Spoken English

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CHAPTER III

SPOKEN ENGLISH IN SCHOOL

ORACY is not a "subject"—it is a condition of learning in all subjects; it is not a "frill" but a state of being in which the whole school must operate. It was argued in the Introduction that the NOL skills (numeracy, oracy, literacy) characterise the educated person; and that of these oracy is central. If this is so then it implies a reorientation in our educational practice which in places will need to be drastic. The key word in our school disciplinary system has been *"Shut up!"*; we have been obeyed only too well.

In this chapter the general conditions favourable to spoken English in schools are looked at; and then more specifically some of the problems and methods involved in teaching it in the classroom.

1. GENERAL ORGANISATION

In school silence is regarded as an oil to the wheels of educational efficiency. And this is true. In so far as noise is an indication of rowdyism, interferes with the learning of other groups or classes, creates an atmosphere of tension in staff and children (for great noise is one of our twentieth-century afflictions) then silence is necessary. But, to continue the image, there are places in a mechanism where oil should not be: oil on the plugs for instance muffles or murders the vital spark and the engine fails. Discrimination is all. Unfortunately there are far too many schools in which the oil is applied everywhere. The head is almost the abbot of a Trappist monastery; he regards silence in and for itself as having some peculiar virtue. The effects of this will be seen both in the general running of the school and in the staff-pupil relationships.

This is one of the reasons (others have been suggested in Chapter II) for the neglect of the spoken language. "Speech" has been isolated from the life of the school. The traditional licensed outlets have been the school play, and the debating society—both extra-curricular activities, neither involving more than a very small proportion of pupils. In those schools where "speech" has been taught it has seldom been done by a regular member of staff. Instead a

visiting "speech specialist" has attended for one or two periods with one or two forms; however intelligent her work is (why are they always women?) she finds it impossible to integrate it, as she knows it should be integrated, with the regular teaching. Because it is not integrated the staff distrust it; they also distrust it because they associate it with "elocution"—they may be right about this, but may equally be wrong. Other schools, a comparatively small number, may have a "speech specialist" on the staff; but even this can be unfortunate if it encourages the assumption that oracy is something which can be safely left to "speech periods" on the time-table, and that other teachers are not concerned. Every teacher is a teacher of English; every speaker is a teacher of speech.

Since oracy is inextricably bound up with personality its encouragement is a matter of the fundamental attitude of the school towards its pupils; of their relationships with the staff; of the degree of responsibility accorded them; of the confidence they acquire. Oracy and democracy are closely related. If the regime is autocratic then the children are less likely to be orate than if it were more tolerant, and gave them a greater share in the running of the school. There are exceptions of course. In some independent and some preparatory schools, there is a high degree of oracy despite an autocratic system because the pupils possess a high degree of confidence and language experience from their home backgrounds. One finds similar schools where these conditions do not operate, and where there is a large degree of inoracy despite fastidious RP accents. There are a few schools where individual teaching is so enlightened that it can produce in the classroom conditions which do not operate in the rest of the school. But the general picture is clear. Where children are given responsibility they are placed in situations where it becomes important for them to communicate—to discuss, to negotiate, to converse—with their fellows, with the staff, with other adults. And of necessity they are likely to develop oral skills. This basically is how oracy grows: it is to be taught by the creation of many and varied circumstances to which both speech and listening are the natural responses. Shahrazad was told "communicate or perish", and a thousand and one nights did not exhaust her discourse. There is a very real sense in which we must all communicate or perish.

That the pupils should take responsibility is the basis of good *methodological* practice in the classroom itself. Psychological research has made it clear that the learner is active; he must co-operate in his own education. Teaching, in which the pupil plays a passive role,

receiving information directed to him by the teacher, is less effective than that in which there is reciprocity. The contributions that the pupils are expected to make to a lesson—in answering questions, asking questions, in discussion, in interpretation, in carrying out assignments—are obvious indications that responsibility is shared. And a good part of this activity will be in oral form. Some subjects and some parts of some subjects will lend themselves to oral treatment more than others; reading and writing there must certainly be but too often the possibility of proceeding by word of mouth is insufficiently entertained, even where it would be an improvement.

In the classroom other factors making for oracy operate. One is the speech model provided by the teacher himself. Another is that the dialogue is taking place in the realm of ideas; the situation is more formal than that operating outside school, but not so much so that it is inhibiting. Thus the Playground English used a few minutes before amongst the peer group will be out of place; the style too intimate, the register too narrow. But it will not be too much out of place, for a wise teacher will extend tolerance in the transition; and the peer group will be the same. Throughout every school day there will be opportunities for practice in conditions which are not too daunting. If one is to refer to "bi-lingualism" at all, this is what one must mean by it, and not the matter of accent switches which are so often disastrous.

The teacher-pupils dialogue is only one of those possible. Division of a form into groups each with a particular item for discussion, with particular plans to make or course of action to decide on, is a method capable of much greater application in most subjects than it has received. Some schools operate projects based on group assignments, which require discussion amongst themselves, the seeking out of information, not only from books but from their families, inhabitants in the area, the representatives of business firms and public service bodies, from the local historians, librarians, newspaper, clergy, etc., involving the pupils in a large number of different speech situations.

In general devices which are intended primarily for the efficient running of the school are often a means of social—and speech—development. Hence there are pupils' councils with some responsibility for school government (though this will have to be greater than the right to complain about blocked lavatories or missing electric light bulbs). Many customary activities at present carried on by head and staff can be handled by pupils. There are schools where

much of the planning for school events such as fête and speech days are carried out by the boys and/or girls; where visitors to the school are taken round by them; where, on open days, they act as receptionists and hosts, and give short talks on the work or experiments in different departments. The art of talking to adult strangers is not an easy one for a fifteen- or sixteen-year old; he (or she) may be uncommunicative or obsequious on the one hand or apparently condescending and off-hand on the other. It is important that the visitor should not be made to feel either that he is a contemporary of Gladstone, or a contemporary of the guide. Where the pupils have practice of this kind the results are often remarkable. Again, if Speech Days are to be preserved as an institution, there seems little reason why they should be preserved in their present form. The pupils' part in these is usually limited to the proposing and seconding of a vote of thanks, and the field is otherwise free for the Chairman of the Governors, the Distinguished Visitor, and the Head. The present writer has never met anyone, with the possible exception of these three, who enjoy such occasions. A day upon which we heard the speech of the children instead of that of their elders would be a refreshing change (see section 3 (D) below).

Extra-curricular activities are of course important in the development of oracy; for instance societies where children meet to further common interests, as well as those specifically devoted to speaking— debating societies, discussion groups, sixth form societies whose entry ticket is to give an acceptable talk before a meeting of members. In some schools great stress is laid upon school meals as socialising occasions. The dramatic society is the traditional training ground for interpretative speech; but film societies whose members script and make films will necessarily talk a good deal in the process, and to a purpose; and a tape recording group might well produce original spoken material for entertainment or competition. Some schools encourage their pupils to undertake social service of some kind with old, sick or blind people, or to organise efforts for charity. Such exercises—quite apart from the other benefits—place the pupils in a variety of speech situations where communication is essential. This is "speech training" in the fundamental sense.

2. "SPEECH TRAINING"

The development of oracy in schools is not synonymous with "formal speech training". It is as well to make this clear because the fear commonly expressed when the subject of spoken English comes

up is that children will be expected to perform endless variations on the How Now Brown Cow theme. This is not so. Certainly that Brown Cow is still abroad and her lowings can be heard from time to time, but much less often than is commonly supposed. Since however the confusion is so often met with, it will not be out of place to say a little about the place of formal speech training for normal educational purposes.

Speech training, as the term is usually understood, is not suitable for use in schools. There are many reasons for this. One is that it is too abstract. Behind it there lurks a belief in the value of exercises unrelated to specific speech situations (the case has some parallels with that of grammatical exercises unrelated to written composition). A second is that it has an over-riding concern with accent. One studies frightening anatomical diagrams of the mouth and lip positions; one may be required to acquire the phonetic alphabet. The assumption is that there is a "correct" accent, and the vocabulary used to describe any variations from this accent is tendentious in the highest degree—thus we hear of "ugly" sounds (as though all beauty were enshrined on earth in the BBC); we hear of "slovenly" and "lazy" pronunciations (as though all moral virtue were similarly enshrined) —though it is the RP speaker who is too "lazy" to pronounce the "h" in words like "what", which some non-RP pronunciations include. If one is to make judgments like this one must be clear that one is doing so entirely on social and not on scientific grounds.

A third difficulty with speech training lies in the rarefied atmosphere in which it has been developed. It has been concerned to train actors, elocutionists, and other small self-selected groups whose motivation is high. This means that the material and the approach are not of general application, and have in addition a solemnity with which it is difficult to sympathise. In a well-known text-book appears the following footnote:

> Messrs . . . make a prop which serves admirably for keeping the jaw open and teaching the tongue to be independent. It is called Aikin's Bone Prop for Vowel Position, and is made in various sizes from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 inch, price 6d. Children can use the $\frac{5}{8}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ inch and adults the $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{7}{8}$ or 1 inch.

In a book entitled *Speech Training for Children*, many examples for repetition are offered, similar to:

> Ten tiny tots tormented ten testy tabbies.

It is difficult to imagine self-respecting children of any age standing for that. There is also a fourth objection, associated with this third;

and that is that "speech training" has aimed to produce performers—interpreters of mainly literary texts—poetry, prose, drama; the speaker does not create the language he delivers. But oracy is the ability to utter anything and everything. A child who detests poetry may be more orate than one who adores it. We must be very careful not to give the impression that good speech is to be identified only with poetry festivals, and similar events. If so, children, especially non-academic children, would be rightly suspicious. It would seem that, having failed to sell them literature, particularly poetry, in the open market, we were now offering it to them as part of a package deal along with a product they had no alternative but to buy.

If the foregoing appears unduly critical of speech training it is because it is important to bring out that an approach designed for specialists will not do in the schools. Oracy comes from practice in specific situations, whether these occur naturally in the classroom, or elsewhere, or are created as a specific teaching device; it is helped by unconscious imitation, it is stimulated by the responses of others, and speech becomes clearer in the necessity for communication. The main job of the teacher is to provide situations which call forth increasing powers of utterance. This is not to say that a teacher with a knowledge of voice production techniques could not profitably employ them—"breathing" and "range" for instance—discreetly and sparingly, but always within the context just described—it is the speech training *approach* which is to be deprecated. But it is to say that a teacher without such knowledge may nevertheless be very well equipped to develop the spoken English of his pupils. His own speech should be good, however, and here his training institution has a responsibility. Lewis, Moore, and Brettell (Compton, Ch. III) suggested (apart from a specialist course) a general course for all teachers, which stresses situational work, is not concerned with accent changes, but is part of the study of the spoken language. This was in 1947, but insufficient has been done on these lines: speech and drama specialists have been catered for in a different way; but far too often the general student has been treated to a couple of lectures on how to lecture, and a few acid remarks on his or her pronunciation, and then turned loose (a woman lecturer whose surname began with that letter became known as the "Intrusive R" because of her obsession with that speech feature to the exclusion of anything else). In view of the great interest in the spoken language and the revision of our attitudes towards it, partly under the influence of linguistics (see Chapter I) it is more than ever important that it should receive

theoretical and practical attention, perhaps as a course on contemporary English, in our training institutions.

3. Speech Situations

The first section considered the general responsibility of the school, and of each teacher in it, for oracy. Inevitably however the English teacher will be held to have the greatest share of that responsibility; and rightly so—just in the same way we are all accountable for the moral health of the community, but it is the parson who is the sin specialist. Since the spoken and written word are inseparable, the English teacher is concerned with all English, not just written English; and it should be clear that, despite the unfortunate antithesis in the past (Chapter II, section 3) literacy and oracy must go hand in hand, supplementing and vitalising each other.

As has been said above, the basic teaching device in the training of oracy is the creation of stimulating speech situations. It is impossible here to give a list of all the situations which have proved useful with good teachers, but an indication of some of them is now given under general headings.

(A) Spontaneous Speech

(i) *Discussion*

Classes are divided into groups, with a particular end in view. These might be "study groups" as at a conference, or committees as in an organisation (verisimilitude of terminology is often helpful). After their separate discussions there will be a reporting back to the whole form. (Discussion group leaders and perhaps "minute secretaries" will be required.) They might each plan a school visit, and question other groups about their plans in the open session. They might have problems presented to them, as in a WOSB test; one might be how best to improve the school were a large sum of money presented to it; or the most appropriate memorial to a great man (such as President Kennedy). They might be required to provide the best solution to a murder from a number of clues presented to them. Older children might discuss in groups a character or interpretation in literature. The groups might be asked to compose stories from a given starting point, and arrange to tell them to the form, individuals taking various portions. Discussion in groups, with the teacher unobtrusively circulating, is of course in addition to the general class discussion which is part and parcel of ordinary

teaching. The more discussion of either kind can form part of the whole programme of English, leading naturally from and into writing or literature, the better. Members evolving a story might each write it down as they understand it to have been agreed on; and further discussion arise on the correct or best version. In the three excellent books *Talking Sense* (1954-55) David Johnston sets forth a scheme of work which is group-oriented on the lines outlined above.

(ii) *Composition*

Children are often required to give short talks, "lecturettes" or what Caldwell Cook, who is thought to have originated them, embarrassingly called "Littleman Lectures" (1917). They are usually for three or five minutes with questions following; apparatus or diagrams are encouraged. They are prepared beforehand but it is important that they should not be read; the technique of speaking from a few heads on a piece of paper is the desirable one. Such talks are very useful even though the teacher feels at times that he can never sit through another "fishing" or "stamp-collecting"—and other subjects requiring some research can be selected when more confidence has been acquired. Talks can be descriptions of visits or journeys, recommendations of a book, with short readings, or of a play or film; they can be descriptions of a process—how to prepare a party, solder a wireless set. They can be part of symposium—on say, different aspects of road safety. Other composition can be the prepared completion of a story, the opening of which was given by the teacher on the day before; or the telling of an original story—prepared but not written down (this aspect of oral composition has been little considered—we always ask for writing). Children may be asked to seek out a joke which involves a development. The ability to tell a joke, with the appropriate timing and tone—and facial expression or lack of it—is one of the best tests of command of the spoken language that the everyday world provides. A final exercise would be for a pupil to summarise the lesson; this might not be a joke at all.

(iii) *Panels*

The debate, that last resort for the end of term, is often introduced too early; it requires a formality of utterance, and an ability to follow reasoned argument which is not within the capacity of younger children (though it may be personal idiosyncracy which finds boys in short trousers calling one another "gentlemen" unconvincing). Less ambitious versions are often more successful; two speakers only,

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briefed by groups, talk for five minutes; with a chairman who asks for questions from the meeting. A Press Conference in which someone in the news—a politician, or an Atlantic small boat sailor—is introduced; and is then questioned by three or four journalists, is a useful device. S. Cook (1962) suggests a Public inquiry "into something familiar such as closing a local cinema, or something preposterous such as re-erecting Blackpool Tower in a local park". There is a chairman of the inquiry who calls witnesses for either side and finally gives his reasoned decision. This is a much better idea than the Mock Trials we are often urged to hold; and which in the writer's experience have proved unmitigated disasters, concluding in the *You did / I didn't* impasse. Granada television produced a series of "trials" in which the actors made up their words as they proceeded; this was a gallant experiment, but even with experienced actors well briefed as to the general outlines of the plot it was only a qualified success. Mock Elections however can and do work.

Radio and television can provide useful patterns for speech activity, particularly since children are naturally interested in them. Thus a panel or a brains trust may be asked to deal with questions through a question master or from the floor; or the panel may produce a symposium of opinions on a previously announced topic, and then be questioned from the floor. "Parlour games" such as "What's my line?" in which skilful questioning has to be employed to elicit the correct solution from a piece of mime can be useful; so can the device used in the BBC's "My Word" where a speaker has to construct a story, however improbable, from a proverb or common saying. In the programme "What do you know?" a form of listening test was used in which the listener had to answer a series of factual questions after hearing a short narrative.

(iv) *Role-playing*

Some teachers have profitably associated speech with mime and drama of the spotaneous kind. The social and psychological aspects of this association can be seen most clearly in America, where psychiatrists such as Moreno (1947, 1961) developed psychodrama as a technique for playing out conflicts of mentally ill subjects; and from this came, as an educational device, Sociodrama (see e.g. Haas, 1949). Basically the device can be summed up in the old phrase: put yourself in somebody else's shoes and see how it feels. The students are given roles in what are known as SLS (Standard Life Situations) and interchange these roles, so as to develop in them understanding of

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aspects of speech and behaviour appropriate to different persons and settings. This work often forms part of a training in spontaneous responses which is known in America as "creative dramatics" (Ward, n.d.; Siks, 1958); and in this country as Free Drama or Child Drama. It is often used with music and dancing as in the notable work of Peter Slade (1954, 1958). E. J. Burton's most helpful manual, *Teaching English Through Self-Expression*, associates role-playing in mime and acting with both talk and writing.

Work is varied. It may involve at first a simple mime—picking up a needle, imagining it to be a cold day—in which the whole form participates. An individual may be asked to walk as though carrying a heavy weight; as though entering a strange room with an object in one corner to which he eventually reacts. Simple situations in which two or three people are involved may follow; a caller comes to the wrong house and has to be directed; he may be selling something, and refuse to be deterred. At first "blabla" talk—where the speaker uses nonsense words, but with the correct expression and gesture, is useful in establishing confidence before words proper are employed. Slightly more difficult work comes in SLSs such as an interview for a job; telephone conversations with explanations or apologies to make; home dialogues (father refusing to put up pocket money or allow a late night); casual conversation on a bus or tram. These may lead up to the creation of plays in groups from an outline story; one or two characters; or merely a word or object; and then its enactment in mime, blabla talk, or speech.

(v) *Brief encounters*

It is important to remember that certain types of speech activity are tiring; and that the balance of a lesson involving them should be watched particularly carefully. Instant speech situations which can be used little and often, perhaps at the end of a lesson devoted to something else, are very useful. The following are drawn from the highly imaginative work of Miss Catherine Hollingworth in Aberdeen. A pupil may be asked to name everything in the room without stopping; or all the goods he can think of in (say) a grocer's shop; he may be given three words and asked to construct a sentence; look at a picture, then describe it (seen or unseen); give his thoughts on hearing a single word; tackle a tongue twister; talk for one minute only on an object (from lighter to anchor); describe a place (beach, harbour, station); make a single statement about a given topic; talk briefly on a subject obtained in a "lucky dip"; explain a proverbial saying; give

a *reasonable* answer to a ridiculous question such as "Why do you crawl along the school corridor?", "Why do you bark at dogs?"

(B) Interpretation

(vi) *Reading aloud*

This is a common classroom activity. In the form "reading round the class" it is an attempt to do everything at once—improve comprehension, stimulate enjoyment and appreciation of literature, teach spelling and vocabulary ("Write down the hard words in your notebooks"), and develop the technique of reading aloud. As a result it does none of these things. The bad readers stumble, the class groans, and they stumble more as the focus of all ears; the good readers are quietly reading ahead until they are discovered and stopped ("Read slowly like the rest of us"). Clearly poor readers are best dealt with as individuals or in small homogeneous groups, using material they have had an opportunity of studying, whilst the rest of the form is otherwise occupied, say with silent reading. Occasional lessons, or better, parts of lessons, on the techniques can be given for the whole form, particularly with delivery in relation to meaning in mind ("What words should we emphasise in this sentence?"). Hand-outs of brief "news bulletins" add verisimilitude. The pupils study them before being asked to read; but there is no reason why with more advanced pupils a technique of sight reading, with passages suitable for it, should not be developed. In general it is important however (both for the listeners' sakes and theirs) that the readers should have an opportunity to prepare their material, and it is greatly to be hoped that this will not be from books of snippets of literature "designed for reading aloud". They might, in groups for instance, prepare short short stories for delivery to the form, each member reading a different section or sharing the dialogue; if the story is too long this is the occasion for an oral summary of part of it by one of them. The attention or otherwise of the audience will be an effective guide to performance and spur to communication. A long book—"an eight-part serial"—can be dealt with in a similar way, with a different group each week. Such activities also provide a useful exercise in listening comprehension on the part of the audience.

(vii) *Poetry and Drama*

Oral delivery of both verse and drama is of course common and little need be said about it here. In both cases the aim is to get the words off the page. With verse, techniques such as recitation by

individuals, miming, enactment with words, choral delivery are employed. Some poems lend themselves to these techniques more than others. The notable school anthology, Garrett and Auden's *The Poet's Tongue*, included for the first time, poems (apart from the border ballads) which actually had lived upon the tongues of men, and cried out for speaking and audience participation. Since then the practice of including work ballads, street ballads, folk songs, rhyming games, catches, calypsoes, bawdy songs (suitably amended) has increased considerably (see e.g. Reeves, 1954; O'Malley and Thompson, 1961). The alliance of poetry with song has been re-established (see Holbrook, 1961, Ch. 6). Writers concerned with verse-speaking include Swan (1939), Gullen (1951), Bruford (1957).

Drama does not seem to have had that generally beneficial influence on speech that might have been hoped. The reasons for this are first that comparatively few children are involved in performances such as the school play; and secondly that the treatment of plays in the classroom tends to be restricted both by the space available, and by a literary approach which regards them as texts for dissection. There are certainly problems; but even so methods such as the splitting up of a form into groups to write a play; or to discuss and produce a short play; the use of the school hall; the getting at the meaning of a scene by an attempt to interpret it in "rehearsal"; the enactment of even only a single scene of a longer play to an audience of peers, using scripts if necessary—such devices are often found helpful. The subject of drama in schools is well-documented (see for instance Hudson, 1954; HMSO, 1954; Burton, 1955; Coggin, 1956).

(C) Listening

Oracy involves two elements; adequacy in speaking and adequacy in listening. So far we have been speaking about oral expression; but clearly this work also involves listening. More specifically however attention should be given to training in listening. It has been shown that we listen below a possible level of efficiency; and that instruction in listening techniques and specific practice can bring about definite improvements (see Ch. VI section 1). Techniques used in experiments however are not necessarily those best for classroom use. The technique of listening is to be sharpened on the spoken language itself in all its manifestations. Children should be led to an awareness of the spoken language in the same way as literary criticism has traditionally led them to an awareness of the

written language; and awareness not only of what is said but how it is said—its style and register. There is nothing revolutionary about this; in the thirties books like *Culture and Environment* were examining, with a different critical vocabulary, what we have called the "register" of advertising; now with the mass media that register is passing more and more into the oral sphere. With the radio, television—and particularly tape-recorder—generally available, speech of all kinds can be heard—and captured for study. For instance the opportunities—for small scale "research" into language by schoolchildren are most exciting. The case for an education in "language" has been argued in Chapter I; a knowledge of "how to speak when" is also important for the personality development outlined in Chapter II. Chapter VI below on tests of Listening Comprehension will give some indication of the kinds of listening it has been felt desirable to test so far.

(D) Focal Points

Many of the speech activities described above can come together for some particular purpose; and the knowledge that there is to be some end product is a spur to interest and motivation.

Thus a form may work on a radio programme to be rehearsed and recorded on tape, individual items being assigned to different groups. A "programme" might consist of news items, a "literary magazine" of original short stories or poems, a book talk, an "in town to-night" interview, a panel, a radio play, an episode of a serial. Such programmes can be played to other forms in return for theirs. In writing a radio play particularly a group will learn a very great deal about non-verbal communication and its relation to verbal. A stage play put straight onto tape can easily sound meaningless, for in the theatre the bodies of the actors differentiate them, their voices may be very similar; their gestures and movements express certain thoughts, feelings, and relationships; in sound these are lacking, so the writers must become conscious of them and articulate them in verbal terms.

Some schools focus on festivals. In Wales, and in schools with Welsh links in the Midlands, Eisteddfodi are held in which plays and poems, often original, are delivered, along with musical items by choir and orchestra, sometimes also with dance. On a smaller scale poetry and music evenings with pupils as performers are held. Speech Days are occasionally to be met with, where it is the children's speech which is featured. There is no reason why any of the

traditional speeches should be given by adults with the exception of that of the Distinguished Visitor; the School Report can quite easily be delivered by a group of pupils, each giving their impression of the year from a different point of view; the chair can be held, and the votes of thanks given by pupils. Other speech activities in schools include an annual poetry and/or prose reading contest; whilst some enter teams for a district public speaking or debating competition. These last often arouse strong feelings in staff, for and against; certainly one knows of occasions when they seem to encourage a glib insensitive use of language, with hints of a Demosthenes complex (Ch. II, sect. 1). And of course they are to be judged in the last resort not by who wins and who loses, but by whether they are helpful in creating in the schools concerned a climate in which oracy can grow and flourish.

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