you.</p> 	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me a story about animals escaping from a zoo.</p> 	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me how to play your favourite game.</p> 	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>If you had £100, what would you spend it on?</p> 	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>
5		6		7		8	
<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>What is the best way to build a den? What would it look like?</p> 	<p>PRESENTATION</p> <p>Tell me about a film that you like. What happens in the film?</p> 	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>	<p>NTU</p> <p>Go MAD Thinking</p> <p>Confidence Cards</p>				
9		10					