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Reflections on oracy, dialogic teaching and the UKLA conference 2024

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Published version

EHIYAZARYAN-WHITE, Ester (2024). Reflections on oracy, dialogic teaching and the UKLA conference 2024. Wordpress.

Reflections on oracy, dialogic teaching and the UKLA conference 2024

This summer (5-7 July 2024) I had the pleasure of attending the UK Literacy Association conference in Brighton, 'Making a Difference'. The conference has a broad focus going beyond traditional literacies of reading and writing and acknowledging embodied, neurodiverse and multiliteracies. As the conference attracts a hybrid teacher, practitioner and academic audience, I was very interested in how teachers and researchers would respond to the increasing focus on oracy in taught curricula. This focus on oracy has been introduced by the DfE through government commissioned reports (e.g Voice 21) and partly in response to post-pandemic concerns about children's spoken language. The current newly elected government further emphasises a focus on oracy in its Labour Manifesto, which states *'Labour will fund evidence-based early-language interventions in primary schools, so that every child can find their voice.'* In response to this, there is currently a proliferation of school-based speech and language intervention programmes, aimed primarily at children from disadvantaged backgrounds in early years and primary school settings.

It is necessary to acknowledge however, that literacy researchers and practitioners (including many at UKLA) make a distinction between oracy and dialogic teaching (Alexander, 2020) According to Alexander in oracy teaching the emphasis is on teaching the skills of speaking and listening, with outcomes such as clear speech production and articulacy (sounding confident). This positions oracy as an employability skill, on the basis of which there have been claims linking oracy to social justice (Bercow, 2018; Voice 21). Raciolinguists have challenged these claims, pointing out that socio economic issues such as children growing up in poverty require socioeconomic, not linguistic solutions (Cushing, 2024; Flores and Rosa, 2015). In contrast, and as Alexander outlines in his framework for dialogic teaching, the distinct feature of dialogic talk is the reciprocity of ideas and thoughts – it is in the interaction of talk between learners and between teacher and learners, that thinking and criticality can develop and creative ideas can flourish. Dialogue is therefore inherently reciprocal, cumulative and mutually supportive – features which are missing from oracy's preoccupation with teaching for proficiency in receptive and expressive language.

Social justice furthermore, can be enacted at classroom level through dialogic teaching. Drawing on research evidence from the DIALLS project, 'Teaching children to be tolerant, empathetic and inclusive through talking together' Fiona Maine (2024) emphasised the need to build a dialogic space where children learn to notice whose voices dominate, and whose voices are marginalised; in the process developing respect and giving space for each other to contribute.

It remains to be seen how the government's priorities around enabling children's voices in the classroom will be enacted. As a parent of primary aged children, I would like to think they would be taught to think critically and creatively rather than correctly and articulately. The ability to doubt, question, collaboratively build ideas in my opinion will provide a much better foundation for the substantial challenges of climate change, sustainability and AI their generation will have to tackle in the future, than the ability to articulate with certainty.

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