

Now the masks are off, let every voice be heard

March 2022

If you read no further than the end of this sentence, please watch the YouTube video [Frank Cottrell-Boyce supporting the Essex Year of Reading - Essex County Council](#).

This short film was commissioned for the recent launch of the [Essex Year of Reading 2022](#). It is one of the most moving pieces about the power of reading that I have come across in five decades in education.

Show it to any age audience and it will stir a wide range of emotions: sheer fun when the author speaks about the large youths he encountered in a Glasgow classroom; deep sadness in reflecting on the human misery of war. And much besides.

Frank Cottrell-Boyce's closing words about reading aloud to one another, and especially to children, strike a timely chord.

For close on two years in classrooms, teachers' and students' voices have been muzzled. In the early months of online learning, children's voices were little heard, teachers relying on the 'chat' function to check understanding. And once masks became the order of the day in secondary classrooms the vital conversational sparks and interactions were curtailed.

Teachers and support staff across all phases have made the very best of their own facial restrictions, but I know few who were not beaming as they cast off their protective gear last month.

Life in any classroom is simply not the same when smiles are hidden, students' mutual conversations are half-heard, and answers to teachers' questions are muffled. The very wearing of a mask affects how we structure our speech.

Someone will be quick to observe that there is published research into 'the masked classroom' which pre-dates Covid. And that research showed advantages and disadvantages. I don't believe it! In all the classrooms I've visited over the past months, I detect loss: the pivotal role of oracy and keen listening has suffered immeasurably.

Arguably, certain subjects have been affected more than others.

Teachers of modern foreign languages, drama, humanities and English say their usual repertoire has been limited and much of the enjoyment of their subjects dented. Maths and science teachers comment that while lessons focused on subject content have been satisfactory, topics which require conversational exchanges have not been explored by students in the usual depth. Practical subjects have lost out too.

The impact on this summer's examination performance at GCSE and A level will be worth researching, though disentangling reduced oracy from so many other factors may prove difficult.

Two particular groups of students have felt the effect of the masked voice. Those with English as an additional language and those with identified speech and language needs have been impacted significantly - [I CAN](#).

With masks optimistically a thing of the past, the coming months in schools and colleges across the country should ensure that every voice is heard and every smile encouraged. Let us plan for this trinity:

- Reading aloud across the curriculum
- Oracy opportunities at every turn, for every child
- Vocabulary practice - say it loud, say it proud.

Let the fun and fundamentals of speech and language sing in our classrooms.