

***No Child Left Behind: Bridging The Literacy Achievement Gap of Looked-After Children in Secondary School Through Speaking and Listening***

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the key challenges that children in care and children who have suffered adverse experiences face in their education and solutions to these challenges. Using a mixed methods approach, the researcher conducted interviews with American secondary school teachers, a focus group with members of the USA's Legal Centre for Foster Care and Education, an interview with EL Education's Chief Academic Officer, and action-based research with 9th grade/year 10 students at Codman Academy Charter School in Boston. The research identifies key steps that can be taken by educators to develop the spoken and written literacy skills of children that have had adverse childhood experiences, ranging from oracy-centred lesson planning, curriculum design and school pastoral support to positive reinforcement. It demonstrates the potential that this approach has to engage these children when educators utilise and apply their own speaking and listening skills effectively.

*No child left behind: bridging the literacy achievement gap of looked-after children in Secondary School through speaking and listening.*

*“But now I realise that the only way to find your voice is to use it”* Austin Kleon  
(2014)

Keywords: Looked-After, Oracy, Expeditionary Learning, Literacy

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## Introduction

Looked-after children (referred to as foster children in the USA) are significantly behind their peers academically. The Department for Education's statistics show that in 2018, 82.5% of looked-after children did not pass their English and maths General Certificate in Secondary Education (GCSEs) (The Department for Education, 2019). Furthermore, only 6% of looked-after children in England entered higher education (The Department for Education, 2018). The USA's National Working Group on Foster Care and Education's 2018 report on the educational outcomes of children in foster care reported that 70-84% of 17 to 18 year-olds in foster care said that they wanted to go to college (National Working Group on Foster Care and Education, 2018). However, even in the USA there is a great discrepancy between the students' desire and their fulfilment of this desire as between 31.8% to 45.3% of young people in foster care who graduated from high school in the USA enrolled in college (Ibid). This is in stark contrast to the American national average. The statistics in the UK are particularly concerning as there is a lack of cogent evidence that the low attainment levels can be attributed to a high level of absence from school. Only 10.6% of looked-after children are persistently absent from school, moreover the Department for Education's statistics show that looked-after children are even less likely than all children to be persistently absent (The Department for Education, 2019). This brings into question what the barriers to learning are when looked-after children attend school.

The mutual dependence of speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills means that poor speaking and listening skills can lead to poor written skills and vice versa. The listening and speaking skills of looked-after children have often been negatively impacted by their adverse childhood experiences. Adverse childhood experiences comprise of a number of experiences including psychological, physical and sexual abuse and household dysfunction ranging from substance abuse, mental illness, domestic violence and criminal behaviour (Felitti et al, 1998). The Department for Education's 2019 statistics show that 63% of looked-after children in England are in care due to experiencing child abuse or neglect, 14% are in care due to family dysfunction, 8% are in care as their family is going through a temporary crisis that diminishes the parental capacity to adequately meet some of the children's needs, 7% are in care due to absent parenting, 3% of them are there due to their parent's illness or disability, 3% are there due to their own disability and 1 % are there due to low income or socially unacceptable behaviour (The Department for Education, 2019). These situations primarily under the umbrella of adverse childhood experiences.

Poor speaking and listening skills is one of the factors that not only underpins the low statistics that we see in the education attainment levels of looked-after children but is often a reason behind their higher school exclusions, challenges in engaging effectively in the classroom and challenges in communicating with their care givers (sometimes culminating in them moving from foster home to foster home and from school to school).

Traumatic memories remain in the brain and when triggered lead to the brain responding from the amygdala (which is the less rational part of the brain that triggers fight or flight responses) rather than the prefrontal cortex which is the rational part of the brain (O'Neil, L Guenette, F and Kitchenham, 2010). This can be triggered by any

and everything, from a discussion about a topic in a school lesson, to a conversation between students and teachers to a classroom setting. This has implications on a traumatized students' interpretation of what others are saying and how they in turn respond.

### **Background to the question**

In 2015 the UK's GCSEs experienced some of the most significant reform that we have seen in recent education history. The 2015 English GCSE reform replaced the English Speaking and Listening GCSE with a Spoken Language GCSE that does not count towards students' overall English GCSE grade (unlike its predecessor), removed the differentiated approach of a foundation, intermediate and higher English GCSE paper replacing it with one paper that students of all levels complete and introduced a 100% exams-based English GCSE. These changes have led to a growing concern over the level of prominence oracy and project-based learning are being given in secondary school students' education and the challenges that these changes present for students that have significant literacy challenges that make written exams particularly difficult for them. This situation is compounded by the current challenge that teachers are facing in addressing students' literacy at a time when the Department for Education's 2018 statistics show that 27% of pupils finish primary school without having reached the expected standard in reading (The Department for Education, 2019). Sound reading and comprehension skills are vital for students' engagement with the work that they are expected to complete in Secondary School.

Looked-after children that are recovering from traumatic experiences and have moved schools and foster homes during the academic year are particularly disadvantaged by the removal of the GCSE coursework that they could take to their new schools and the exclusion of their spoken language exam results as part of their overall English GCSE.

The GCSE changes can lead to a tendency to overlook oracy in the planning and delivery of English GCSE lessons making it increasingly important to ensure that the discourse about oracy and the development of students' listening and speaking skill does not become lost in the process of these changes. With this in mind, I decided to centre my Walter Hines Education research on the benefits of oracy-centred strategies for the development of the literacy skills of looked-after children using the topic: *no child left behind – bridging the literacy achievement gap of looked-after children through speaking and listening*.

I travelled to the USA in October 2019 for my research. I spent one week in Washington DC where I visited the USA's Legal Center for Foster Care and Education and one week in Boston, Massachusetts where I visited Blackstone and Russell Elementary schools and Codman Academy Charter Public School.

### School 21

School 21 is a 4-18 free school in Stratford. At the heart of the school's approach is an emphasis on a whole-school approach to oracy. School 21's focus is on four strands of oracy: physical, linguistic, cognitive and social/emotional as reflected in the diagram below. This oracy-centred approach manifests in an approach to the

curriculum, assemblies and parents' evenings that positions students (as opposed to teachers) to do most of the talking. School 21's success led to the creation of Voice 21 who have shared the ethos and good practice of School 21 in schools across the United Kingdom the USA, Canada and Australia. School 21 has been rated as outstanding by England's Office for Standards in Education Children's Services and Skills (OFSTED) who regulate schools in England. Of note, is OFSTED's statement that "*No pupil is left behind because teachers do not allow them to be held back by gaps in their reading, writing or mathematical skills*" (OFSTED, 2014). OFSTED's statement is reflective of the role of oracy-centred tasks as a learning tool for the engagement of students that have significant gaps in their reading and writing skills that could lead them to be left behind their peers academically from one academic year to the next.

### EL Education

The EL (formerly called expeditionary learning) education model centres on pedagogy that centres around the concept of students learning through doing. It utilises problem-solving, project-based learning, exploratory talk and field work. The model was developed through a collaboration between Outward Bound USA and the Harvard University in the 1990s. The impact of EL Education in the USA is reflected in the fact that its Language Arts Curriculum has been downloaded more than 10 million times by educators (EL Education, 2019) and that EL Education's Detroit students' 2019 state tests scores demonstrated "the greatest single year improvement in state tests in the history of the exam" (EL Education, 2019). This reflects the ability of EL Education's approach to lead to the significant and accelerated acquisition of skills that students (particularly students that are starting from the point of having significant literacy proficiency gaps) would normally take longer to acquire. As looked-after children are often significantly behind their peers in the year group teaching strategies that lend themselves to rapid and significant improvement within an academic year are vital to their success.

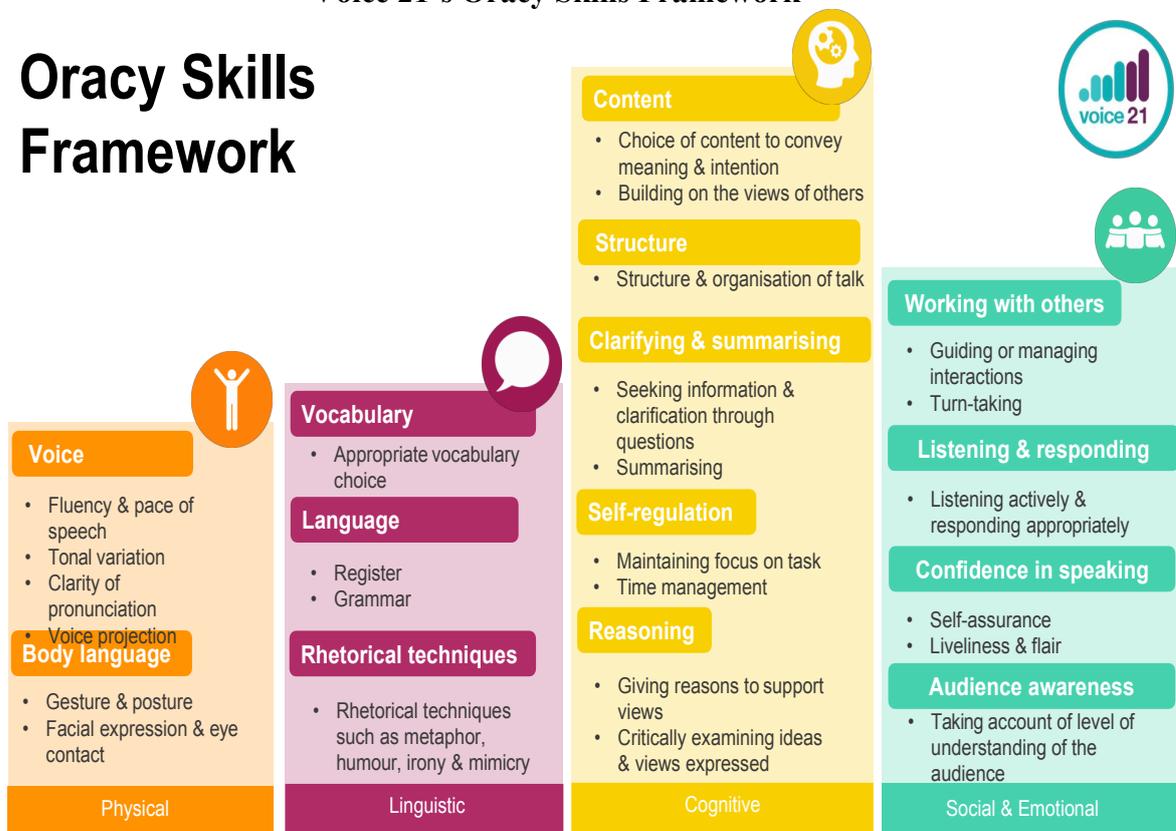
Ron Berger is one of the founders and the Chief Academic Officer of EL Education. Berger's approach to education is highlighted in his written work such as *Leaders of Their Own Learning*. It champions an approach that centres students as participants and not just as spectators in the classroom. His work presents a blueprint that schools such as School 21 have applied to their own whole-school approach making both the Voice 21 model and EL Education model models that complement each other in many ways and have a commonality in purpose.

I was interested in seeing the benefits of EL Education's approach for the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of children that have had adverse childhood experiences. As the aforementioned statistics on reasons why looked-after children are in care demonstrate, most looked-after children are in care due to adverse childhood experiences, consequently, I chose to visit an EL Education school with extensive experience of working effectively with children that have had adverse childhood experiences. Codman Academy is one of EL Education's schools which has a number of students that have had adverse childhood experiences furthermore, four in five students at the school are economically deprived (Ward, 2019). It also has a rich culture of oracy that involves a partnership with Huntington Theatre.

## Research aims

- To expand my understanding of the key challenges that looked-after children face in their education in the USA.
- To explore American foster care specialists' and educators' perspectives on the challenges that children that have had adverse childhood experiences face in school.
- To explore American teachers' and foster care specialists' perspectives on the most effective strategies to address these challenges.
- To explore students' perspectives on oracy-centred teaching strategies based on Voice 21's oracy framework.

**Table 1**  
**Voice 21's Oracy Skills Framework**



## Methodology

First half of research visit: Washington DC

A focus group with members of the USA's Legal Center for Foster Care and Education

The USA's Legal Centre for Foster Care and Education work with steering groups that advise the USA government on legislation that can address the various needs of foster children. They also engage in regular research and annual reporting on the status of the education of foster children in the USA and advocate for foster children

in court. I wanted to start my research with a grounding and understanding of the challenges that foster children face in their education from the perspectives of these experts that advocate for them. The participants of my focus group were Kathleen McNaught, the Director of Education Projects at the American Bar Association, Emily Peeler, the Overseer of the American Bar Association's Education and Permanency Projects (permanency projects are aimed at providing foster children with permanency in their foster home placements and schooling) and Kirstin Kelly, the Assistant Director of the American Bar Association's Education projects.

#### Second half of research visit: Boston, Massachusetts

An interview with Ron Berger one of the founders and the current Chief Academic Officer of EL Education and a written questionnaire from EL Education's Head of Curriculum Christina Riley.

Ron Berger worked in partnership with Outward Bounds and Harvard University in the 1990s to develop EL Education's expeditionary learning model. Christina Riley is EL Education's Head of Curriculum. She has worked with the organisation since 2013. I arranged an interview with Ron Berger and created a typed questionnaire for Riley, to gain a deeper understanding of their vision for EL Education, how EL Education aims to develop the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of students and its potential benefits for children that have had adverse childhood experiences.

Interviews with 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities teachers at Codman Academy and the Head of School

Codman Academy has an integrated History and English curriculum. I arranged interviews with 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities teachers at Codman Academy and the Head of School in order to gain a deeper understanding of how they develop the speaking, listening, reading and writing skills of their students, the challenges that they encounter when teaching students that have had adverse childhood experiences and the strategies that they employ to support these students in their English lessons.

Action-based research with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students followed by voluntary student task feedback questionnaires

Individual students in two 9<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities classes were asked to prepare a recap of the key points that they have learnt in a Humanities lesson of their choice to the rest of their class and to answer questions from their peers about their lesson recap. I designed the task to embed the physical, linguistic, cognitive and social and emotional elements of Voice 21's oracy framework. The task was followed by voluntary student feedback questionnaires. My aim was to observe how the students engaged with the tasks and utilised elements of Voice 21's framework and to identify problems and potential solutions to student challenges with the task.

Whilst the number of students that engaged in the task and completed voluntary feedback on the task was fairly small, the validity and reliability of this element of the research as a fairly representative sample of Codman Academy's 9<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities' students is supported by the random nature of the class selection.

Codman Academy did not select the class based on students that they identified as being the most eloquent or “well-behaved”. Their selection of the classes that I worked with was based on the student class timetable availability for my visit dates, my requested year group and subject.

## Results And Discussion

### The focus group with members of the USA’s Legal Center for Foster Care and Education

I explored a number of questions with members of the USA’s Legal Centre for Foster Care and Education. The main points have been summarised below.

**Table 2**  
**Focus Group with the USA’s Legal Centre for Foster Care and Education**

<p>Q1. <i>What do you think are some of the key challenges that <b>foster children</b> face in the area of their education?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• High rates of student mobility in students moving from home to home and school to school leading to a change of curriculum (there is not a national curriculum in the USA), teachers and friends.</li><li>• The after-effect of the children’s traumatic experience impeding on their ability to focus and concentrate at school.</li><li>• The nature of the experience that they have experienced with their biological caregivers prior to their entry into care in which their educational needs were sometimes not being properly met.</li><li>• A lack of expertise from child welfare staff (who are trying diligently to prioritise the children’s pressing home placement needs) in educational needs and the information needed to advocate effectively for the children in the area of their education.</li><li>• The after-effect of trauma leading to behaviour that results in higher school suspensions sometimes caused by educators’ lack of understanding of the reason for the children’s behaviour.</li><li>• A lack of clarity in the assessment of their special educational needs. Sometimes students recovering from trauma are misidentified as having special educational needs or under-identified as having special educational needs.</li><li>• Systems co-ordination challenges leading teachers to be unaware that a student is in care.</li><li>• School’s application of a broad-brush approach to the management of foster children’s education in way that does not give due consideration to their unique challenges.</li><li>• Trauma-informed curricula and trauma-sensitive environments are being cultivated by individual schools however, there are many schools that have not engaged with this as yet.</li></ul>
<p>Q2. <i>What do you think are some of the key challenges that <b>schools</b> face in educating foster children?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Schools lack of understanding of the foster care system for example, an understanding of all the key figures that are involved and the processes when children are in care. Oftentimes, the general understanding that schools have centres solely</li></ul>

around the fact that the children have been placed in care and not on what happens beyond this.

- Foster parents' lack of knowledge of the key contacts, key support that schools offer vulnerable children etc. that prohibits them from engaging in quality advocacy on behalf of the children.
- A new USA law allows foster children to remain in their original foster school even if it is in a different area to their new foster home. This can sometimes create a logistical challenge in that the distance from the potential foster parent's home has unfortunately caused some potential foster parents to decline taking in some children or to end a home placement. Schools' provision of transportation does help when it is available but is not always available. This can be particularly challenging when the children want to participate in the full school life for example, after school extra-curricular activities.
- The higher rates of school expulsion and suspension that require students to stay at home creating challenges for foster parents (for example, at work) that has on occasion contributed to foster parents having to reconsider the continuation of the home placement.
- Challenges arising from the multi-faceted nature of the categories and types of foster care.

*Q4. In terms of the speaking and listening skills of looked-after children, can you share*

*your thoughts on whether this is an issue?*

- All foster children are different, so it is difficult to generalise an answer to this question.
- The members of the focus group are not educators and do not assess the speaking and listening needs of foster children. However, as lawyers the members of the focus group have received training on how to communicate with the children to ensure that they feel safe enough to communicate their feelings, advocate for themselves and tell their story. They have found this to be effective when they take statements from the foster children that they advocate for in court.
- Being able to communicate in itself is something that foster children are often able to do just as well as other children. The key challenge for them is more in the area of trusting the other person enough to share their views and feelings due to the impact of trauma.

*Q5. Do you in any way think that the training you received could also be useful for practitioners that work within schools?*

- Similar training with an emphasis on trauma-sensitivity, how to approach kids who have experienced, abuse and neglect, how to not re-traumatize them but at this same time be able to give them an opportunity to express how they're feeling and what they're thinking could be useful for educators.
- Members of the focus group recalled examples of the benefits of effective communication between foster children and their teachers in anecdotes in which foster children recall their foster homes and schools changing and their experience of a teacher that did not give up on them that made a key difference to their lives.
- A challenge in the educators' work is that oftentimes foster children do not want their foster status to be divulged to their schools as they are concerned that it may lead to teachers or students treating them differently.

*Q6. What are some of the solutions that are currently being implemented in the USA that have had a positive impact?*

- Washington DC’s child welfare agencies’ daily school teacher check and connect strategy with foster students that requires each school building to have a member of staff who is responsible for checking-in with a foster child every school day.
- Trauma-informed schools.
- The Compassionate Schools model.<sup>1</sup>
- Having the buy-in of the school leadership to prioritise these children, for example, giving them reductions on school resources, field trips etc.
- The American law that requires schools to immediately enrol foster children regardless of administrative delays in their receipt of their full student records.

Q7. *What would you factor-in in considering how we measure the success of an education strategy for these children?*

- Grade improvement.
- School attendance improvement.
- Decreased levels of truancy.
- Decreased levels of entry into disciplinary measures.
- Decreases in school placement moves.
- Higher higher education entry levels.
- Different children stay within care for different ranges of time so it can be difficult to apply a generalised approach to measuring what success is for each child.

Q8. *What do you think, is the key question (in your opinion) that we should be asking when it comes to the education of foster children?*

- Who is really responsible for making education decisions for this child?
- Who is needed to advocate on behalf of the child?
- Are we adopting a pragmatic approach to problem-solving that does not involve just contacting other professionals but also asking the child, for example, when there are systematic challenges, for example, where the school can’t even piece together the kids’ education history, have we asked the child?
- If we have identified the right people, are they be going to be engaging meaningfully, with the student and having their voice be part of that decision-making process? This is particularly important when working with older children.

Interview with Ron Berger one of the founders and the current Chief Academic Officer of EL Education and a written questionnaire from EL Education’s Head of Curriculum (Christina Riley).

Respondents’ responses summarised in the below table:

**Table 3**

**Interview and Questionnaire with EL Education’s Chief Academic Officer and Head of Curriculum**

Q1. *In your opinion what is the most significant achievement that EL Education has made in the area of students’ literacy?*

Ron Berger

<sup>1</sup> The Compassionate Schools Project champions a whole-school approach that is geared towards supporting students that have experienced trauma. It is “the most comprehensive study ever undertaken of a 21st century health and wellness curriculum in an elementary or secondary school setting. The Group Randomized Trial was started in 2016 and a follow-up is scheduled to run through 2021. Fifty schools, over 625 teachers, and more than 6250 students will be included in the study” (The University of Virginia, 2019).

“I would separate our deep-whole model approach from our new broader curriculum approach.

a) So, in the adoption of our whole model I think we’ve brought a much more rigorous and challenging vision of literacy into a project-based learning model than had existed before. Oftentimes project-based learning is not tuned well for student literacy skills and so, completion of the project becomes the goal in a way that means literacy skills are not attended to deeply. Kids might not be getting the level of challenge and skill development literacy. So, I think we’ve spent 25 years figuring out how to join those two well. So kids who are doing important meaningful projects are also getting really good literacy instruction as a part of that.

b) From our curricula impact, I think:

1. we are now able to reach schools that were struggling. That could never do our whole model with the way they are now, it was way too challenging a change for them and yet by taking on the curriculum they are seeing immediate gains, even though small but significant gains for kids within a year.

2. Giving kids more voice, more action, more opportunity to grapple with much harder material that teachers would have assumed was too hard for them: that we’re seeing very good results. I mean I can give a very specific example, we’re working with every student in Detroit right now, every student is using our curriculum, so we’re working with all the schools and I had dinner with one of those principals in one of the most struggling cities in American (as you can imagine locationally). She said a year ago there were only three students in her school that were on grade level in reading out of the entire school and two of them had transferred in that year so they actually only had one student who had been there for a year who could read at grade level, and after one year of using the curriculum now she had 76 students that were at grade level. And it’s still not-it should be way more than that in her school- but the difference was vast, just from having more challenging material and more student voice and ownership in the work. So, on a small level I’m really glad that the curriculum is reaching so many students and on a deeper level the schools that we work with that are using the whole model are doing great projects that are really literature rich”.

Christina Riley

- Changing the culture of classrooms: from teachers doing most of the talking to students doing more of the talking. This means students are spending more time processing and thinking for themselves rather than being told everything by the teacher.
- Students being more effective learners and ethical people who contribute to a better world. The aim of the curriculum is beyond literacy – we want students to become good citizens of the world.
- Higher quality writing preparing students to be college and career read.
- 2018-2019 literacy scores from Detroit, Michigan, and Shelby County, Tennessee.

*Q2. What are your thoughts on oracy-centred teaching strategies?*

Ron Berger

- “Well, I think that verbal skills for students are just as important as reading, writing and mathematics skills. For their success in university, for their success in their career, for their success in life, the ability to express themselves well verbally is arguably more important than their ability to do mathematics. There is nothing more important than those skills. We take them for granted. We don’t assess them typically,

we don't test them, schools are not held accountable for them, so people forget how important they are.

- So, I feel like our whole vision in EL of trying to transform the classroom to elevate student voice and have students do more of the talking and thinking and have teachers do less of the talking and thinking”.

Christina Riley

- The Read-Think-Talk-Write framework is a fundamental design principle of the EL Education curriculum. In order to process, and to formulate and refine ideas for writing and tasks, it is essential that students are given the opportunity to discuss their reading and thinking. Protocols are one of teaching strategies used in the curriculum to ensure all students discuss their thinking.

- Discussion and presentation skills are crucial for college and career readiness, which is reflected in the college and career ready speaking and listening standards, which are taught and assessed thoroughly in the EL Education curriculum.

- Providing every student with the opportunity to speak and be heard demonstrates to students that what they say has value, and therefore learning becomes more meaningful and personal.

Q3. *Do you think that EL Education's Language Arts Curriculum has advantages for students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds? If so, what advantages do you think it has?*

Christina Riley

- Having high expectations of students: the curriculum requires students to read, think, talk, and write at their grade level.

- Student-engaged assessment: the curriculum supports students in setting goals and tracking their progress towards those goals, which is an effective strategy to engage all students in taking responsibility for their own learning.

- Supporting students in developing social and emotional skills (SEL): SEL is embedded in the curriculum. As students read engaging texts they analyse and evaluate the responses and interactions of characters in fictional stories, and real people in informational texts, in order to identify positive models. Students also analyse what it looks and sounds like to practice habits of character to be effective learners and ethical people.

- Authentic and meaningful tasks: each curriculum module culminates in a performance task, which is a synthesis and celebration of their learning throughout the module and is a product created for an audience beyond the classroom and school. This provides engagement, and purpose throughout the module for all students.

Q4. *What do you think are challenges that children from under-privileged backgrounds face with their education?*

Christina Riley

- Access: to food, sleep, books, language, travel beyond their community and high-quality education through systemic issues.

Q5. *What do you think are some of the solutions to addressing the challenges that children from underprivileged backgrounds face?*

Christina Riley

- At the systems level: financial resources for public schools in historically under-served communities to be able to invest in teacher professional development and high-quality curricula, and funding for programs to support students in providing for their basic needs – food, warm clothing, etc.

- At the school and classroom level: Taking an asset-based approach to education – recognizing and valuing the community and what students are bringing in with them.
- Having high expectations of students. Giving them the opportunity to read, think, talk, and write at their grade level.
- Supporting students in developing social and emotional skills (SEL).

Q6. *What is the key question that teachers should be asking (in your opinion), when addressing their students' literacy skills?*

Ron Berger

• “We need to be watching that kids have a love and comfort with reading, writing and speaking. Because all the testing that we do won't matter if kids feel like they don't like to read, they don't like to write, they don't like to speak in public. If we can't get beyond that, well there's not a lot of hope for us. So, we have to build in kids both a love and also a sense of competency and agency that they can express themselves. A sense that they can get knowledge from reading and they can express themselves verbally and in writing and they're capable. The sense that they're capable people who can do that is key, I think. That doesn't show up any test but it's what we need to be looking for and if students are not showing that level of love and confidence we have to figure out how do we get them to think I love reading or a love writing, or I want to express myself, or I can do that, or I'm willing to speak up. I think we need to look for a spirit in kids that shows that they're willing to take on harder challenges in reading, writing, speaking and that they have strategies when they struggle. We can't fix everything right away but we can get an ethic or spirit in kids that when they're encountering harder texts, or harder written tasks or when they're asked to speak, and they're a little intimidated, that they don't give up, that they have strategies and ways to move forward when they're stuck”.

Christina Riley

Are students being presented with mirrors as well as windows? You should have a window into other people's lives but you should also have a mirror to see yourself.

Interviews with 5<sup>th</sup> grade to 11<sup>th</sup> grade teachers at Codman Academy and the Head of School (Thabiti Brown).

Q1. *What are the most effective strategies that you use to develop the **listening and speaking skills** of your students?*

The Head of School:

- Experiential learning. This centres on the idea of learning by doing. So we put them in experiences where they have to speak out loud in order to be able to successfully complete their projects e.g. the ESU's Shakespeare Competition, The August Wilson Monologue competition and the Poetry-out-loud competition. Students' involvement in these activities are added to their Humanities credits.

11<sup>th</sup> grade/year 12 teacher:

- Group discussions, whole-class discussions. Embedding a discussion element to project-based learning for example presentations or a speech.

10<sup>th</sup> grade/ year 11 teacher:

- Fieldwork, internships, entering students into monologue presentation competitions (for example, the August Wilson completion) and working with the Huntington Theatre Company.

- Peer modelling.

- Every Friday students work on theatre projects which focus on oracy and body language and how we communicate with other people. They're not doing writing in those spaces. It's all about, how do you communicate verbally? How do you communicate with your body language? How do you tell stories?

- They write half the theatre play themselves and present the play at the end of the year.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade/year 8 and 9 teacher:

- Pair discussion tasks. Situating students as experts sharing their knowledge with their peers. Embedding oracy into project-based learning tasks e.g. a monologue presented in the character of the historical figure that is the centre of the project.

- Cultivating the culture of the class in a way that allows room for students to be vulnerable enough to engage in oracy-centred tasks.

5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade/year 6 and 7 teacher:

- Class, peer and group work, peer modelling.

- Careful differentiation of students for group tasks to allow quiet students to have an opportunity to express themselves.

**Q2. What are the most effective strategies are that you use to develop the **reading and writing skills** of your students?**

The Head of School:

- Through experiential learning that pushes young people to learn through doing. This is embedded in the written tasks that students are given in each lesson, between lessons and for their assignments.

11<sup>th</sup> grade/year 12 teacher:

- A scaffolded approach to written tasks that breaks down what the task entails and what the expectations are, enabling students to engage more effectively.

- Positive reinforcement that involves reminding students of good written tasks that they have previously completed.

- The EL Education's crew ethos of teamwork that is reflected in proactive older students guiding younger students on tasks that they have successfully completed in previous years.

10<sup>th</sup> grade/year 11 teacher:

- The students write half of their theatre play themselves in small groups via an oracy-centred process. They don't start writing the script until after they've gone through the process of generating ideas together and creating sketches of scenes and tableaux. They identify what the scene looks like without actual language but with body language. Then they start to refine it, through video tape reflections of the scene followed-by the creation of a relevant script.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade/year 8 and 9 teacher:

- Using the scaffolded EmPOWER (Evaluate, Make a Plan, Organize, Work, Evaluate and Re-work – this was developed by Bonnie Singer and Anthony Bashir) approach to the sequencing of written tasks.

5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade/year 6 and 7 teacher:

- Same as above.

**Q3. What are the key challenges that you've faced in English lessons (over the course of your career) when teaching children that have had adverse childhood experiences?**

11<sup>th</sup> grade/year 12 teacher:

- The students can be closed off emotionally and demonstrate feelings of "I'm

not deserving of anything or I'm not wanted here" which can transfer into their academics: "I'm not deserving of good grades", "I'm not worthy of this". "Someone won't notice this if I do well".

- Their resilience or their desire to improve isn't always there. They can easily get down on themselves. They feel ready to give up.
- They don't feel like they're good and this can be really challenging, even if they really are good at completing the work. Once they develop that belief about themselves it's really challenging to get them to change that.

10<sup>th</sup> grade/year 11 teacher:

- The skills gap which is compounded year after year.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade/year 8 and 9 teacher:

- If the culture of the classroom is not in place, to help that child to feel safe then like it really doesn't matter how amazing the lesson is. We know if students are triggered parts of their brain shut down and learning cannot happen.

5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade/year 6 and 7 teacher:

- The lesson content itself can sometimes be triggering and they'll disengage and not want to get involved and sometimes if you don't know their background it can just look like they just don't want to do their work.

Q4. What strategies have you used to address these challenges?

11<sup>th</sup> grade/year 12 teacher:

- One-to-one work, positive reinforcement, careful task instructions and reminding students of the good work that they have produced.

10<sup>th</sup> grade/year 11 teacher:

- Using the schools' structural provision of support. Getting support from the school's Student Support Team to support students who have reading disabilities, oracy difficulties and social-emotional disabilities that impact on their learning.

7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade/year 8 and 9 teacher:

- Key focus is on creating a classroom culture that is conducive to the success of the child.

5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade/year 6 and 7 teacher

In dealing with emotionally triggering topics: making sure that you are mindful that they are bringing their own experiences and having some conversations before engaging in areas that might potentially be troubling.

Action-based research with 9<sup>th</sup> grade/year 10 students followed by voluntary student task feedback questionnaires

Student questionnaire feedback results.

Codman Academy went to great lengths to accommodate my request for this element of my research and allocated approximately 25 minutes of the remaining time in the two 9<sup>th</sup> grade humanities lessons to the completion of this task. There were time constraints as the students were completing a test that overran and their teacher needed to have time at the end of the lessons to give them their homework instructions, consequently, there was no ice-breaker or lead-up to the delivery of the lesson recap tasks. The children and the teacher did their utmost to engage well with the task despite these limitations. Eight students across both 9<sup>th</sup> grade Humanities classes completed and presented their lesson recaps. One student had prepared hers but was too shy to deliver it, I presented it to the class on her behalf. The results of the

key questions are summarised below. Four students that did not present their lesson recaps provided feedback on their peers' presentations. Please find the anonymous student responses summarised below:

**Table 4**  
**Action-based research with 9<sup>th</sup> grade students at Codman Academy Charter School**

<p>Q1. <i>On a scale of 1-10. 1 being not confident and 10 being very confident. How confident were you about your ability to complete the lesson recap task?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 1 = 1 student.</li> <li>• 3 = 1 student.</li> <li>• 5 = 1 student.</li> <li>• 7 = 3 students</li> <li>• 8 = 2 students.</li> <li>• 10 = 1 student.</li> </ul> <p>The majority of the 9 students (7 students) selected a score of at least 5 for this question.</p>
<p>Q2. <i>How do you think your lesson recap went?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Very good</li> <li>• Great (2 students).</li> <li>• Pretty good.</li> <li>• Good (4 students).</li> <li>• It went well.</li> </ul> <p>All 9 students expressed a good level of satisfaction with their lesson recap.</p>
<p>Q3. <i>What was your biggest challenge when <b>planning</b> your lesson recap?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trying to make the speech long enough.</li> <li>• Knowing how to start.</li> <li>• Finishing it.</li> <li>• Focusing.</li> <li>• Picking which lesson to present.</li> <li>• Timekeeping.</li> <li>• Explaining a historical situation.</li> <li>• No challenge.</li> <li>• One student did not answer this question.</li> </ul>
<p>Q4. How were you able to <b>solve</b> this challenge, if so, how?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Problem -Focusing: Yes. I presented.</li> <li>• Problem -Knowing how to start: Yes. I just kept typing until I felt it was good enough.</li> <li>• Problem - Trying to make the speech long enough: Yes, by writing and explaining each answer.</li> <li>• Problem - Explaining a historical situation: Google.</li> <li>• I let Sylvia read it for me.</li> <li>• Others did not answer this question.</li> </ul> <p>The overriding solution that the students have given on how they overcame their initial challenges with the task is by doing. Their decision to use this approach to problem-solve demonstrates the school's culture that encourages students to learn by doing.</p>
<p>Q5. Did you find listening to other students' lesson recaps helpful? If so, why? If not, why not?</p>

- Yes, they explained colonialization and bias/unbiased: **student that didn't present.**
- Not really and because it just was helpful: **student that didn't present.**
- Yes. It was nice to let us get important info from our class: **student that didn't present.**
- Yes, because they explain what I have a hard time... **student that didn't present.**
- Yes: **student that presented.**
- Yes – I re-learned it: **student whose lesson recap I presented.**
- No x 2: **students that presented.**
- Yes, because it was a good way to understand what they thought: **student that presented.**
- Yes, because it was better for me to hear a peers' voice instead of a teacher's: **student that presented.**
- Yes, listening to other people's definitions was helpful: **student that presented.**

8 of the 10 students that completed this question stated that the lesson recaps were helpful with 7 providing specific reasons why. The students' comment about it being a "good way to understand what they thought" and "Because they explain what I have a hard time..." highlight the fact that students not only see their teachers as a source of information in lessons but their peers and that they have an interest in hearing what other students have extrapolated from a lesson (this interest could particularly be high in hearing what the students with a higher level of subject proficiency have interpreted from the same material that they viewed) individual non-verbal written tasks do not provide them with an opportunity to do this. This is particularly interesting given that the students had just completed a written test in which they were unable to hear the thoughts of their peers.

Q6. What did you think about the presentations of the other students?

- Very good: **student that didn't present.**
- They were really thought out: **student that didn't present.**
- They did a good job: **student that didn't present.**
- They did good, just be more louder: **student that presented.**
- It was good (x2): **student that presented.**
- Wonderful: **student whose lesson cap I presented.**
- A lot more information: **student that presented.**
- It could have been better: **student that presented.**
- Good (x2): **student that presented.**
- They were okay: **student that presented.**

8 of the 10 students rated their peers' presentations as at least 'good'.

As the students had just completed a test for this subject they would be conscious of the key assessment points that their Humanities lessons were designed to prepare them for and particularly attentive to answers to some of the questions that they were asked in the written test. This adds to the level of validity of their assessments of their peers' lesson recaps and makes their positive feedback of particular note. In future research it would be interesting to explore the written test results of the students that prepare oral feedback on what they have learnt whilst engaging in revision for a written assessment and to see whether preparing to explain the concepts verbally makes it easier for them to process the key points that they needed to include on their written assessment.

## Discussion

The key challenges that looked -after children and children that have had adverse childhood experience face in the area of their education and ways of addressing this.

As the USA has a decentralised education system each state is allowed to set its own curriculum. This presents significant challenges of discontinuity to foster children when they move to different states. A limited understanding of the personal situations of foster children, for example, from the perspective of the impact of their adverse childhood is an underlying issue that both members of the Legal Centre for Foster Care and Education and the teachers at Codman Academy underscored as a barrier to learning. Educators' lack of understanding of the effect of the trauma that many foster children have experienced contributes to higher school suspensions and misconceptions of the behaviour of children that are recovering from adverse childhood experiences, for example, the example the fifth and sixth grade Codman Academy teacher gave of the dangers of the misinterpretation of a student response that has been caused by the emotions triggered by an emotive topic as a student being unwilling to work. Teachers' lack of understanding of the foster care process (for example, the process through which foster children leave residential children's homes and are placed in a foster home, the process through which some children return to their biological parents' home) can limit their ability to fully appreciate the extent of the anxiety, emotional strain and fear of rejection that foster children are experiencing during this rollercoaster period in their lives and bringing to schools and the anxiety and limitations that their foster parents are experiencing.

The underlying theme in the strategies that Codman Academy's fifth grade/year six to eleventh grade/year twelve teachers apply to address the challenges that children that have had adverse childhood experiences have at school is a careful and differentiated approach to every element of their teaching, from their introduction of emotive topics, to their cultivation of safe classroom environments for the children to feel comfortable enough to be vulnerable in, to their use of differentiated text (particularly for students who speak English as a second language, a vast number of unaccompanied child refugees in care speak English as a second language). These strategies enable Codman Academy to utilise oracy-centred strategies in a way that engages rather than intimidates its vulnerable students.

The level of confidence that Codman Academy's students have when it comes to oracy-centred activities is reflected in the results of the action-based research that I completed. As an English teacher, I appreciate how challenging it is to get students to engage in presentations at the best of times, nevertheless presentations in front of a teacher from abroad after completing a long test. The students' engagement with the task and their positive feedback, coupled by the random selection of the class is a testament to the oracy-centred culture that the school has. The students' high confidence level in their ability to complete their lesson recap task reflects the sound teaching that they were given in the lessons and Ron Berger's vision of EL Education's students having "a sense of competency and agency that they can express themselves". Their positive reflections of their lesson recaps after completing them reflects EL Education's Head of Curriculum's vision for the children to not only have windows through which they see others but mirrors through which they see themselves and the benefits of Codman Academy's teachers' emphasis on strategies

that build the self-esteem of their students. As I designed the lesson recap task using the key physical, linguistic, cognitive, social and emotional strands of Voice 21's oracy-framework, the results of this task reinforced the degree to which EL Education's education ethos and Voice 21's education ethos complement each other and serve a similar purpose.

## **Conclusion**

### My impressions

My research visit to the USA has shown me the broad range of factors that contribute to the low education attainment levels of foster children that many educators are not necessarily aware of. The range of complex external factors that are outside of the power of foster children highlights the needs for schools to take particular and deliberate care to empower looked-after children by: showing them that their voice matters and is valued, demonstrating an appreciation of their personal strengths and potential and cultivating a sense of belonging and acceptance. Oracy-centred literacy strategies have a strong potential to support teachers in doing this when approached with a considered and differentiated approach to the cultivating of the group classroom dynamic, lesson planning, delivery and assessment. EL Education's approach to English curriculum planning and its teachers' approach to teaching provide a good model for UK schools in their quest to do this in their own schools.

Codman Academy's Huntington Theatre programme entails students working with teacher actors to learn about the interplay between physical and verbal communication whilst developing their written literacy skills by writing half of their final play. It is a strategy that schools in the UK can also utilise, for example through a collaborative cross-curricular approach to the development of students' verbal and written literacy that involves schools' English and Drama departments working together or by allowing students to engage more in the scriptwriting of school plays. Furthermore, the vast range of tactics that EL Education uses from the perspective of its English Curriculum Design to its teachers' lesson planning, delivery and assessment are transferable to UK English lessons from year 6 to year 12.

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