

DEBATING THE **EVIDENCE**



**Debating the evidence: an international
review of current situation and perceptions**

Research synthesis

Rodie Akerman
Ian Neale



Welcome to CfBT Education Trust

CfBT Education Trust is a top 50 charity providing education services for public benefit in the UK and internationally. Established over 40 years ago, CfBT Education Trust now has an annual turnover exceeding £100 million and employs 2,300 staff worldwide who support educational reform, teach, advise, research and train.

Since we were founded, we have worked in more than 40 countries around the world. Our work involves teacher and leadership training, curriculum design and school improvement services. The majority of staff provide services direct to learners: in nurseries, schools and academies; through projects for excluded pupils; in young offender institutions; and in advice and guidance centres for young people.

We have worked successfully to implement reform programmes for governments throughout the world. Government clients in the UK include the Department for Education (DfE), the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), and local authorities. Internationally, we work with education ministries in Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Singapore among many others.

Surpluses generated by our operations are reinvested in educational research and development. Our research programme – Evidence for Education – aims to improve educational practice on the ground and widen access to research in the UK and overseas.

Visit www.cfbt.com for more information.



The English-Speaking Union

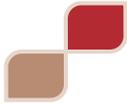
Welcome to the English-Speaking Union (ESU)

The English-Speaking Union (ESU) is an educational charity, focused on promoting global understanding through the use of English, and helping to build confidence and effective communication skills to allow people to realise their potential. We have over 40 branches in the UK and operate in more than 50 countries worldwide, offering debating and public speaking training and development, along with other learning opportunities to people of all ages.

Established in 1918 by Sir Evelyn Wrench, the ESU has remained committed to these goals over our 90-year history. Headquartered at Dartmouth House in London, we have a network of global mentors and organisers who assist in the running of our programmes. These aims are achieved in a number of ways; from supporting scholarships and exchanges, including the Secondary Schools Exchange (SSE) between the US and UK and many parliamentary exchanges, to our literary awards for biographies, education texts and translations.

The ESU's objectives are three-fold: the running of prestigious competitions such as the International Public Speaking Competition, the International Schools Mace (international schools debating competition) and the John Smith Memorial Mace (international universities debating competition); the delivery of training through its longstanding teaching programme, Discover Your Voice, which trains in excess of 4,000 students per year; and the support of new and developing social advocacy and citizenship programmes across the Middle East, Africa and other developing parts of the world.

For more information on the English-Speaking Union please visit www.esu.org



Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions

Technology has fuelled the capacity for people to discuss issues and make their voices heard.

Introduction

We live in a global society, where the latest news stories and events from across the world move at a rapid pace and are the subjects of constant debate. Technology has fuelled the capacity for people to discuss issues and make their voices heard. Yet here in the UK, concerns are expressed that young people often lack the communication skills needed in the workplace and in life.

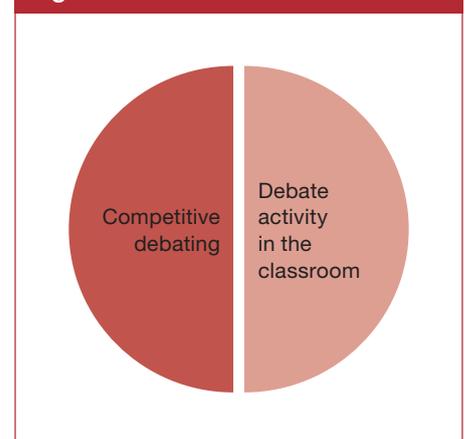
In the context of the increasing importance of social and political debate and the need to have the ability to communicate knowledge effectively, activities involving debate, public speaking or other training in oral communication ('debate activities') ought to be recognised for their role in developing vital skills for children and young people. However, while a wealth of anecdotal evidence exists on the value and impact of debate activities, no previous work has brought together the evidence around the benefits for children and young people and their learning.

A new report, *Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions*, aims to fill that gap by exploring what is currently known about the impact and benefits of participating in debate activities.

Debate activity is more than just a competition

Debate activities have the potential to be used in a variety of contexts and environments across the education spectrum. Debate activities are commonly thought of in relation to competitive debate, often in the form of well-established debate leagues and competitions. However, this covers only part of how debate can be used to support the development of children and young people. Equally prominent in the literature is classroom debate and the use of debate activities as a teaching tool. This is a form of active learning, where students work either collaboratively or independently to research an issue and debate it in class. US schools and colleges take this further through classes in argumentation and communication that allow students to improve their skills in oral communication, argumentation or rhetoric.

Figure 1: The evidence



Positive perceptions of the value of debate

There is a great deal of agreement that debate activities *should* support learning and provide important benefits to participants. They involve children and young people in practising speech and communication skills as well as reading and writing; they demand that participants construct arguments and think critically about evidence; they often involve library research skills, self-managed study and time management; and they help participants to grapple with the social issues of the day (Reppert 1991; Crenshaw 1998 in Arbenz 2001).



A range of studies suggest that debate has a practical and meaningful influence on the attainment of young people from diverse backgrounds, and in particular on the development of literacy skills.

In essence, debate is a way of promoting active learning, with advocates arguing that researching, discussing and defending an issue may well give students a more meaningful experience than 'merely reading about it in a textbook' (Tumposky 2004, p. 52). However, although the positive characteristics of debate activities may be enumerated, what evidence can be found of children and young people benefiting from engaging in them?

Improvements in academic attainment

The strongest body of evidence exists around the relationship between participation in debate activities and improvements in academic attainment. A range of studies suggest that debate has a practical and meaningful influence on the attainment of young people from diverse backgrounds, and in particular on the development of literacy skills.

The most recent and largest-scale work finds that debaters were 25% more likely to graduate from high school than a group of comparable peers, and that they scored significantly better in reading and English tests, gaining on average an extra 1.02 and 1.04 points¹ respectively (Mezuk *et al.* 2010). This evidence is supported by another study of high school debaters that found an improvement of 25% in the reading scores of 209 debaters versus 212 randomly selected non-debaters from the same schools (Collier 2004). A number of smaller studies of both competitive and classroom debate activities also support the claim that participation leads to improvements in attainment, whether overall or in specific subjects.

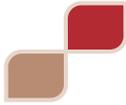
The evidence on classroom debate activities indicates there is a link with increased subject knowledge and achievement in science (biology), history, art and English as a foreign language. Using debate as a teaching tool can also deliver a greater depth of learning. In the teaching of history, a qualitative study focusing on the use of debate with 10 and 11 year olds found that debate enabled pupils to delve further than usual into historical events and to understand historical contexts and differences between viewpoints from the past (Jensen 2008).

Increasing student engagement

The evidence for the academic benefits of debate activities is supported by a strong body of student perception data indicating that engaging in speech and debate activities increases engagement and motivation in a subject, improves subject knowledge and helps students apply their learning to real-world situations.

For example, a majority (79%) of English undergraduates in one study reported that classroom debates had encouraged them to engage with and learn the course content (Goodwin 2003). A college group of business students also reported that classroom debates contributed to their understanding of the topic (88% of 68 students) and enriched the course (88%) (Rao 2010), while business students in another study reported that the debates helped them to appreciate the real-world significance of economics (75% of those surveyed) and that they had learned something about analysing real-life situations (72%) (Vo and Morris 2006).

¹ An improvement of 0.5 points is considered 'practically important' by the operator of the test (ACT 2006 in Mezuk *et al.* 2010).



Evidence exists to support the claim that debate activities can in fact increase participants' aspirations for higher education

Developing critical thinking

Given the pace of change and complexity of modern life, the ability to think critically is an important skill for children and young people to develop. The relationship between the practice of participating in debate activities and the development of critical thinking skills is a strong theme in the literature, with both qualitative and quantitative research suggesting that participation can improve critical thinking.

A meta-analysis by Allen *et al.* (1999) makes a strong argument and concludes that training in communication skills (including debate) measurably improves participants' critical thinking, by as much as 44%. Teachers of secondary school students taking part in the London Debate Challenge reported that participating in competitive debate helped to develop students' skills in selecting evidence and structuring and summing up an argument, with potential 'knock-on' benefits for their written work (Jerome and Algarra 2006). Students' own perceptions also add weight to the argument that participation in debate activities lead to improvements in critical thinking, with competitive debaters ranking improvements in critical thinking among the top five benefits of taking part in debate.

Better communication skills

As regards communication skills in general, students' own perceptions provide strong evidence that taking part in debate activities leads to improvements in these skills. A majority (74%) of US college students from six classes, participating in classroom debate in various subjects, agreed that improved communication skills were a benefit (Cronin 1990).

This finding is supported by surveys of 286 university and 193 high school students in the US, who perceived improved communication and speaking skills to be the most important benefit of competitive debate (Williams *et al.* 2001 and Littlefield 2001); and by Japanese participants in competitive debating in English, who also ranked improved speaking and communication skills, and improved English, as their top benefits (Inoue and Nakano 2004), providing a particular international angle to the findings.

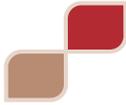
Raising aspirations for education

Raising young people's expectations and aspirations around education is a critically important aspect of education policy. Evidence exists to support the claim that debate activities can in fact increase participants' aspirations for higher education, with US high school debaters showing an increased commitment to attend college in comparison with their non-debating peers (Collier 2004; Shuster 2008).

Boosting confidence

While academic impacts are an important focus, it is also possible to identify evidence that participating in debate activities can boost young people's confidence. Valuable evidence exists from an Ofsted review of 44 UK schools and from the London Debate Challenge, highlighting that participation in both classroom and competitive debate can play a role. Importantly, the review by Ofsted suggests that pupils who are encouraged to debate, present and reflect critically gain in confidence from the sense of challenge and personal achievement they experience.

Young people and their teachers taking part in the London Debate Challenge reported increased confidence most frequently among the benefits they perceived, while students also thought



... debate activities have the power to contribute not only to educational achievement, but also to a range of wider outcomes that work towards developing more rounded and confident individuals for later life.

that taking part in this competition helped to prepare them for future career roles (Jerome and Algarra 2005).

'I have also gained confidence. When debating, if you stand up and are not sure about your argument or yourself, your opponent will pick up on it and use it against you, so you have to be able to stand up and present yourself with confidence, which I learned to do at the London Debate Challenge.'

Year 9 student (Jerome and Algarra 2005, p.32)

Increasing cultural awareness

The broadening of horizons, improved cultural awareness through meeting new people and spending time with those from diverse backgrounds, and the empowerment of young people are also important elements around the value of debate activities in schools (Williams *et al.* 2001; Littlefield 2001; Inoue and Nakano 2004). For students from disadvantaged backgrounds, debating and winning – even against those from elite backgrounds – can equip them to see that disadvantage can be overcome and to take on those in positions of power in other situations.

Making the case for the value of debate activities

The evidence makes the case for the increased use of debate activities as a teaching tool to support the learning of children and young people, as well as for the value of competitive debate activities. Studies suggest that there is a positive relationship between debate activities in schools and improvements in overall attainment, reading and writing, and the development of critical thinking skills. Furthermore, qualitative studies, expert opinion and student perception data point to a range of additional benefits relating to improvements in communication skills and wider, 'softer' outcomes such as increases in aspirations around education and the broadening of young people's cultural horizons.

As is the case with educational interventions in general, it can be extremely difficult to prove a causal link between debate activities and outcomes because of the variety of other factors that can influence outcomes such as attainment, and the difficulties in measuring the less tangible effects. What is apparent from the existing studies is that debate activities have the power to contribute not only to educational achievement, but also to a range of wider outcomes that work towards developing more rounded and confident individuals for later life.

About this research

The findings set out in this report are based on a rapid research review of relevant international literature around the impact and benefits of debate activities. A search strategy was developed and initial searches identified over 800 references, which were narrowed to 59 titles for review, through applying inclusion/exclusion criteria and through an assessment of methodological robustness.

The search and analysis of the findings in this report have been supported by the input of an expert consultative group, consisting of prominent individuals from across the world of debate. Full details of this group can be found in the full report, *Debating the evidence: an international review of current situation and perceptions: Research report*.

The authors would also like to thank Kallina Basli, Jason Vit and Martin Mulloy from the English-Speaking Union and Karen Whitby from CfBT for their guidance and support.



References

- Allen, M., Berkowitz, S., Hunt, S. and Loudon, A. (1999). A meta-analysis of the impact of forensics and communication education on critical thinking. *Communication Education*, 48: 18–30.
- Arbenz, C. and Beltran, S. (2001). Empowering Latinas Through Debate: An Analysis of Success at SCUDL Tournaments of Latina Debaters. Paper presented at the Western States Communication Association's 2001 Panel on Debate Outreach, Coeur D'Alene, Idaho.
- Collier, L. (2004). Argument for Success: A Study of Academic Debate in the Urban High Schools of Chicago, Kansas City, New York, St. Louis and Seattle. Paper presented at the Hawaii International Conference on Social Sciences, Honolulu.
- Cronin, M. (1990). Debating to learn across the curriculum: Implementation and assessment. Paper presented at the Southern States Communication Association Convention, Birmingham, Alabama.
- Goodwin, J. (2003). Students' perspectives on debate exercises in content area classes. *Communication Education*, 52 (2): 157–163.
- Inoue, N. and Nakano, M. (2004). The Benefits and Costs of Participating in Competitive Debate Activities: Differences Between Japanese and American College Students. Paper presented at Wake Forest University/International Society for the Study of Argumentation, Venice Argumentation Conference, June 27–30.
- Jensen, J. (2008). Developing Historical Empathy through Debate: An Action Research Study. *Social Studies Research and Practice*, 3 (1).
- Jerome, L. and Algarra, B. (2006). English-Speaking Union London Debate Challenge: 2005–06 Final Evaluation Report. Cambridge and Chelmsford: Anglia Ruskin University.
- Littlefield, R. (2001). High school student perceptions of the efficacy of debate participation. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 38 (2): 83–97.
- Mezuk, B., Bondarenko, I., Smith, S. and Tucker, E. (2010). The Influence of a Policy Debate Program on Achievement in a Large Urban Public School System. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Sociological Association, Hilton Atlanta and Atlanta Marriott Marquis, Atlanta, Georgia, August 14.
- Rao, P. (2010). Debates as a pedagogical learning technique: empirical research with business students. *Multicultural Education & Technology Journal*, 4 (4): 234–250.
- Reppert, J. (1991). Improving Relationships between College and High School Forensics Programs: Three Case Studies and a Regional Survey. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (77th), Atlanta, Georgia, October 31–November 3.
- Shuster, C. (2008). Not Making the Case: A Critical Examination of Research Supporting Urban Debate Leagues. Paper presented at the 2nd International Conference on Argumentation, Rhetoric, Debate and the Pedagogy of Empowerment, Ljubljana, Slovenia, April 11–13.
- Tumposky, N. (2004). The debate debate. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 78 (2): 52–55.
- Vo, H. and Morris, R. (2006). Debate as a tool in teaching economics: Rationale, technique, and some evidence. *Journal of Education for Business*, 81 (6): 315–320.
- Williams, D., McGee, B. and Worth, D. (2001). University student perceptions of the efficacy of debate participation: an empirical investigation. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 37: 198–209.



CfBT Education Trust
60 Queens Road
Reading
Berkshire
RG1 4BS
0118 902 1000
www.cfbt.com