

Life Lessons 2024

The development of oracy and other life skills in schools

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Overview

- Life skills such as confidence, motivation, resilience and communication are important for young people's success, both in schools and in the workplace.
- Almost all (96%) of teachers think life skills are as or more important than formal academic qualifications in determining how well young people do in adulthood.
- 1 in 5 teachers in state schools do not think their school provides good opportunities for pupils to develop these non-academic skills, compared to just 1 in 10 teachers in private schools.
- A focus on speaking or 'oracy' to improve students' communication skills has become popular in recent years. The new government has also committed to ensuring oracy and life skills are embedded in schools.
- The majority of state schools already report some type of oracy related activity. The most common being to embed oracy in some lessons (e.g. English or History), reported by 37% of senior leaders. 31% said oracy was embedded in most lessons, and 30% that teachers had training in oral language interventions. Debate clubs were popular in private schools (53%), but much less common in state schools (18%).
- The biggest barriers to improving oracy reported in state schools were not enough teaching time (48%), not enough staff time (46%), and not enough teacher training or development (46%).
- If government were to commit additional funding to oracy, 68% of state school senior leaders would like to see additional teacher training, 50% implementation of a whole school oracy strategy, and 30% one to one or small group oracy interventions outside of lessons.

Recommendations

- **The new government's ongoing curriculum review should include a specific focus on improving life skills, such as communication, resilience, motivation and confidence, for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.** This group of students often have least access to the extra-curricular activities likely to help them develop these essential skills, so it is vital they are provided with these opportunities within the school curriculum.
- **During the curriculum review, government should also look to consult widely with schools on the pros and cons of existing approaches.** For example, many schools are already working to improve the oracy and speaking skills of their students, and will have valuable learnings on what does or does not work on the ground. The review should make the most of these experiences, across both the state and private sectors.
- **The new curriculum should ensure state school students at all ability levels have the opportunity to develop their oracy skills.** Schools should be encouraged to teach all students the broad foundations of oracy and speaking skills, and to also give highly able students access to interventions to stretch their skillset further, for example through activities like debating. However, schools should ensure any such stretch activities are accessible to students from all socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Government should continue to fund the evaluation of activities aiming to improve life skills, including oracy.** While initial evidence on many of these interventions are positive, more research is needed before oracy and speaking skills can be successfully developed in state schools nationwide.



Introduction

While academic and subject-specific skills and knowledge are vital for young people, it is increasingly clear that broader 'life skills' - things like communication, resilience, motivation and confidence - are also needed for success, both in education and in the workplace.¹ Of those 'life skills', the development of communication skills particularly, and speaking skills specifically (sometimes termed 'oracy'), have grown in popularity in recent years. Speaking was also highlighted in Labour's recent manifesto, and the new government's curriculum review aims to deliver – *"A curriculum that ensures children and young people leave compulsory education ready for life and ready for work, building the knowledge, skills and attributes young people need to thrive. This includes embedding digital, oracy and life skills in their learning."*²

"Broader 'life skills' - things like communication, resilience, motivation and confidence - are needed for success, both in education and in the workplace."

But speaking and oracy are broad terms, often interpreted differently between different teachers and in different schools. There is also not much known about how speaking is developed in schools now, and the approaches that are commonly taken. This piece looks at the views of teachers, on life skills more widely, and on speaking in more detail. It looks at what is being done in schools today, and what teachers would like to see to help them to develop the skills of students further in future. It also includes breakdowns by the deprivation level of schools intakes, and between schools in the state and private sectors.

Background

Life skills

In 2017, Sutton Trust research found 88% of young people, 94% of employers and 97% of teachers felt that life skills are as or more important than academic qualifications for young people's future success. However, only just over half

¹ Deming, J. (2017) The growing importance of social skills in the labor market. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 132(4). <https://academic.oup.com/qje/article/132/4/1593/3861633>

² Department for Education. (2024, July 19). *Curriculum and Assessment Review: Review Aims, Terms of Reference and Working Principles*. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6699698f49b9c0597fdb0010/Curriculum_and_assessment_review_-_aims_terms_of_reference_and_working_principles.pdf

(52%) of employers believed university graduates had the right skills required for the workplace.³

More recent research has echoed these findings. A nationally representative survey of 1,006 teachers in the UK carried out by YouGov for Skills Builder in 2023 found that 92% of teachers view explicitly teaching life skills as important in preparing learners for both life and work, with just 24% agreeing that life skills are being taught sufficiently in education. Barriers identified included not enough time in the curriculum or for lesson preparation, a lack of teaching resources and lack of a shared language or framework for these skills.⁴

Life skills and social mobility

Analysis by Skills Builder has linked self-assessment of life skills (including listening, speaking, problem solving, creativity, staying positive, motivation, leadership and teamwork) to a wage premium, and found that this relationship is stronger for those whose parents did not attend university,⁵ showing the potential that supporting life skills development has for improving social mobility.

However, Sutton Trust research has found that both access to and uptake of opportunities to develop life skills can be limited. For example, there are notable differences in access to extra-curricular activities; a key opportunity to develop life skills.⁶ Pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds were less likely to take up extra-curricular activities than their better off peers (46% compared to 66%), with just half of those receiving free school meals (FSM) saying they took part in these activities.⁷

³ Cullinane, C., & Montacute, R. (2017). *Life Lessons*. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/life-lessons-workplace-skills/>

⁴ Craig, R., & Stewart, G. (2024). *Essential Skills Tracker 2024*. Skills Builder Partnership. <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/essential-skills-tracker>

⁵ Seymour, W., & Craig, R. (2023). *Essential Skills Tracker 2023*. Skills Builder Partnership. <https://www.skillsbuilder.org/file/essential-skills-tracker-2023>

⁶ Cutmore, M., Llewellyn, J., & Atkinson, I. (2020). *Extracurricular activities to develop life skills*. Department for Education. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5fd0c3f28fa8f54d5c52dde4/ELS_what_works_paper.pdf and Social Mobility Commission. (2019, July 19). *An unequal playing field: extra-curricular activities, soft skills and social mobility*. Social Mobility Commission. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility/an-unequal-playing-field-extra-curricular-activities-soft-skills-and-social-mobility>

⁷ Cullinane, C., & Montacute, R. (2017). *Life Lessons*. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/life-lessons-workplace-skills/>

Similarly, recent research from the Education Policy Institute also found considerable gaps in access to extra-curricular activities, with students from independent schools much more likely to go to sports clubs or clubs for hobbies, arts or music; with attendance linked to high rates of progression to both higher education and employment.⁸

What is Oracy?

Communication skills are commonly included within definitions of 'life skills', with a focus on the development of oracy or speaking skills particularly having grown in popularity within the education system in recent years. However, there is not currently a clear shared understanding of what exactly is meant by 'oracy', with schools often interpreting the term in different ways. It is not always about communication skills alone, and many researchers and policymakers also look at oracy as a means by which other key academic skills, such as reading, can be developed, as well as other harder to measure outcomes, like self-esteem or confidence.

Many different potential approaches and interventions fall under the 'oracy' or speaking umbrella. A few recent descriptions of oracy or speaking from notable individuals or organisations are included in Box 1 below:

Box 1: Recent descriptions of oracy and speaking

Education Endowment Foundation – *“Oral language interventions (also known as oracy or speaking and listening interventions) refer to approaches that emphasise the importance of spoken language and verbal interaction in the classroom. They include dialogic activities.”*

English Speaking Union – *“Oracy is to speaking what numeracy is to mathematics or literacy to reading and writing. In short, it’s nothing more than being able to express yourself well across a range of contexts. It’s about having the vocabulary to say what you want to say and the ability to structure your thoughts so that they make sense to others.”*

Voice 21 – *“Oracy is the ability to articulate ideas, develop understanding and engage with others through spoken language. In school, oracy is a powerful tool for learning; by teaching students to*

⁸ Robinson, D. (2024). Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes. Education Policy Institute. <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/access-to-extra-curricular-provision-and-the-association-with-outcomes/>

become more effective speakers and listeners we empower them to better understand themselves, each other and the world around them."

Skills Builder – *"Speaking: The oral transmission of information or ideas. This skill is all about how to communicate effectively with others, being mindful of whether they are talking to customers, colleagues or other stakeholders and in different settings."*

Sir Keir Starmer – *"Let's raise the importance of speaking skills – 'oracy' as academics call it. Because these skills are absolutely critical for our children's future success. First and foremost – for academic attainment. Talking through your ideas before putting them on the page, improves writing. Structured classroom discussion – deepens thinking. But it's not just a skill for learning, it's also a skill for life. Not just for the workplace, also for working out who you are – for overcoming shyness or disaffection, anxiety or doubt – or even just for opening up more to our friends and family. Confident speaking gives you a steely core, and an inner belief to make your case in any environment. Whether that's persuading your mum to buy some new trainers, a sceptical public to hear your argument, or even your daughter to let-go of her iPhone."*

Groups promoting oracy

The last few years have seen a growth in interest in oracy, and efforts to promote the skills in schools. This has included work from the national oracy charity [Voice 21](#). Launched in 2015, the charity works to promote oracy, having so far provided support to over 1700 schools. The charity [describes its support](#) as follows - *"Our sustained approach weaves oracy into your school's DNA, ensuring current and future students have access to a high-quality oracy education. We provide comprehensive training and support to your teachers and school leaders to embed oracy deliberately and explicitly in your teaching practices and across your curriculum."*

Other groups, including [Oracy@Cambridge](#), aim to raise awareness of the importance of oracy, bringing together relevant research for policymakers. There has also been the formation of an All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Oracy, first formed in 2018, aiming to *"co-ordinate research, promote best practice and encourage the overarching principles of oracy in education and society at large."* In the latest register of APPGs (August 2024), the APPG on oracy was not registered in parliament. However, due to changes in rules around APPGs (and a relatively short window post-election), many APPGs have which were previously active have not yet been re-registered.

Potential approaches to develop oracy and related skills in schools

The section below summarises some of the methods used by schools aiming to improve oracy skills, and available existing evidence on the efficacy of those interventions.

The EEF toolkit on oral language interventions

Overall, the Sutton Trust/EEF teaching and learning toolkit entry for [oral language interventions](#) assesses them as high impact for very low cost, with a strong evidence base. It also highlights the importance of these interventions for young people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, given evidence that they are more likely to be behind in these skills than their peers. It should be noted these studies largely focus on a relatively broad definition of oracy, which includes both speaking and listening skills, and are largely but not entirely whole class interventions. They do not however cover broader related skills often linked to oracy, for example public speaking. It should also be noted that most of the evidence covered in the toolkit focuses on the impact of these interventions on reading, rather than on speaking and oracy itself.⁹ Some of the specific interventions included in the oral language toolkit strand are covered in more detail in some of the sections below.

Dialogue activities in lessons

Dialogic teaching is a teaching method that involves ongoing discussion between teachers and pupils (as opposed to a style of teaching whereby teachers primarily present to their class). This includes having students explain concepts and their own ideas with feedback from teachers, with teachers also modelling specific ways of using language.

An evaluation of a programme involving dialogic teaching by the EEF - in which Year 5 teachers and a teacher mentor from each participating school received resources and training to implement this method - found consistent and positive effects in English, sciences and maths for all children in the year group. This positive effect was equivalent to roughly 2 months of additional learning, with a similar level of positive impact found for children eligible for free school meals, and the intervention had a relatively low cost (£52 per year) per student.

⁹ Education Endowment Foundation. (2021). Oral language interventions. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions>

Specific impacts on oracy or speaking skills were not measured as part of the study.¹⁰

One to one or small group oral language interventions outside of lessons

As well as interventions and the implementation of styles of teaching built into lessons, oral language interventions have also been tested in one-to-one sessions or small groups outside of lessons.

The Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) programme is an example of such an intervention, designed to improve the language skills of young children (age 4 to 5). Over 20 weeks (with 5 sessions a week), children in the intervention receive scripted individual or small group language teaching sessions, usually delivered by teaching assistants (TAs). Children were chosen to take part who had the lowest scores in their class on an app based assessment of oral language skills. The sessions focus on improving a child's vocabulary, active listening and narrative skills. The EEF has funded several trials of NELI, all of which have found children receiving the intervention make additional progress in their oral language skills, with benefits found to be sustained into the long term.¹¹ In 2020, the Department for Education made funding available to all schools with reception classes to offer NELI as part of catch-up efforts.¹²

Working with external organisations

As outlined above, Voice 21 is a well-known national charity looking to improve oracy education in schools. The charity aims to develop a whole school approach to oracy, through one to one support, professional development opportunities, and looking at how oracy can be implemented strategically across a school.

¹⁰ Education Endowment Foundation. (2017). Dialogic Teaching – trial. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/dialogic-teaching>

¹¹ Education Endowment Foundation. (2024). Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) – Reception. Education Endowment Foundation. [https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/nuffield-early-language-intervention-neli#:~:text=The%20Nuffield%20Early%20Language%20Intervention,usually%20teaching%20assistants%20\(TAs\).](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/nuffield-early-language-intervention-neli#:~:text=The%20Nuffield%20Early%20Language%20Intervention,usually%20teaching%20assistants%20(TAs).)

¹² Department for Education., & Ford, V. (2021, May 13). Every school with Reception class offered early language training. Department for Education. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/every-school-with-reception-class-offered-early-language-training>

The EEF has run pilots looking at Voice 21's approach, which have shown promise.¹³ However, a full study has not yet been carried out on Voice 21's programme. Further research is needed to determine the full impact of the charity's model.

Appointing an Oracy Lead

Some schools have started to appoint Oracy Leads, a member of staff who has specific responsibility for oracy across the school. This is part of Voice 21's approach, but is also implemented by some schools outside of this programme.

No specific evaluations on the effectiveness of Oracy Leads have been carried out. Their success is likely to depend considerably on the approach taken to such a role, including whether a teacher with this responsibility is given the time and space to fulfil it alongside other commitments, issues the Sutton Trust has previously explored in relation to Career Leads in schools.¹⁴ The EEF's guidance to implementation in schools advises that 'champions' for a change area can help to advocate for an approach by generating enthusiasm, modelling good implementation and supporting others to use it effectively. However, they caution that where specific leads or champions are used within a school, they should function within a wider supportive team for the best chance of success.¹⁵ And EEF guidance on professional development in schools advises any training should be well-designed, selected and implemented to ensure that the investment in time taken is justified, given existing time pressures for teachers.¹⁶

Debating clubs

Debating clubs are also often associated with the development of oracy, speaking and communication skills. No full evaluations of debating clubs have been carried out by the EEF, but there is some existing evidence that they can be beneficial for those that take part. In the US, an evaluation looking at male African American students who took part in Chicago's urban debate league found participating students were 70% more likely to graduate, and three times

¹³ Education Endowment Foundation. (2014). *Voice 21: Oracy Curriculum, Culture and Assessment Toolkit – first pilot*. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/projects-and-evaluation/projects/voice-21-pilot>

¹⁴ Holt-White, E., Montacute, R., & Tibbs, L. (2022). *Paving the Way*. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/paving-the-way/>

¹⁵ Sharples, J., Eaton, J., & Boughelaf, J. (2024). *A School's Guide to Implementation*. Education Endowment Foundation. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eef-guidance-reports/implementation/a_schools_guide_to_implementation.pdf?v=1725887863

¹⁶ Collin, J., & Smith, E. (2021). *Effective Professional Development*. Education Endowment Foundation. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/effective-professional-development>

less likely to drop out of school than matched students with similar prior attainment.¹⁷ Another US study looked at the impact of taking part in debating on students in Boston schools serving economically disadvantaged communities, and found participating had a positive impact on student's English test results, high school attendance and post-secondary enrolment rates.¹⁸ However, less is known about their impact on speaking and oracy skills specifically.

Opportunities to take part in this type of activity can vary considerably by school. Recent Sutton Trust research on the new intake of MPs, *Parliamentary Privilege 2024*, highlighted some of these disparities, with top private schools having their own purpose-built debating chambers, and hiring in specialist debate coaches.ⁱ

What do we know about current practice?

A recent report by the Centre for Education and Youth, commissioned by Voice 21, looked at teacher views and current practice on oracy in schools. The research finds that 68% of teachers feel it is 'very important' to develop student's oracy skills (compared to 75% saying the same for reading, and 63% for numeracy). The work also looked at how teachers rated the importance of various oracy related interventions, with the most popular response (at 71% rating as important) being feeding back on how pupils talk. Other popular responses included feeding back on what pupils say (66%), setting expectations for oracy (64%) and modelling good oracy (63%). In terms of barriers, around a quarter of teachers were concerned about shy and under-confident students struggling with talk-based activities. And the research found 57% of teachers reported not having received any training in oracy in the last three years.¹⁹

¹⁷ Mezuk, B. (2009) Urban Debate and High School Educational Outcomes for African American Males: The Case of the Chicago Debate League. *The Journal of Negro Education* 78, 290–304.

¹⁸ Schueler, B. E., & Larned, K. E. (2023). *Interscholastic Policy Debate Promotes Critical Thinking and College-Going: Evidence From Boston Public Schools*. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737231200234>.

¹⁹ Millard, W. (2016, November 8). *Oracy: The State of Speaking in our Schools*. Centre for Education & Youth. <https://cfey.org/reports/2016/11/oracy-state-speaking-schools/>

Methods

Teachers were surveyed on the 2nd of August 2024 via the online platform Teacher Tapp. Up to 7,978 teachers responded to a set of 5 questions, including up to 1,951 who are members of their school's Senior Leadership Team (SLT). Survey responses are weighted to represent the national teaching population, according to school funding, phase and region, along with teacher age, gender and level of seniority.

Before questions on life skills, teachers were shown the following definition - *"Life skills encompass qualities such as confidence, self-control, good communication, motivation and coping with stress."*

Before teachers were shown questions on oracy, they are shown the following definition - *"Oracy refers to the skill of expressing ideas, developing understanding, and interacting with others through spoken communication."*

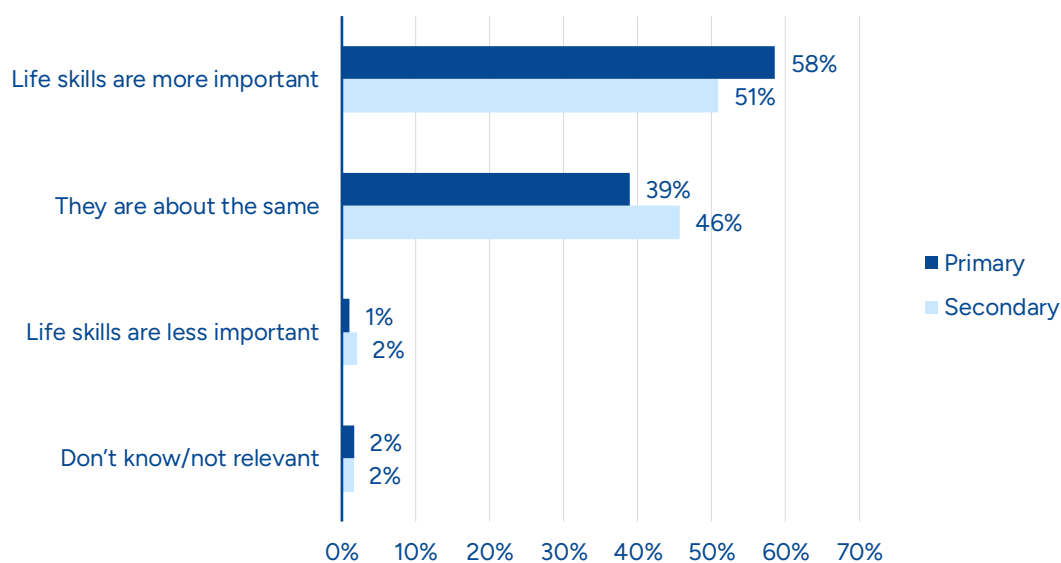
Findings

Importance of life skills

Nearly all (96%) of the teachers surveyed here said that life skills were as or more important than formal academic qualifications in determining how well young people do in adulthood. Just over half (51%) said that life skills were more important, with 46% saying they are both as important as each other (Figure 1). This remains almost the same as when the Trust asked the same question back in 2017 (97% said these skills were as/more important than academic qualifications, with 53% saying they are more important).

Secondary school teachers were less likely to agree that life skills were more important (44%) compared to primary teachers (58%). 51% of both state and private school teachers agreed.

Figure 1: Views on the importance of life skills compared to formal qualifications in determining success in adulthood, by school phase



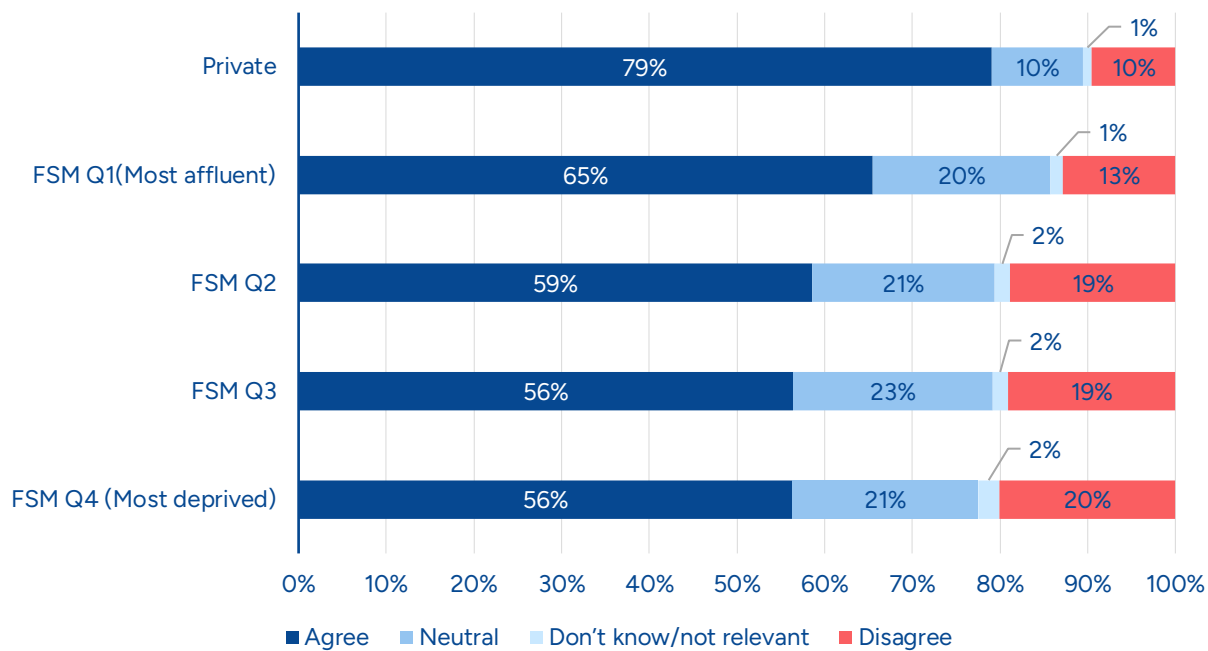
Source: Teacher Tapp survey of Teachers, 2nd August 2024

School provision

When asked their views on the statement “my school provides good opportunities for pupils to develop non-academic life skills”, 61% of teachers agreed (with 15% strongly agreeing). Just under 1 in 5 (17%) of teachers disagreed with the statement, with 3% strongly disagreeing. 1 in 5 teachers in

schools with the most deprived intakes (based on proportions of free school meal (FSM) eligible students) disagreed (20%), compared to 13% of those with the most affluent intakes (Figure 2). State school teachers were nearly twice as likely to disagree compared to private school teachers, at 18% and 10% respectively.

Figure 2: Views on the statement “my school provides good opportunities for pupils to develop non-academic life skills”, by level of deprivation in school



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of Teachers, 2nd August 2024

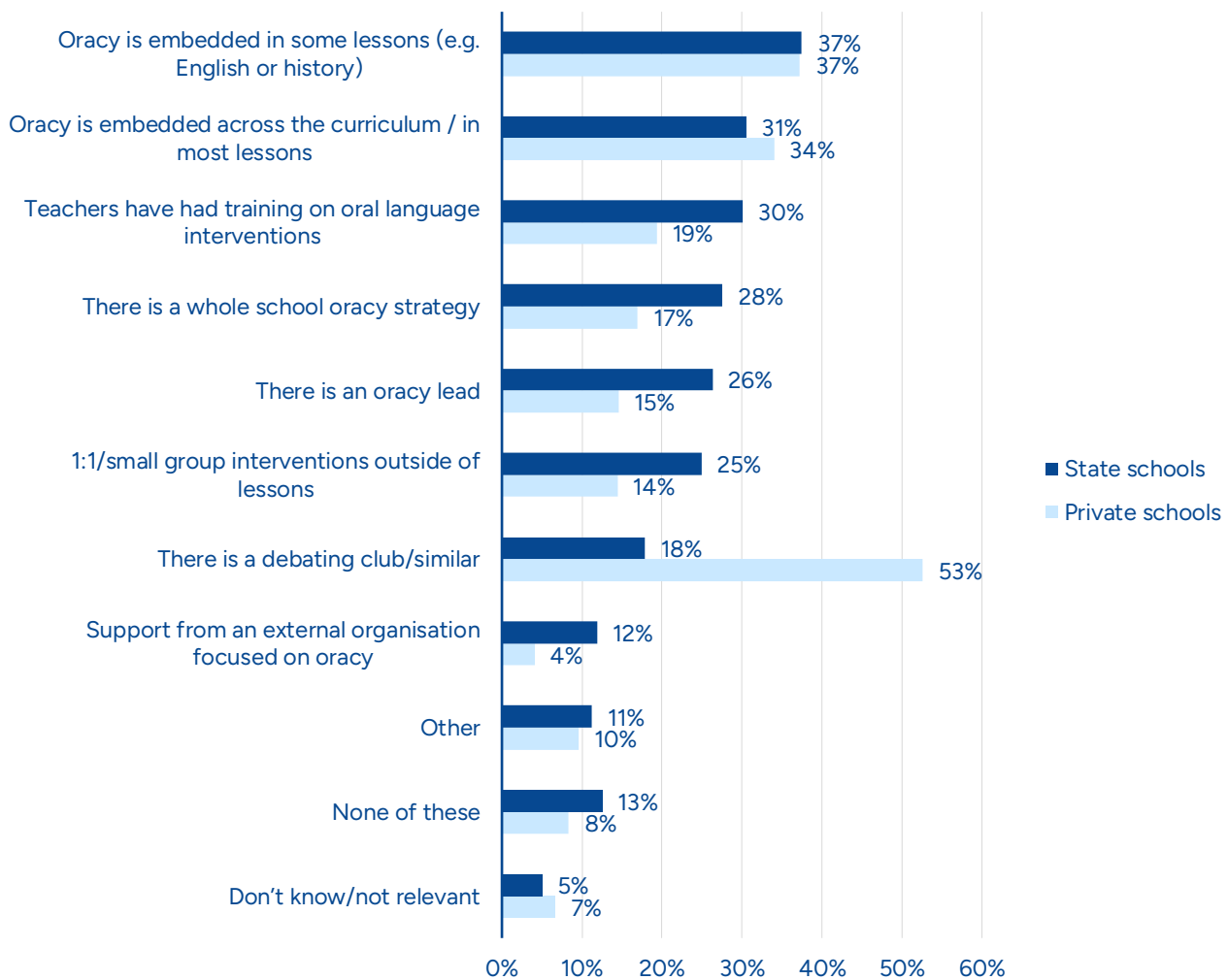
Classroom teachers were nearly three times more likely to disagree than Senior Leaders (including headteachers), at 23% and 8% respectively. Looking at the responses from Senior Leaders only, 77% agreed that their school provides good opportunities for life skills development, with 1 in 4 strongly agreeing.

The following results look at responses from Senior Leaders (SLT) only, as this group is more likely to have a full view of activities taking place across the school.

Looking at existing provision in schools to develop oracy skills of pupils, 37% of this group said oracy is embedded in some lessons (for example, English or History) and just under a third (31%) said most or all lessons have opportunities to develop oracy skills embedded. Other opportunities listed in the question are shown in Figure 3. While 11% said their school offered activities which were not listed in the question, 12% said none of the listed activities were offered.

Interestingly and perhaps slightly unexpectedly, state school senior leaders were more likely to report that their school has teachers trained in oral language interventions, such as dialogic activities, teacher-pupil talk, pupil-pupil talk (30% vs 19%); one to one or small group oral language interventions outside of lessons (25% vs 14%); an oracy lead (26% vs 15%); a whole school oracy strategy (28% vs 17%); and support from an external organisation focussed on oracy (12% vs 4%) compared to those in private schools (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Senior Leader on their school’s approach to oracy, by school type



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of Teachers (senior leader responses only), 2nd August 2024

However, private school senior leaders were much more likely to report debating clubs were taking place at their school – with around half (53%) of SLT working in private schools reporting their school has a debating club or similar.

This is almost three times higher than the 18% of state school senior leaders who said the same.

SLT working in schools with the most deprived intakes were more likely to say their teachers have had training in oral language interventions (35% vs 23%), a whole school oracy strategy (35% vs 21%) and an Oracy Lead (34% vs 20%) when compared to those working in schools with the most affluent intakes.

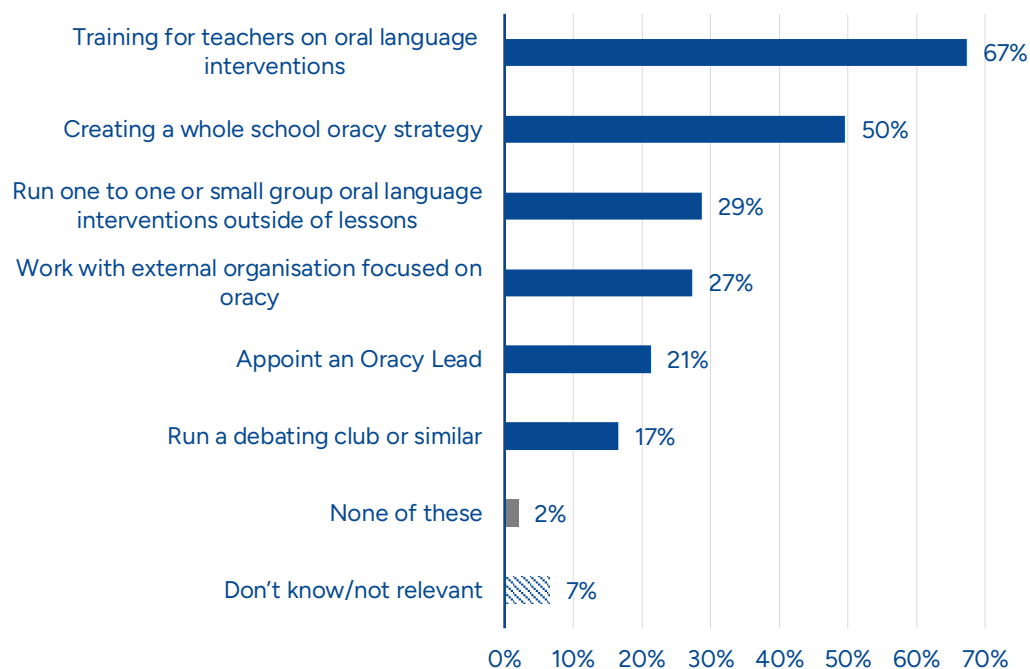
Primary SLT were more likely to say their school offered provisions across most of all subjects (35% vs 24% of SLT in secondary schools), secondary SLT were more likely to say activities were focused in only some subjects like English (44% vs 33% of primary SLT).

Spending priorities

Senior leaders were asked where they thought any extra funding from government to improve oracy skills for pupils should be spent, with each respondent able to select up to three options.

The most popular, at 67%, was training for teachers on oral language interventions such as dialogic activities. (Figure 4). 1 in 2 (50%) members of SLT said they would use it to develop a whole school oracy strategy and 29% selected one to one or small group oral language interventions outside of lessons. No statistically significant differences were found between school types, and interestingly although state schools were less likely to have debate clubs already, state and private school Senior Leaders were equally unlikely to prioritise this for spending.

Figure 4: Senior Leader spending priorities for oracy skills

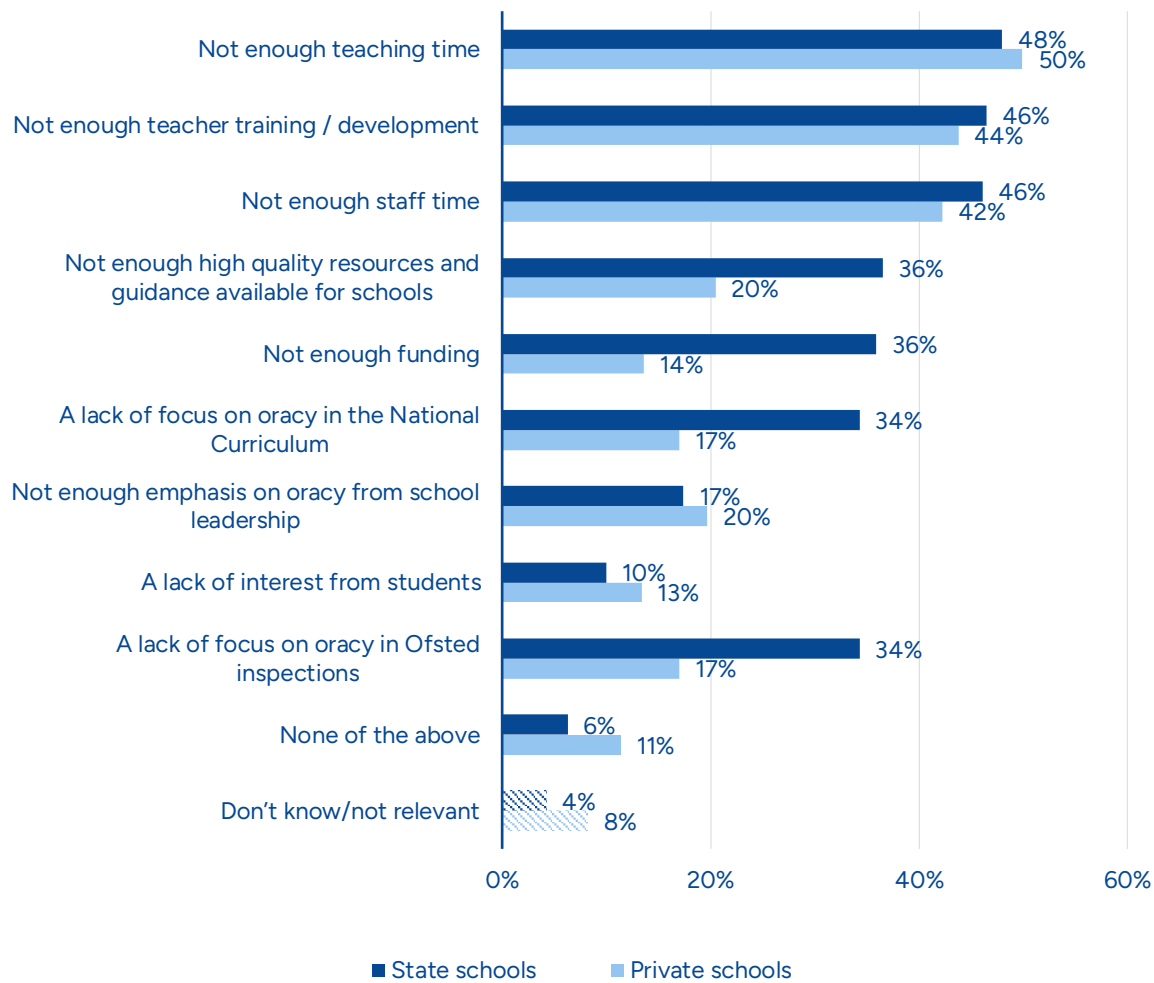


Source: Teacher Tapp survey of Teachers (senior leader responses only), 2nd August 2024.

When asked about the biggest barriers to improving oracy in their school, 48% of senior leaders said there is not enough teaching time and 46% said not enough staff time. 46% said there is not enough teacher training or development in this field.

35% said there are not enough high-quality resources or guidance available for schools; this figure was 36% for those working in state schools, compared to just 1 in 5 (20%) at private schools (Figure 5). 34% overall said there is not enough funding, with those in state schools (36%) more likely to say this than those in private schools (14%). 38% of primary SLT said this compared to 27% of secondary SLT.

Figure 5: Barriers to improving oracy reported by Senior Leaders, by school type



Source: Teacher Tapp survey of Teachers (senior leader responses only), 2nd August 2024. Differences between school types are larger than margin of error for ‘Not enough high quality resources and guidance available for schools’, ‘Not enough funding’ and ‘A lack of focus on oracy in the National Curriculum’

Across both state and private schools, and schools with both disadvantaged and affluent intakes, it is clear that there is room for improvement when it comes to oracy provision.

Case study schools

To help to further contextualise current practices on oracy in different types of schools, the next section includes case studies outlining the approaches to these skills currently being taken. All the schools included here are either well known for their oracy provision, and/or have a considerable programme of oracy provision across the school.

The case studies included here have not been chosen as definitive examples of “best practice”. As outlined elsewhere, while the evidence on oracy interventions for literacy outcomes is strong, the evidence on this type of intervention to build speaking skills specifically is limited, and there is some uncertainty on the best approaches. Similarly, the case studies here have a mix of state and private schools operating in very different contexts, and what works for one school may not always work for another.

Rather, these case studies are included to provide greater insight into approaches currently being taken in schools, including approaches schools have found, within their own context, successful over time.

Case study 1: Alice Byrne, Senior Assistant Head Teacher, Stoke Park School

Stoke Park is a state comprehensive school for 11-19 year-olds in the city centre of Coventry, with an above average proportion of students eligible for free school meals.

“Everything we do at the school is about putting students first, it’s about learning with no barriers. For us, oracy is embedded throughout the curriculum, from when students first start in year 7, right the way up into sixth form. In lessons, we specifically set aside time for students to talk. This can include direct responses, or students making an additional point and sharing their own views. This is achieved through our ‘Add, Build, Challenge’ model. Our teachers model good communication, and allow students opportunities to practise and correct their communication.”

“To successfully embed this across the school, we have a comprehensive induction programme for all new staff on our approach, including training from expert teachers, and viewing lessons in both their subjects and others so they can see the approach in practice. The Teaching and Learning, Middle and Senior Leadership teams are regularly in and out of lessons to observe best practice and support, so we know the practice is being embedded right across the school.”

"There's no one person responsible for oracy, it's written into our curriculum, and is a clear expectation for teachers here, it's everyone's responsibility and takes many forms to compliment individual subjects."

"In humanities and English we have "talking points", where we set up a contentious or thought-provoking statement, and set aside time in the lesson for students to discuss it; it is always linked to the students' learning journeys and curriculum. In our PSHE programme, which is oracy based, there are no books and very little writing, instead it's all about talking points and communication. Every week in Post 16, each form takes it in turns to give a current affairs presentation, and to set talking points for the other forms to then speak about and present on. This was originally only done with older students in the school, but now we're expanding it to young age groups because it's been so successful. And throughout all lessons, we use techniques like Think, Pair, Share to get students talking, and make sure we call on students who may not speak up otherwise."

"We also make sure all students are put into situations outside of their comfort zone, with every student speaking to at least one external adult per year. For example, this can include external speakers being invited to the school, or providers for universities, apprenticeships or job opportunities who come into the school to speak to students. In year 10, all students are formally interviewed by an adult they don't know well, for example a school governor or a local industry expert. And at post-16, those applying to Russell Group universities (including Oxford and Cambridge) are interviewed by teachers in the school who haven't taught them. As they are often not a subject specialist in the course they're applying to, it means students have to fully explain their thinking, which is an important skill for university applications."

"In terms of extra-curriculars, we have small clubs now set up for different year groups, and we're looking to set up a larger club across the school."



Case study 2: Jonathan Noakes, Director of Teaching and Learning at Eton College

“In my experience, while few private schools will have an explicit oracy programme, they are encouraging the use of oracy all the time. We teach through discussion. It is not ok for a boy at Eton not to speak in lessons – and that makes a big difference. We also specifically train teachers to run lessons as discussions. In a teacher’s first year at the school, we run coaching days for them throughout the year, and one of those looks at how best to generate discussions in class.”

“We do have some points throughout a pupil’s time at the school with a specific focus on these skills. For example, in English in Year 9 all students study the rudiments of rhetoric, give a speech and take part in a debate. We want to make sure right at the beginning that they have these skills. But we also teach how to do a presentation more than once, and in more than one subject. Overall, these skills are practised again and again throughout the school.”

“We also have extra-curricular activities, for example debating or the Model UN. But those aren’t compulsory, they’re for students who are particularly interested in developing these skills further. Debating can be a good way for anyone struggling with these skills to make progress. It’s very formulaic, and it’s clear what a student’s role is within the structure of a debate. It can give less confident students a way forward. Work experience is really important too, so students are used to speaking to adults in a workplace environment.”

“Of course, there are things that Eton does which could not necessarily be replicated in every state school. The majority of boys come to us already very confident about speaking up in front of peers and adults. Eton also has small class sizes. Classes are smallest in sixth form (generally 8 to 12 pupils). In Year 9, when our classes are larger (up to 22 pupils), it takes skill to get everyone involved. I’ve seen in state schools, where classes are 30 students or more, that it can be much more challenging to get everyone involved in discussions. I’ve seen in some very well-run state schools that those discussions can tend to be quite tightly controlled.”

“State schools I’ve worked with, for example the London Academy of Excellence (which Eton is a partner school of) serve academically a very similar ability group of students to Eton, and they have chosen to have a specific oracy programme. I think for most state schools, because their

context is different, it makes sense to consider this approach, alongside specific training for teachers to encourage discussions in lessons. Debate clubs in state schools could I think also be an excellent way to help students to learn these skills.”

Case study 3: Dani Burns, Assistant Head and school Oracy Lead at Halifax Academy.

Halifax Academy is an all through 4-16 comprehensive school in Halifax, West Yorkshire. The school has an above average proportion of students eligible for free school meals, and many of their students speak English as an additional language. The school works with the charity Voice 21, and is a Voice 21 Centre of Excellence.

“Talk is important at our school, where pupils are encouraged to find their own ‘voice to change the world’. We teach pupils how to speak with clarity and conviction, how to listen carefully and how to take part in powerful and productive conversations. Talk runs throughout our school curriculum, whether that be storytelling, role play, performing or listening carefully to each other. We want our pupils to learn about what matters, and to understand how to effect real change in their school, their community and the world.”

“Oracy features on all meeting agendas, including for the senior team, and it sits at the heart of our vision and values. We want to make sure all students find their voice, are confident, skilful communicators and feel proud of who they are. We started this work pre-pandemic, but now more than ever we feel it’s our duty to give our students and the community we serve a voice – as they were disproportionately impacted by that crisis.”

“We have worked with Voice 21 from the start. The charity has been fantastic. They flooded us with ideas and support, and the quality of resources they share is excellent. I would absolutely recommend them to any school just starting out, looking to put oracy at the centre of their curriculum.”

“Now, oracy runs through everything we do at the school. To support teachers, we have a ‘Voice Toolkit’, a slide deck filled with structures and scaffolds to support classroom talk. This is a starting point for our



teachers, but it needs to then be adapted to the lesson and context. For example, throughout the school we give students 'sentence stems' - the start of sentences to help them speak. These are things like "I would like to start by saying..." "It seems to me..." "what are your thoughts on..." "I disagree with you because...", but teachers will adapt these stems and how they're used in different lessons. We use structures like 'would you rather', 'odd one out' and 'Think, Pair, Share' to get students talking, as well as 'Concept Cartoons', where students look at different opinions, and then discuss which they agree with most. These can be used on anything from big, ethical questions, to the right answer to a calculation in maths."

"Some other examples of our approach in lessons include a new geography scheme on the history of Halifax, where we include authentic voices from the local area. In English, we have poetry projects on voice and identity where we talk about accent and dialect. We believe that learning about talk is empowering. We want our students to understand the power of language, being able to speak in different settings to different groups of people, while keeping their authentic voice. We also ensure students have a focus on listening, and not just speaking. We want a culture where students really listen to one another."

"We want to encourage all our students to speak up for good. We've had students speak to our local MP about local issues, as well as travelling to London to speak about the importance of free school meals. We encourage every student to speak up about the issues that matter to them. We also make sure they have chances to speak to employers, and have guest speakers into the school our students can question. We haven't focused solely on formal, presentational talk. 'Messy', exploratory talk is also a feature of our classrooms. For us, oracy is very much about identity and how empowering it is to understand the word choices you make, and the power of listening and non-verbal communication."

"Teachers are taught the techniques we use here when they first start, and coaching continues throughout their time at the school. Small groups of staff regularly get together to share resources and discuss new approaches to use in the classroom. Oracy is always part of all staff training we run."

"As Oracy Lead at the school, I've never had to fight for it to be a priority as it's at the heart of all we do. There's a great team right across the school who work together to make great oracy teaching happen. It's a shared responsibility, owned by teachers and led by teachers at every stage of their careers."

“Any school just getting started with oracy will need to take existing resources and develop them for their context. It would also be good to see more opportunities for schools who are already a few years into this journey to collaborate and share their learning.”

Discussion

Alongside the government's ongoing curriculum review, the new research presented here has added additional evidence on existing provision for life skills in schools, particularly in the growing field of oracy and speaking.

As outlined in the background section of this report, there is a strong evidence base for a focus on these skills, including oracy. However, while there is evidence that oracy interventions can be effective, most existing evidence looks at the impact of these interventions on reading, rather than on oracy itself or wider speaking or communication skills. There is also still a wide amount of disagreement on what exactly oracy is. Alongside any curriculum changes, it is vital that government clarifies what it means by oracy and speaking, and continues to fund work to build the evidence base, as well as integrating any findings from that work into school policy on an ongoing basis.

The data here shows some differences in provision between state and independent schools, with state school teachers less likely to think their school provides good opportunities to develop these skills. And when looking at oracy and speaking skills specifically, there are some interesting differences between the state and private sectors. Private schools are often seen as the best performers when it comes to oracy, with a [recent Times article](#) on Labour's plans for oracy stating *"Children are routinely taught a range of oracy skills in private schools, but Starmer is concerned that those in state schools are being left behind and face increased barriers in life."* And, as previous work from the Sutton Trust has outlined, private schools in the UK are known for producing confident speakers in the public eye. However, it is not clear to which extent these skills are taught by the schools themselves, compared to private school students being more likely outside of school to have opportunities to build confidence and speaking skills. And while polling presented here found debating clubs were more common in private schools, private schools were less likely to have several of the oracy approaches outlined here, for example having an Oracy Lead or a whole school oracy strategy.

These differences may come from different understandings of the term oracy, and as outlined previously, there are many different definitions and ways of understanding the term. But as shown in the case studies here, schools that at first glance may have very different approaches to oracy (for example, in whether or not they have an Oracy Lead, or in whether there is a specific "oracy" approach outlined in their curriculum, compared to those with a much less formalised approach) can in practice do quite similar things. In the ongoing curriculum review, government should consult widely with schools on existing

"In the ongoing curriculum review, government should consult widely with schools on existing approaches, and take learnings from a wide range of schools, across both the state and private sectors."

approaches, and take learnings from a wide range of schools, across both the state and private sectors.

It is also important that any approach to integrate speaking and oracy into the curriculum takes an inclusive approach. Concerns have been raised²⁰ that the origin of the term 'oracy' has come from a "deficit framing", that what is viewed as high quality oracy is based on the way that people from higher socio-economic backgrounds communicate, and negatively stigmatises communication styles of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Previous Sutton Trust research has highlighted the challenge of accent bias in schools.²¹ It is vital that any curriculum level approach to oracy and speaking skills stresses the importance of young people finding *their* voice, and not just replicating speech patterns and behaviours common for those from higher socio-economic backgrounds. An inclusive approach will be vital to ensure efforts really deliver for social mobility and educational opportunities.

Another important question for the curriculum review will be the best way to assess and hold schools to account on their oracy approach. A 2021 report by the Centre for Education and Youth looked at how oracy was covered within Ofsted reports, and found that oracy is only mentioned in a small minority of Ofsted's inspection reports, with many of those mentions related to potential improvements that could be made by the school, and mostly in the role oracy could play in promoting literacy (rather than speaking skills themselves).²²

Improving oracy education in schools, alongside provision for wider life skills, has the potential to make a big difference for students, and particularly those from the poorest backgrounds. But before real change can be made, more evidence is needed on the best approaches to deliver for these young people.

²⁰ Cushing, I. (2024, February 12). Are the theoretical underpinnings of oracy sound? Schools Week. <https://schoolsweek.co.uk/are-the-theoretical-underpinnings-of-oracy-sound/>

²¹ Levon, E., Sharma, D., & Ilbury, C. (2022). *Speaking Up*. Sutton Trust. <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/speaking-up-accent-social-mobility/>

²² Millard, W., Menzies, I., & Stewart, G. (2021). Oracy after the pandemic: what Ofsted, teachers and young people think about oracy. Centre for Education & Youth. <https://cfey.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CfEY-and-University-of-Oxford-Oracy-after-the-pandemic-FINAL-slides-v2.pdf>



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