

# Developing Debating Initiative 2024 - 2025



## Overview

From September 2024, Eleanor Palmer Primary School led an initiative to develop a structured and inclusive debating curriculum for KS2 pupils. In collaboration with seven other Camden schools, the project aimed to embed fortnightly whole-class debating lessons that would build pupils' confidence, reasoning, and communication skills through the development of a curriculum model that provides a clear structure of delivery.

## Why this and why now?

Oracy is increasingly recognised as a vital skill for academic success, employability, and social mobility. Children with strong communication skills are four times more likely to achieve five A\*-C GCSEs, and employers consistently rank oral communication as the most important workplace skill, [suttontrust.com]. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) identifies oracy as a high-impact, low-cost strategy, particularly for disadvantaged pupils. Yet, the [Sutton Trust's 2024 Life Lessons report](#) found that pupils in private schools are nearly three times more likely to access debate clubs than their state school peers. While Camden schools embed oracy across subjects, debating as a discrete, sequenced curriculum area has been underdeveloped. Teachers reported clear benefits from trial lessons but lacked confidence, resources, and progression models. This initiative responds to those needs by creating a curriculum that is inclusive, scalable, and rooted in classroom practice.

## Goals and Intentions

The initiative set out to:

- Co-create a structured debating curriculum for Years 3-6.
- Build teacher confidence and subject knowledge through CPD and practical resources.
- Challenge perceptions that debating is only for certain pupils.
- Ensure accessibility for disadvantaged pupils, EAL learners, and those with additional needs.
- Embed fortnightly debating lessons using a "low threshold, high ceiling" approach.

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## What we did

Teachers from eight Camden schools collaborated to design and trial the curriculum. Key activities included:

### Baseline lessons:

Year 3 teachers delivered introductory lessons using a shared observation proforma. Findings revealed varied pupil strengths, some had strong physical oracy (e.g. projection, eye contact), while others struggled with organisation, counter-arguments, or spontaneous contributions.

### Curriculum design:

Five skill strands were developed: Organisation, Building Arguments, Listening and Responding, Linguistic, and Physical, drawing on the Voice 21 Oracy Framework and formal debate judging criteria.

**Professional collaboration:** Teachers shared learning at a national Literacy Conference. Plans are underway for a borough-wide debating competition and a Teach Meet-style event to further disseminate resources and strategies.

### Resource creation:

- "Do Now" activities blending oral, reading, and writing tasks.
- Tiered games and debate structures (e.g. paired arguments, layered discussions, citizen-style assemblies).
- Sentence stems, visual prompts, and Widgit images to support vocabulary and behaviour.
- A bank of debate motions organised by conceptual and vocabulary complexity.
- Model arguments to illustrate strong and weaker practice.

## Impact on Practice

### Powerful Pedagogy

The co-constructed curriculum model provided clarity and progression across Years 3–6. Teachers taking part reported that having a shared structure helped them plan lessons more deliberately and adapt with greater precision for mixed-attainment cohorts as well as confidence to embed oracy into wider curriculum areas such as literacy, PSHE, and citizenship.

*"Debating is really fun, it's increased my confidence in talking in front of other people."*

*"Debating is such a valuable part of the curriculum, especially for the children in our setting who may not previously have experienced this form of speaking and listening."*

## **Pupil Oracy**

Structured oracy scaffolds supported pupils to respond more thoughtfully through greater precision in chosen vocabulary.

Pupils reported and teachers assessed greater confidence in speaking in front of others, particularly among pupils who had not previously accessed debating.

## **Key takeaways for effective implementation**

1

### **Establish talk routines and expectations early**

Build a classroom culture that values respectful listening, turn-taking, and structured speaking before introducing formal debate formats.

2

### **Teach debating skills explicitly using a clear framework**

Use the five skill strands—Organisation, Building Arguments, Listening and Responding, Linguistic, and Physical—to sequence learning and support progression across KS2.

3

### **Start small and build confidence gradually**

Begin with low-stakes formats like Talk Partner work or paired arguments before moving to structured group debates, especially for less confident pupils.

4

### **Use scaffolds to support vocabulary and participation**

Incorporate sentence stems, Widgeit images, and visual prompts to help all pupils, especially those with EAL or additional needs, access and contribute to debates.

5

### **Embed reading and analysis to deepen understanding**

Use echo reading, model arguments, and scaffolded comparisons to develop fluency, critical thinking, and awareness of effective reasoning.

*Eleanor Palmer Primary School worked in partnership with: Argyle, Hawley, Torriano, Hampstead Parochial, Kingsgate, Brookfield, Argyle and Christ Church NW3 Primary Schools, London Borough of Camden*