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ND Executive Statement on Oracy and Drama.

According to the Education Endowment Foundation, (EEF 2021) 'oral language interventions' and dialogic teaching can have a high impact on children's learning, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

The average impact of Oral language interventions is approximately an additional six months' progress over the course of a year. Some studies also often report improved classroom climate and fewer behavioural issues following work on oral language.

Previous iterations of the National Curriculum in England referenced 'speaking and listening', and encouraged the fruitful interaction of English and drama. In contrast, current National Curriculum guidance evidences a narrow and partial understanding of what constitutes literacy, and the abject neglect of oracy - and drama. National Drama therefore welcomes the stated intention of the Labour Party, if elected, to pay attention to oracy as a key element of any curriculum reform.

In drama, children learn by doing - in an active, collaborative and learner-directed way. Whilst drama is an art form in its own right, with its own distinctive body of knowledge and pedagogy, it also provides a potent method to develop the spoken language skills crucial to successful higher-level study and to effective communication.

Where drama is employed in cross-curricular teaching, the numerous drama strategies available to teachers presents them with a means to engage and motivate children to speak and listen for different reasons and in different language registers; where drama is taught as a subject in its own right, it provides opportunities for children to work together to rehearse and refine their speech and reflect on the performance of others, to become confident speakers, critical consumers and attentive listeners.

Learning in drama is also linked to emotional maturation and affective intelligence. Students of all ages learn to empathise through the creative use of the imagination. They stand in others' shoes and understand how others

see the world. Drama teaches agency, compromise and shared responsibility. These skills help children to make meaning in a complex world which some may find threatening. It can make difficult or 'abstract' ideas concrete and clarify children's developing values and sense of self.

Drama creates a productive and positive environment for oracy, creating opportunities in planning, performing and evaluating in relevant and dynamic contexts that encourage participation and collaboration. When children become engaged in this way they are motivated to:

- ask and devise questions
- clarify, summarise and predict
- make comparisons
- solve problems
- explore unfamiliar vocabulary
- respond to others
- justify, explain and reflect on what they know and understand

Ideas can be created and debated both in and out of role, and the universality of a shared dramatic experience can enable group reflection and a sense of ownership and achievement. Although drama is essentially an imaginary experience, it is also a tangible experience which can make complex ideas concrete and malleable.

Put simply, in drama, children work together and behave 'as if' they are in the 'world' of the drama. Crucially, this provides a context and a motivation for a diverse range of spoken language.

Some examples:

- Children in the early years have to help 'Big Bad Wolf' who sends the class a letter complaining that he doesn't have any friends. In doing so, they empathise with the wolf, who complains that 'the stories about him are all wrong', and help him tell a story that challenges the stereotypical portrayal of wolves!
- Year 2 children have the challenge of using 'formal' language whilst advising a rather pompous ruler (portrayed by their teacher, in role) about how to rule the country fairly. They have to find ways of challenging the monarch without causing upset...
- Year 4 children are in role as townspeople whose livelihood is threatened by the demolition of their decrepit, but much-loved market hall. They have to use persuasive language to argue against the planned development at a 'public meeting', and ensure that the values of the whole community are represented...

- A mixed-age group in a SEND setting interact with a person in role as 'Rebecca the Robot' who can only move if given particular instructions by the children. For less verbal children, the robot has a touch-screen panel built into her costume...
- A year 7 group face the challenge of making a speech to the 'court', pleading for the lives of wrongly-imprisoned prisoners they have befriended in 17C 'Newgate Gaol'.
- Students in year 9 devise a sequence of short scenes showing key moments in the life of Nelson Mandela - whom they have studied in history lessons - as part of a *Black History Month* celebration.
- Students in year 11 work together in groups to create a dramatic metaphor based on the idea of a paradox: '...we're building a wall which makes us free'.
- As part of their A Level Theatre Studies work, students in year 13 perform a stylised drama about mental illness, based on themes from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, and utilising the theatrical style of Steven Berkoff.

Drama's ability to provide limitless fictional contexts to motivate speech, can equip teachers with a flexible pedagogy which enables them to tailor the oracy demand to the precise needs of the class, irrespective of age or linguistic sophistication. As a physical, as well as a verbal medium, drama is socially inclusive, and can aid communication with multilingual groups and non-verbal children.

It is especially potent for less-confident, or non-native speakers of English, or those for whom speaking to the whole class without a clear context is challenging- as can sometimes be the case in secondary school oracy assessments. When engaged in this way, the drama itself motivates the language demand, not the teacher!

In relation to oracy, drama pedagogy creates a 'dialogic space'...where communication in the classroom is collective(teachers and children in partnership). It is 'reciprocal' (talking, listening and sharing viewpoints), supportive (no fear of failure), cumulative (builds on each other's ideas) and purposeful (with educational goals in view).

(Stephenson & Lofthouse, 2023)

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