

Oracy education: The **power of speaking** up

IN CLASSROOMS AND COMPETITION HALLS ACROSS THE COUNTRY, A QUIET REVOLUTION IS TAKING PLACE – ONE POWERED NOT BY TECHNOLOGY OR TESTS, BUT BY TALKING

Oracy education, the teaching of speaking and listening skills, is gaining traction as schools increasingly recognise its value in helping pupils build confidence, prepare for their futures, and understand the world around them.

It's also climbing the political agenda; in 2023, Keir Starmer pledged to improve children's speaking skills, announcing that oracy would be a central part of Labour's educational priorities if it won the general election. In July this year, campaigners wrote an open letter to the prime minister urging him to establish oracy as a core part of the revised national curriculum.

South Hampstead High School embeds oracy across its curriculum and widens access to public speaking opportunities through its award-winning partnership programme, Debate Hub.

Chris Dearmer and Michael Hepburn reflect on this sector-leading work and its lasting impact on the lives of young people.



We do oracy in some form from Reception all the way through to the Sixth Form. In Year 5, students begin a timetabled programme of debating, with over an hour each week. It's the same programme we share with our state school partners: the Junior School Debating Programme.

When they progress to senior school, all pupils embark on a year-long course: Oracy and Critical Thinking. This involves a lot of debating and public speaking, but it also involves thinking about logical fallacies and how to spot bad arguments, in a theoretical and philosophical sense.

We have embedded a variety of oracy projects for different year groups. Our Global Issues Oracy Project enables pupils to develop their understanding of international current affairs. We partner with a school in Rwanda for our annual Think Global, Act Local project – a sustainability challenge whereby pupils work together to reduce waste and effect change. And, of course, we have good oracy happening in lots of our classrooms, with teachers supported by the debating and oracy department.

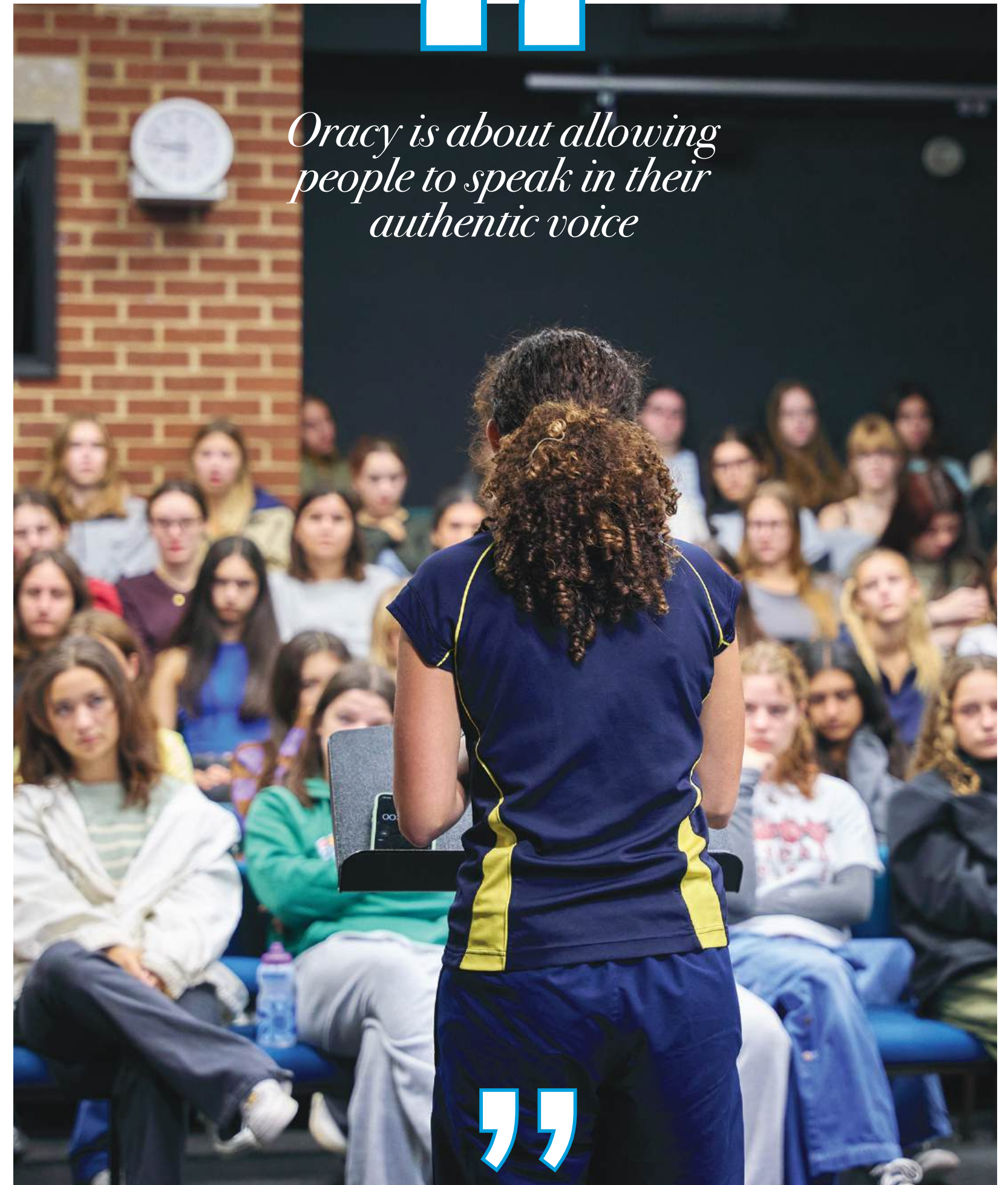
We have lunchtime debate clubs every day of the week, and an after-school club four or five days a week, from beginner to advanced. We compete in about 20 competitions annually and host around 12 competitions a year where other schools come to us – our own students take part in a lot of those or help run them.

We are also in the process of creating our own school-directed course in oracy – which we believe is the first of its kind. From next September, GCSE students will be able to take our two-year course – Scholarship through Speech – and earn an in-house qualification at the end.

Since appointing a head of debating, we've been building up a culture of oracy; it really has become a cornerstone of what we do here. Through our Debate Hub, we share a wealth of resources and debating opportunities with our partner schools, and it's a statement of the importance we place in that area.

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Oracy is about allowing people to speak in their authentic voice



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Giving young people a voice

We've always encouraged girls at South Hampstead to speak up and speak out – that's been something of a mantra we've had for many years. If you go to a debating competition for beginners, you notice that the boys are significantly more confident than the girls, particularly at secondary school. That's something that can be very quickly solved – by giving girls the skills to debate well. It's on us to equip young women not only with the belief that their voice is important, but with the skills to advocate for things they care about with calmness and surety.

There are so many misconceptions about what debating and oracy is about. A lot of them come down to this idea that good public speaking sounds a very particular way, and often that idea of a good public speaking voice is a white, male, upper-class person with a strong vocabulary who doesn't use filler words.

In reality, oracy is about allowing people to speak in their authentic voice. These voices will be different, and that difference is awesome: that's what makes it fun. There's not sufficient celebration of the authenticity of girls' voices, young people's voices, diverse voices, slang, regional dialects – that's the biggest thing holding oracy back. We have students from all different backgrounds, and they all come with their own opinions, ideas, and personalities. They are encouraged to use their own voice, as opposed to feeling that they need to fit into a preconceived model.

Diversity of opinion is incredibly important, and it's very good for all our students to be exposed to different viewpoints. One of the great strengths of our partnership work is the glorious discovery that, when it comes down to it, for all those perceived differences between pupils from different schools, they actually have far much more in common. Through the process of debating, they discover there is so much more that ties them together.

Where language comes alive

There is a real buzz during our competitions – the energy is palpable. There will often be as many as 200 students involved, taking part in about 30 concurrent debates. When we put the topic on the board, there's that moment where there's a cheer if they like the motion, or there are a few shocked gasps – we even have some running to the room as quickly as possible to maximise their prep time. With the younger pupils especially, there's a lot of chaotic excitement.

Giving pupils independence and autonomy is a big thing here; our debaters have to go out to the big hall, find a room, prep with their teammates, come up with their ideas, decide who's speaking first, get their notes ready. They're not in their comfort zone, but they love it.

We see them offering to shake hands afterwards, applauding other teams without being asked – it's very sweet. It's also lovely to witness our mixed-age group events, watching that dynamic at play and seeing how much the younger pupils learn from the older ones.

Changing lives

From the start, we've been struck by the confidence and the assurance that our girls have when they stand up and speak, whether that's in a classroom or in front of a whole-school assembly. Two of our girls recently attended an event at the House of Lords to speak about the value of girls' education, and we were amazed by the brilliance with which they spoke and were able to articulate their ideas.

It's incredibly rewarding to witness pupils' transformations. There's a girl who started debating with us when she was in Year 8 and she was incredibly quiet and shy. By the time she left, she was this dynamic, funny, confident young woman, and now she is at university in Paris. Another pupil recently delivered two speeches at the Lib Dem party conference. And several of our girls have been selected for Debate England's national squad.

Being able to see that growth is really satisfying. We take real pride in our girls achieving extraordinary things but also pride in the processes that we have in place to promote that. A few years ago, a pupil from a nearby state school came to one of our debating competitions and liked it so much she applied to join our Sixth Form on a fully funded bursary; she went on to become the borough's local Youth MP and is now studying global humanitarian studies at university. The benefits to the wider community are especially tangible. As one of our partner school teachers said: "You have really revolutionised the debating scene – this has the power to change lives."

A growing priority

One reason why oracy is getting a lot of focus at a national, governmental level – and rightly so – is because it's arguably the best means to enable young people to understand the world around them. In an age of social media, echo chambers, and very prominent voices with extreme points of view, there's a lot out there to make sense of. Our girls are able to engage with those issues and make sense of them because of the oracy provision that we give. That is something that should be accessible to everyone, and it should be on the government's agenda.

There's also a social equality angle. Students need to be able to interview well to get into the top university courses, Magic Circle law firms or Big Four accountancy firms. If the top-tier jobs, universities, and to some extent, careers, all revolve around oracy, and you want everyone to be able to access them, you're going to have to teach everyone oracy.

Practical steps for schools

When it comes to making oracy a priority, don't overthink it. Start with something small and simple – a debate club, Model United Nations, or your English department hosting a little public speaking competition at the end of every year. There are lots of resources out there, particularly for state schools, including free training and free entry to competitions. Importantly, there has to be genuine support from senior leadership. Both our current and previous heads have made it a point to highlight the value of oracy. Even if the teachers want



I had an interview with a law firm for a training contract yesterday, and I got the job! I just wanted to tell you both that debating has had the biggest impact on my life, and I truly don't believe I would have got to this stage without it

A former South Hampstead High School pupil



to do more – and they do – the time, money, and training must come from the top.

You can't just give staff more work; teachers are incredibly busy. One of the ways we talk about oracy is that it can sometimes save time; for example, rather than having to mark a lot of homework, you can mark a classroom debate or speech during lesson time instead.

And don't be afraid of getting it wrong. At Debate Hub, we have plenty of ideas and resources to tap into – and anyone can check our website to see what we personally advocate and why – but just doing some of it is better than nothing. No one is an absolute authority on oracy, so you might as well give it a try and learn as you go.

All schools will be offering oracy in some way, shape or form, whether they're conscious of it or not. Just introducing that word into the vocabulary of the school, getting it into the consciousness of students and staff, and recognising its importance can be the first step.

Debate Hub is a partnership programme promoting a culture of oracy among pupils and the wider community. For access to competitions, lesson plans, debate curricula, video guides, workshops and other key resources, visit debatehub.co.uk.

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