

# Speaking but not listening? Accountable talk in an unaccountable context

Robin Alexander

## Abstract

Taking the 2009 UKLA conference theme of “making connections and building literate communities” and recalling Hoggart’s plea for literacy to be critically and morally engaged rather than merely functional, this paper calls for a reassessment of the pursuit of literacy in schools so as to connect the language of learning with the language of democratic participation. Given what we know about the way classroom talk mediates both learning and culture, the paper takes such talk as its focus, comparing the author’s principles of dialogic teaching with Resnick’s criteria for accountable talk. The paper then contrasts these idealised versions of the discourse of pedagogy with the public discourses of power, noting the prevalence of four discourse types – derision, dichotomy, myth and meaninglessness – through which, in pursuit of political goals, governments rewrite history, simplify the problematic, dignify the mundane and marginalise unpalatable evidence. This prompts an addition, in the interests of meaningful citizenship as well as effective learning, to Resnick’s criteria of accountability to the learning community, standards of reasoning and knowledge: accountability to language itself.

**Keywords:** literacy, citizenship, dialogic teaching, accountable talk, Cambridge Primary Review

## Introduction

What follows is the text of a keynote address given at the 2009 UKLA International Conference on “Making Connections and Building Literate Communities”. Apart from bringing the referencing into line with this journal’s house style and adding a post-election footnote, I have left the text pretty well as delivered, in terms of tone and style as well as content. Within a few months of the UKLA conference, the Cambridge Primary Review’s final report was published, the Labour government was defeated in a general election, its Rose curriculum framework was summarily abandoned, and the rainbow-bedecked Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was replaced by a more sombre Department for Education. Yet I have retained the commentary on these matters as presented in the summer of 2009, for while politicians expound on ‘the new politics’ the rest of us know better and the lessons are there to be learned. I have also retained the tone, for while polemic is frowned on in academic articles it tends

to be tolerated, even enjoyed, in public lectures. As to style, it is of course the case that conference keynotes and journal articles demand different registers, and only in the former can one get away with a sentence as long as the one on which I now embark.

## ‘Only connect’

“Making connections and building literate communities in and beyond the classroom” is an excellent conference theme, for education is all about the making of connections: between teachers and pupils; among pupils themselves; between home and school; between children and the wider world; between the cultures, languages and values that schools in a diverse and pluralist society bring together; between the different ways of exploring, knowing and making sense represented by the established disciplines of enquiry, and between these and each individual’s unique personal knowledge; between the needs of children as individuals and the collective needs of society; between how teachers think and act, and how and what pupils learn; between classroom practice and educational policy; between education and the state; between the conditions of wealth and poverty, privilege and disadvantage, power and powerlessness – conditions which are notoriously far apart in Britain but even further apart in the world as a whole – and how we help children to make sense of these inequalities and achieve the difficult balance in their lives between personal fulfilment and collective obligation; and perhaps the most basic connection of all, for it comes to the heart of teaching, between what the child knows, understands and can do *now* and what we wish him or her to know, understand and do *next*: that critical but not always straightforward connection which we pursue through what Jerome Bruner and others have called ‘scaffolding’, with its attendant links of ‘uptake’, when the baton of reasoning and enquiry is passed from one person to another – teacher to child, one child to another child – and ‘handover’, when the transition is achieved from existing understanding to new.

‘Only connect’ – as borrowed for *Howard’s End* by E. M. Forster from A. N. Whitehead – is not, as its now clichéd status manages to make it, merely a cosy piety. For Forster’s Margaret Schlegel, ‘only connect’ was a cry of desperation at our stubborn refusal to

understand the connection between the way we behave and the way we judge the behaviour of others. Nor is it simply a matter of human frailty. Most of the connections I have illustrated entail real tensions and dilemmas. Connecting education and the state, cultures with fundamentally different world views, an entitlement curriculum for all with the child's unique individual needs – for example – is not about taking a construction kit and building a bridge (or even some cognitive scaffolding). It is about reconciling what in some cases may be incapable of reconciliation.

It is a theme that has preoccupied writers for centuries. It is the very stuff of literacy – and of literature, which of course is fundamental to literacy, although you would not think so from the way some politicians talk about it. So we have Forster and 'only connect', Donne and "no man is an island", Lear's refusal to see the gulf between his older daughters' pious words and malevolent intent until it is too late; and, for writers everywhere, the connection or absence of connection between word, meaning, intent and action. And although the conference theme – *making connections and building literate communities* – reads as a single, seamless task, if we pause for a moment on 'making connections', as I have done, then we are forced to ask, as every so often we should, what a 'literate community' looks like, and what literacy is *for*.

## The uses of literacy

Just over 50 years ago, in 1957, one of the great books of the 20th century was published: Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. Towards the end of the book Hoggart reflected on what the largely successful fight to achieve universal literacy in Britain had achieved, but had also failed to achieve, by the mid-1950s. His target was the debasement by the mass media of literacy's life-enriching possibilities – what, more recently, we have called 'dumbing down'. Hoggart said:

Most mass entertainments are . . . full of a corrupt brightness, of improper appeals and moral evasions . . . They tend towards a view of the world in which progress is conceived as a seeking of material possessions, equality as a moral levelling, and freedom as the ground for endless irresponsible pleasure. [They] belong to a vicarious, spectators' world; they offer nothing which can really grip the brain or heart. They assist a gradual drying-up of the more positive, the fuller, the more co-operative kinds of enjoyment, in which one gains much by giving much (Hoggart, 1957, p. 340).

He goes on:

The fact that illiteracy as it is normally measured has been largely removed only points towards the next and probably more difficult problem. A new word is

needed to describe the nature of the response invited by the . . . material I have discussed, a word indicating a social change which takes advantage of and thrives on basic literacy (Hoggart, 1957, p. 341).

Hoggart, then, accepted that education had created, in UKLA's phrase, a 'literate community' but was deeply concerned about what kind of a community that was. Certainly it was not one in which, as he says, "one gains much by giving much". Hoggart reaches towards, but does not find, a counter-culture which elevates literacy beyond what the Rose report reductively calls "speaking and listening skills . . . reading and writing skills" along with "numeracy skills . . . ICT skills . . . learning and thinking skills . . . personal skills . . . emotional and social skills . . ." (Rose, 2009). The elevation sought by Hoggart introduces discrimination and criticality, so as to give some point to 'functional literacy'.

Have we heeded Hoggart's warning? Have we acted on the educational agenda, which he implies? Or has the downward slide continued? Judging from the many expressions of concern which the Cambridge Primary Review received on this matter, the problem is if anything now more serious than in the 1950s. And does the brave new primary curriculum from the not-so-independent Rose review stop the rot? Or does the very act of reducing everything to a checklist-friendly 'skill' signal the very opposite of that moral elevation of the uses of literacy to which Hoggart encouraged us to aspire, and which so preoccupied, before Hoggart, those great but now unfashionable figures Matthew Arnold and F. R. Leavis?

## Connecting classroom talk with the public and civic spheres

You may be wondering where all this is leading. In fact this is not going to be a critique of the Rose version of the primary curriculum, which to many of you here from outside primary education or from other countries will seem parochial or irrelevant. Nor am I going to brandish the alternative curriculum developed by that genuinely independent enquiry, the Cambridge Primary Review (Alexander, 2009, chs 12–14). What I have said so far has been by way of immediate response to the tantalising theme of this conference, and I certainly think that revisiting *The Uses of Literacy* would make a powerful and timely theme for next year's UKLA conference – not least now that the government has announced, after spending £2 billion of taxpayers' money to get primary teachers to toe the party line on literacy and numeracy, that they are going to allow teachers to exercise a greater degree of professional judgement in such matters (DCSF, 2009). If teachers are going to be given that qualified freedom, then let us force the door open wider still and reopen the debate about literacy itself – its nature, purposes, uses and abuses in today's world. And let us reclaim

that debate from the politicians and political advisers who have dominated but also diminished it since 1997, giving rise to what two of the Cambridge Primary Review's research consultants called a "state theory of learning" (Balarin and Lauder, 2009, in Alexander et al., 2009) – a chilling diagnosis which the Review's final report went on to test against the evidence and, regrettably, confirm (Alexander, 2009, pp. 291–299).

One facet of my work over the past decade has been the development of an approach to pedagogy which I call 'dialogic teaching'. At one level this is about adding a few modest bricks to the towering edifices of pioneers like Douglas Barnes, Courtney Cazden and Jerome Bruner, in order to find ways whereby the immense cognitive, social, affective and educational potential of talk can be better exploited in our classrooms; whereby, as Martin Nystrand puts it, we may hear more *authentic* questions and fewer "guess what I'm thinking" *test* questions (Nystrand et al., 1997); whereby classroom exchanges can be extended so that they actually lead somewhere; whereby the pupil's answers and contributions can be explored and built upon rather than merely judged acceptable or unacceptable; whereby talk truly empowers children as learners rather than merely enables them to jump through hoops; whereby children talk to learn as well as learn to talk.

This is the aspect of my work on dialogic teaching which has been picked up in the United Kingdom. Indeed it has received the ultimate accolade of being appropriated – and indeed plagiarised – by DCSF, the government's national strategies and QCA, assimilated to the existing rather bland concept of 'speaking and listening', stripped of its critical intent and passed on to schools barely recognisable (Alexander, 2008a, pp. 17–18). The same fate, indeed, has befallen assessment for learning as developed by Black et al. (2002, 2003), and now a shadow of its former self on the DCSF standards website. Why, one has to ask, do government and the national agencies feel obliged to appropriate such ideas and claim them for their own, in the process knocking the stuffing out of them, rather than allow teachers as professionals to read about the ideas for themselves and draw their own conclusions? Is it perhaps that theories of dialogic teaching or assessment for learning are too potent in their original form to be acceptable to the compliance culture of the national strategies, and need to be neutralised? Remember the fate of the National Oracy Project. And remember that, historically, we have inherited a view of literacy which is about reading and writing but not talk, because the Victorian founders of public education wanted an education which fitted children for their preordained station in life, and talk might subvert that goal.

But if dialogic teaching was always about much more than National Curriculum 'speaking and listening' – for it is about how *teachers* as well as children talk, and about pedagogy across the board rather than one facet of the teaching of English – it is also about more than

what goes on in classrooms. My own contribution to the field started with classroom research in Britain during the 1980s but principally with a close-grained analysis of videotapes and transcripts of classroom talk in five countries – England, France, India, Russia and the United States – which were at the heart of a project during the 1990s which explored the relationship between pedagogy, policy, history and culture; or between what goes on inside the classroom and what goes on outside it; or how the words, actions and relationships of teachers and pupils relate to the values of the culture and political system in which they are located (Alexander, 2001).

This latter aspect, I have to say, has not registered as strongly in the United Kingdom as I would have liked, despite my arguing the contribution of dialogue to citizenship and democratic education. Interestingly, the connection has been pursued elsewhere: a few years ago copies of *Towards Dialogic Teaching* (Alexander, 2008a) were bought for every school in Hong Kong, partly to support teachers' work on improving talk for learning, but partly in the hope that it might counterbalance, through its emphasis on a reciprocal rather than transmissive pedagogy, the more monologic and authoritarian version of citizenship preferred by Beijing.

Also interesting, I suggest, from a cultural and political standpoint, is the way that Vygotsky's ideas – which have strongly influenced most workers in this field – tend to be used in Britain to legitimate a highly localised, almost parochial view of learning as a social and indeed cosily sociable process, firmly bounded by the walls of the classroom, when in fact Vygotsky was centrally interested in the relationship between development, learning, teaching, culture and history. The Marxian goal of taking the child from what he calls the 'natural' to the 'cultural' line of development is prominent in much of Vygotsky's writing, but in Britain we tend to prefer our pedagogy to be culturally and politically disengaged (this problem is discussed more fully in Alexander, 2008b, ch. 5). The dialogue in dialogic teaching is not just between teacher and child or child and child, as the official 'speaking and listening' formulation has it; it is also between the individual and society. It is about cultural and civic interaction, not just classroom interaction.

There is nothing unique or novel about trying to use pedagogy to support the quest for the good society, and Lauren Resnick's idea of 'accountable talk' captures this better than I have been able to. In an important article, she, Sarah Michaels and Catherine O'Connor pursue empirically the relationship between reasoned discussion in the classroom and deliberative democracy in society. They remind us that:

Dialogue and discussion have long been linked to theories of democratic education. From Socrates to Dewey and Habermas, educative dialogue has represented a forum for learners to develop

understanding by listening, reflecting, proposing and incorporating alternative views. For many philosophers, learning through discussion has also represented the promise of education as a foundation for democracy (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 283).

We know from the major 2005 EPPI review of evidence on citizenship education that dialogic pedagogy really can open up the child's understanding of what citizenship in a democracy entails, and of the capacities which are needed for that understanding to be translated into effective democratic action (Deakin Crick et al., 2005). But in the context of this conference's theme of making connections, and bearing in mind my earlier warning that connections are more easily aspired to than achieved, note how Michaels, O'Connor and Resnick conclude their discussion:

What the classroom can show us is that the gap between the idealized and the realized is daunting . . . The parallels with broader civic discourse are clear. Deliberative practices are an interactional accomplishment, and shared norms undergirding them have to be established – either negotiated or mandated. But there are important discontinuities between the classroom and larger society as well. In national and international context there may be no analogue to the teacher – no agreed-upon figure of authority to establish the norms and negotiate the ensuing conflicts about them (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 296).

## The discourses of pedagogy and power

Let us look more closely at these 'discontinuities' between what we might call the discourses of pedagogy and power. Admittedly, approaches like dialogic teaching and accountable talk – on which I wish to concentrate by way of example – are *aspirations*, so it might be suggested that it is rather unfair to compare classroom talk as we would like it to be with policy talk as it actually happens. However, in an increasing number of classrooms dialogic and accountable talk are also a reality, so comparison is legitimate.

### *The discourse of pedagogy*

Let us take dialogic teaching first. In a nutshell, dialogic teaching comprises repertoires for everyday talk, learning talk, teaching talk and classroom organisation on which the teacher draws flexibly according to purpose and situation, and which become dialogic when they are demonstrably informed by five principles (Alexander, 2008b, pp. 112–113):

- collectivity;
- reciprocity;
- support;
- cumulation;
- purposefulness.

The bottom line, I have suggested many times elsewhere, is captured by two quotes which to me have epigraphic force. From Mikhail Bakhtin (1986, p. 168): 'If an answer does not give rise to a new question from itself, it falls out of the dialogue'; and from Martin Nystrand et al. (1997, p. 72): "What ultimately counts is the extent to which instruction requires students to think, not just report someone else's thinking".

Adam Lefstein (2006) argues that the five principles might usefully be supplemented by two more: *criticality* and *meaningfulness* so as more explicitly to recognise that dialogue entails the meeting of competing viewpoints. I have always understood dialogue to entail this, and certainly in some of the genuinely dialogic lessons which have been captured on videotape in our development projects in Barking and Dagenham and North Yorkshire (Alexander, 2008a, b, pp. 114–119) there is an extent of mutual challenge – from the pupil as well as the teacher – which bears this out. However, Lefstein is probably right that the grit in true dialogue needs emphasising and reinforcing.

Next, accountable talk. Michaels, Resnick and their colleagues propose three facets, criteria or principles:

- *accountability to the learning community*: the talk should "attend seriously to and build on the ideas of others";
- *accountability to standards of reasoning*: the talk should "emphasise logical connections and the drawing of reasonable conclusions" on the basis of premises and argumentation;
- *accountability to knowledge*: the talk should be "based explicitly on facts, written texts or other . . . information that all . . . can access. Speakers make an effort to get their facts right and make explicit the evidence behind their claims and expectations. They challenge each other when evidence is lacking or unavailable" (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 283).

They see accountability to knowledge as the toughest nut to crack, and accountability to the learning community – which is close to the dialogic teaching principles of collectivity and reciprocity – as the most straightforward for teachers to implement. This corresponds to the finding from dialogic teaching development projects that many teachers, given secure class management, sound classroom relationships and heightened self-awareness, are able fairly readily to achieve the shift to talk which is collective, reciprocal and supportive – that is, to change the *dynamics* of their teaching – but the principles of cumulation and sustained purposefulness are much more difficult, because they are about the *content* of talk, and the deeper forms of knowledge and understanding in which the pedagogical content is grounded, as well as the *dynamics* (Alexander, 2008b, pp. 114–119). Cumulation and purposefulness, like accountability to knowledge, require success in changing the *substance* as well as the *form* of learning; in the way that teachers and pupils, working collectively, reciprocally and

supportively, actually understand and engage with knowledge. Indeed cumulation and accountability to knowledge go hand in hand, for we cannot help pupils to build up their understanding and insight within a particular domain of the curriculum without having a good grasp of what the domain is about. Some teachers do not like to hear this, but domain knowledge is essential to effective teaching, whether dialogic or transmissive, and to every stage of education.

### *The discourse of power*

How do these ways of talking and relating and coming to understand – ways which we call ‘dialogic’ or ‘accountable’ – compare with what goes on in the realm of policy? Well, what we must immediately acknowledge is that there is at least as wide a range of discourses at Westminster as in Britain’s classrooms, and that for every equivocating or mendacious minister there is another who is direct and honest, although it does seem to be the case that mendacity and obfuscation are in inverse proportion to power, and that only the disempowered backbenchers in opposition parties, those who have absolutely no chance of making it even to a junior ministerial position, feel free to say what they think and to tell it as it is.

Having said that, my experience of dealing with policy-makers over the past 20 years – years which have included the so-called ‘three wise men’ enquiry into primary education, 10 years on two quangos, CATE and QCA, and now the Cambridge Primary Review – leads me to two conclusions.

First, there is the sharpest of splits between the private and public discourses of policy-making. Since the Cambridge Primary Review started in October 2006, we have held something like 250 formal meetings, seminars, soundings and other events with organisations and groups up and down the country. Twenty-seven of these have been with ministers and/or officials at DCSF and 10 Downing Street, and with the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats, the House of Commons Select Committee and the non-departmental public bodies – Ofsted, QCA, TDA and NCSL. The striking feature of the meetings with representatives of the Labour government has been the gulf between private and public utterance. Almost without exception, the meetings have been constructive, reasonable, perceptive, with give and take on both sides. During this period, we have published 31 interim reports, the last of which was the pair of reports we issued on the primary curriculum in February 2009. When government commented on those reports, all of which they received as a matter of courtesy well in advance of publication, and some of which we discussed with them when they were in draft, it was as though the meetings had never happened. Instead, we were assailed by this:

‘These reports use tunnel vision to look at education. Primary standards are at their highest ever levels’...

‘A spokeswoman for the DCSF attacked the Primary Review for peddling “a collection of recycled, partial or out of date research” ’... ‘I am not going to apologise for delivering what parents want, even if these researchers – often on the basis of out-of-date research – don’t like it,’ Ed Balls said’... ‘Professor Alexander is entitled to his opinions but once again we fundamentally disagree with his views – as will parents across the country. Parental interest in children’s education in the home is vital for their learning. We need parents to make books available, read to their children and take an interest in their homework. Many parents already do this, and unlike Professor Alexander, we think they are right to do so’...

“Independent” is certainly not an apt description of today’s report from the self-styled “largest” review of primary education in 40 years. It is another deeply ideological strike against standards and effective teaching of the 3Rs in our primary schools. Many of its contributors oppose the very idea of “standards”... A return to a situation where the teaching of the basics is subsumed into a process of osmosis would destroy another generation of primary schoolchildren in the same way that the children of the seventies were failed... The Primary Review is... about reversing the changes of the last twenty years and returning our schools to a time when there was no public accountability and the basics were largely subsumed into other lessons’ (quoted and sourced in Alexander, 2009, pp. 24–26).

In other words – apart from that strange reference to subsuming the basics “into a process of osmosis”, which makes little sense – we have the by now familiar cocktail of misrepresentation, ad hominem attacks, the recycling of discredited myths, and above all a refusal to engage with the vast array of evidence which enquiries like the Cambridge Review have assembled and published in the hope of helping to improve the quality of primary education.

To some extent a mismatch between the private and public discourses of power is inevitable. Privacy gives us room to speculate about possibilities which in public would be pounced on by the press as firm policy commitments. The two registers are fundamentally different. But there ought to be some connection between them, and when there is not we should be worried, because that is the point at which the public language of power becomes merely dishonest and manipulative, and supposedly accountable politicians say one thing but think, mean and do another. The need to uncover this relationship between the privacy of the policy process and the public claims and decisions which an elected government makes and takes on our behalf, you do not need me to remind you, is why there was such an outcry when in 2009 the government announced that there would be a full enquiry into British involvement in the Iraq war but it would take place behind closed doors.

My second observation is that over the past 20 years, four versions of the discourse of power have become increasingly evident, at least in the educational policy sphere. Let us call them the discourses of dichotomy, derision, myth and meaninglessness.

*The discourse of dichotomy* reduces everything to mutual exclusives, to a choice between grossly oversimplified alternatives, to the politics of them and us. This is a tendency which, sadly, is all too common in education as well as politics – teacher centred vs child centred, traditional vs progressive, children vs subjects, process vs product, knowledge vs skills, teaching vs learning, basics vs breadth – although in the policy domain, where adversarialism is fundamental and endemic, it is even more pronounced. Courtney Cazden (2001) has written about this too, and she and I agree that the dichotomy of ‘one right way’ is the absolute antithesis of the principle of *repertoire* which should be fundamental to all professional thinking and action. Try replacing ‘versus’ by ‘and’ and you will see what I mean. Dichotomy closes debate and diminishes options; inclusivity and repertoire enlarge them (for fuller discussion of the problem of dichotomous pedagogy, and the damages it causes, see Alexander, 2008b, pp. 72–91).

*The discourse of derision* – the phrase comes from Jane Kenway via Stephen Ball (1990) – is illustrated weekly at Prime Minister’s Questions and spills over into ministerial and departmental responses to anything that has been said and done which is off-message. If you do not like it, ridicule it. It is of course the discourse of media headlines too. Thus, hear this from when some of the Cambridge Primary Review’s interim reports were published in 2007 and 2008:

‘Primary tests blasted by experts’ ... ‘Thousands of pupils given wrong grade in 3R tests’ ... ‘Test regime must change’ ... ‘Kids lose love of books’ ... ‘Literacy drive has almost no impact’ ... ‘£500 million literacy drive is flop, say experts’ ... ‘Millions wasted on teaching reading’ ... ‘Primary pupils let down by Labour’ ... ‘Study shows Labour has damaged education’ ... ‘State control of education under scrutiny’ ... ‘Government policy has created impersonalised education’ ... ‘Primary schools have got worse’ ... ‘Ten years of bold education boasts now look sadly hollow’ ... ‘Failed! Political interference is damaging our children’s education, says report’ ... ‘A shattering failure for our masters’ ... (quoted and sourced in Alexander, 2009, p. 24).

To which government and its advisers responded in the terms I have already quoted.

If the discourses of dichotomy and derision are crude and transparent, the *discourse of myth* is perhaps more insidious and therefore dangerous. It is the tendency, again endemic in policy discourse but particularly striking since 1997, to ignore history or to rewrite it to conform to and support the current agenda. Thus:

Until the mid-1980s what happened in schools and classrooms was left almost entirely to teachers to decide ... Almost all teachers had goodwill and many sought to develop themselves professionally, but, through no fault of their own, the profession itself was uninformed ... Under Thatcher, the system moved from *uninformed professional judgement* to *uninformed prescription*. The 1997–2001 Blair government inherited a system of *uninformed prescription* and replaced it with one of *informed prescription* ... The White Paper signals the next shift: from *informed prescription* to *informed professional judgement* ... The era of informed professional judgement is only just beginning ... The era of informed professional judgement could be the most successful so far in our educational history ... It could be the era in which our education system becomes not just good but great (Barber, 2001, his italics).

When I first criticised this historical travesty, for that is what it is, I listed a vast range of authoritative information from government, HMI, Ofsted, local authorities, the APU, local, national and international tests and achievement surveys, published research and so on which was readily available to teachers and often drawn on by them during the period in question, and which showed that before Thatcher and Blair the teaching profession was at least as well informed as now – and perhaps with a greater emphasis on rigorous and independent evidence (Alexander, 2004).

Finally, *the discourse of meaninglessness*. It is this, I suggest, which must cause particular concern to an organisation like UKLA, for if the discourse of myth is about the destruction of the past, then this is about the destruction of language itself. Once you have negotiated all that macho, militaristic nonsense about tough new initiatives, step changes, hitting the ground running, driving up standards, rolling out innovation, zero tolerance, best practice, world-class schools and the rest, you encounter either the patronising language, large print and pictures of happy children, tokenistically matched for gender and race, in which these days supposedly serious curriculum reports and white papers are cloaked, or – no less pervasive – managementspeak. Here are two examples. The first is a definition of that key political concept of the past decade, school effectiveness:

We define [school] effectiveness in two dimensions. The ‘quality’ dimension is modelled as the average score of each school on output (corrected for input) and is represented by the intercept (each school has a different intercept). The ‘equity’ dimension encompasses the compensatory power or selective quality of schools. Some schools can better compensate for input characteristics than others. This dimension is represented by the slopes of the within school regression of input on output (Reynolds et al., 1994, pp. 10–11).

There are the seeds of important ideas here: the quality of schooling; the challenge of achieving equitable education in an unequal society. But meaning is lost when these complex and value-laden ideas are reduced to simple measures of input and output.

The second example, a different kind of meaninglessness, comes from the 2007 McKinsey Report *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come out on Top*, which some people in high places view as the key to educational transformation. Are they right to do so?

To produce effective school leaders, school systems first need to select the right people to become leaders (Barber and Mourshed, 2007, p. 30).

A good start, but hardly earth shattering. What is next?

Getting the right people to become school leaders is very important, but so is providing those people with the right set of skills to become effective leaders (Barber and Mourshed, 2007, p. 26).

Obvious again, but at least it is clear. So how do schools get leaders with "the right set of skills"?

Top-performing school systems leverage a substantial and growing knowledge about what constitutes effective school leadership to develop their principals into drivers of improvement in instruction (Barber and Mourshed, 2007, p. 29).

'Leverage' as a verb? "Drivers of improvement in instruction"? I have read this several times and I still do not understand what it means – or, more to the point, whether it means anything at all. If that is where effective school leadership is taking us, I would rather not go there, if it is all the same to you. And I remain baffled that senior politicians and officials endorse a document which contains so much of this kind of thing.

Dichotomy, derision, myth and meaninglessness: there are no doubt other discourses of power, although you may feel that these four are quite enough to be going on with. But what can we say about the way they relate to the pedagogical discourses which many teachers are striving to foster with today's learners and tomorrow's citizens?

What, first, of those dialogic principles of *collectivity* and *reciprocity*? Well, such language is neither collective nor reciprocal. True, there is something called 'consultation', but it is stage managed, and alternative views, as we have seen, are marginalised, misrepresented or ridiculed – or, more insidiously, appropriated, neutralised, sanitised and repackaged. And bear in mind that when government dismisses reports from the Cambridge Primary Review, it is not sidelining the work of a small group of academics with whom it happens to disagree, but the considered written submissions of well over 1,000 organisations and individuals, all of whom submitted evidence in

the hope that it might make a difference; and by the same token the views of the thousands of people who took part in the Review's 250 soundings, seminars and other meetings; and the 4,000 pieces of published research covered by the Review's 28 research surveys, themselves the work of 66 leading academics in 21 university departments, and of course in the Review's final report. To reject out of hand such a vast and complex body of evidence is to reject the principle of democratic engagement, let alone to make a mockery of the government mantra of 'evidence-based' policy.

And what of the vital educational and interactive principle of *cumulation*, or building, critically and discriminatingly, on what is said and written by others, of interrogating evidence, of moving discourse and understanding forward rather than round in circles? In the educational policy domain this one, all too often, is a non-starter. In the final Rose report, a typical example, hardly any evidence is cited other than that from approved official sources. Such evidence from non-official sources as is cited is used, shall I say, very selectively. There are several references to the Cambridge Review, but all of them are cosmetic and one – the claim that there is little difference between the educational aims proposed by the Cambridge Review and the QCA aims commended by Rose – is just plain wrong (Rose, 2009, pp. 32–33).

I once analysed the policy changes in teacher education over the 14-year period 1984–1998. There were large numbers of them, each introduced by a new minister determined to make his or her mark. Not one of them was properly evaluated, and not one of them was allowed to run its course before being replaced by another (Alexander, 2001, p. 591). Here, it is salutary to recall Gemma Moss' (2007) finding that between 1996 and 2004 the government issued to schools no fewer than 459 documents on the teaching of literacy. Here, also, we can note the evidence in the Cambridge Review's final report, including that provided by UKLA, that the problem with initiatives like the National Literacy Strategy was that they kept contradicting themselves (Alexander, 2009, pp. 220–222). And then, of course, there is the casual dismissal of all the Cambridge Review's evidence from those thousands of people, organisations and published sources I mentioned, as "re-cycled, partial or out of date". Apart from the contempt for democratic process that this reaction conveys, there is a more profound point, for by dismissing what was known, discovered and published yesterday, government is not so much playing fast and loose with cumulation as rejecting it outright as relevant to the way that knowledge and understanding develop. In its place we have the discourse of myth. But ponder that "partial or out of date". Is Shakespeare partial? Are Darwin and Einstein out of date? Closer to home, is Vygotsky – who died in 1934 yet whose ideas underpin the work of all us who are interested in the relationship between talking, thinking and learning – out of date?

For Bishop Ussher the world began in 4004 BC; for New Labour it began in 1997 AD (on this occasion, for obvious reasons, we stick to the old BC/AD formulation). Before then –

The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep . . . And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.  
And Blair said, A new dawn has broken, has it not?

Yes, he really did say that, and it was surely a conscious echo of Genesis, chapter 1, verse 3. The metaphoric journey from darkness to light also pervades that earlier quotation about teachers being ‘professionally uninformed’ until 1997, or the new year zero. At that point the instruments for the chosen profession’s transition from professional ignorance to enlightenment were the old and new testaments of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies.

We might press the connection between pedagogy and policy further. We are moving away from transmission pedagogy but we still have transmission politics – multiplied by 459 in the case of those literacy documents (Moss, 2007). In the classroom we are trying to discourage closed questions yet in the Rose review we had an enquiry whose remit was restricted to just that – half a dozen closed questions. In the classroom we are moving away from pseudo-discussion but in the realm of policy we still have pseudo-consultation.

By the same token, we have to ask, in Lauren Resnick’s terms, how far the discourse of policy is accountable to the community, to standards of reasoning and to knowledge. Well, you can apply the test yourselves. Merely to read the definitions of the three kinds of accountable talk is to be aware of the enormity of the gulf.

*Accountability to the learning community:* the talk should ‘attend seriously to and build on the ideas of others’ . . . *accountability to standards of reasoning:* the talk should ‘emphasise logical connections and the drawing of reasonable conclusions’ on the basis of premises and argumentation . . . *accountability to knowledge:* the talk should be ‘based explicitly on facts, written texts or other . . . information that all . . . can access. Speakers make an effort to get their facts right and make explicit the evidence behind their claims and expectations. They challenge each other when evidence is lacking or unavailable (Michaels et al., 2008, p. 283).

## Making connections, building literate communities . . .

Let us remind ourselves where we started. I have tried to do what keynote speakers are supposed to do, which is to respond to the theme of the conference. I have emphasised that education is centrally about the

making of connections, and that this fact should also challenge our notion of what literacy is about and for. I have pursued a particular area where making connections might be assumed to be essential, between what we strive to achieve with children in classrooms, and how we operate in the wider public, civic and political spheres; between the discourses of pedagogy and power.

In case I am considered naive or utopian, I should say that I doubt whether there is a single country in the world where the two discourses are fully in harmony. And we know that there are many countries where the dissonance is far greater than here, where children learn to think but as adults they live in fear that others will discover and report what they are thinking; and where those in power speak and act in ways which are the absolute negation of everything that education should stand for. But the fact that ours is a relatively benign variant on this condition should not cause us to shrug and say ‘that’s life’. For I think, and I hope you agree, that the language of policy and power, and how it relates to political action, matter immeasurably; and that for an organisation like UKLA language is indivisible. We cannot say that the language of the classroom matters to us because we are teachers, but that the language of the wider world, within which our pupils will spend the rest of their lives, is someone else’s problem.

This is why Richard Hoggart’s *The Uses of Literacy* represents not merely a reflection on working-class life in pre-war Leeds, or British culture in the immediate post-war period, but a permanent challenge – especially to an organisation with literacy in its title, and especially at the end of a decade when literacy has been so intensely politicised, when it has been defined, controlled and policed by central government, and when it is now supposedly being handed back to teachers. So the challenge is real and urgent and to Lauren Resnick’s three criteria of accountable talk – accountability to the learning community, to standards of reasoning and to knowledge – I therefore propose that we add a fourth: *accountability to language*.

That invites a whole new agenda: about structure, register and code; about usage, variation and identity in the context of cultural diversity and social change; about the forms and interfaces of language as written and spoken, and – only when these matters are to a reasonable degree resolved – about the criteria of linguistic quality about which being accountable requires us to be explicit. But if teachers succeed in making the discourse of pedagogy both truly dialogic and accountable, today’s children and tomorrow’s citizens will be better placed to recognise the discourse of power for what it is, and to transcend it.

## Postscript

Although, as noted earlier, I have left this text as it was initially presented, a brief note on events since July



2009 may be helpful. In October that year the Cambridge Primary Review published its 600-page final report and 850-page companion research volume (Alexander, 2009; Alexander et al., 2009). Within a few hours of publication the report was first misrepresented then dismissed, unread and out of hand, by the then government – an affront to the imperatives of both democracy and literacy which became almost as big a media story as the report itself, although in view of the way the government had handled the Review's 31 interim reports (see this paper) its reaction was nothing if not consistent. The report was, however, warmly welcomed by many other groups who engaged with it – teachers, parents, opposition MPs, religious leaders, educational associations – and over the following months its influence was consolidated through nearly 100 dissemination events in Britain and several other countries. In May 2010, the Labour government was defeated, and as well as abandoning the Rose Review's curriculum framework and promising schools all kinds of previously denied freedoms, its coalition successor initiated a much more constructive relationship with the Cambridge Primary Review, scheduling regular meetings with senior officials and ministers from June 2010 onwards. In October 2010, the Review embarked on a new phase: a 2-year programme of professional networking to support schools keen to build on the final report's findings and recommendations (for further information about the Review, its reports and the network, see <http://www.primaryreview.org.uk>). But, as this paper warns, the new politics may have heralded different policies but the old discourse persists.

## References

- ALEXANDER, R. J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: International Comparisons in Primary Education*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- ALEXANDER, R. J. (2004) Still no pedagogy? Principle, pragmatism and compliance in primary education. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 34.1, pp. 7–34.
- ALEXANDER, R. J. (2008a) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: Rethinking Classroom Talk*, 4th edn. York: Dialogos.
- ALEXANDER, R. J. (2008b) *Essays on Pedagogy*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- ALEXANDER, R. J. (Ed.) (2009) *Children, their World, their Education: Final Report and Recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- ALEXANDER, R. J., DODDINGTON, C., GRAY, J., HARGREAVES, L. and KERSHNER, R. (Eds.) (2009) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- BAKHTIN, M. (1986) *Speech Genres and Other Essays*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- BALARIN, M. and LAUDER, H. (2009) 'The governance and administration of English primary education', in R. J. Alexander, C. Doddington, J. Gray, L. Hargreaves and R. Kershner, (Eds.) *The Cambridge Primary Review Research Surveys*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 733–750.
- BALL, S. (Ed.) (1990) *Foucault and Education: Disciplines and Knowledge*. London: Routledge.
- BARBER, M. (2001) *Large-Scale Education Reform in England: A Work in Progress*. Paper for the Managing Education Reform Conference, Moscow, 29–30 October. The paper was also presented, with small modifications, to the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston 47th Economic Conference, 19–21 June 2002 and the Technology Colleges Trust *Vision 2020* Second International Conference, October/November/December (in which form it is available on the Internet).
- BARBER, M. and MOURSHED, M. (2007) *How the World's Best-Performing School Systems Come Out on Top*. Dubai: McKinsey and Company.
- BLACK, P., HARRISON, C., LEE, C., MARSHALL, B. and WILLIAM, D. (2002) *Working Inside the Black Box: Assessment for Learning in the Classroom*. London: School of Education, King's College.
- BLACK, P., HARRISON, C., LEE, C., MARSHALL, B. and WILLIAM, D. (2003) *Assessment for Learning: Putting it into Practice*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- CAZDEN, C.B. (2001) *Classroom Discourse: The Language of Teaching and Learning*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- DEAKIN CRICK, R., TAYLOR, M., RITCHIE, S., SAMUEL, E. and DURANT, K. (2005) *A Systematic Review of the Impact of Citizenship Education on Student Learning and Achievement*. London: EPPI-Centre, Social Science Research Unit, Institute of Education.
- DEPARTMENT FOR CHILDREN, SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES (DCSF) (2009) *Your Child, Your Schools, Our Future: Building a 21st Century Schools System*. London: DCSF.
- HOGGART, R. (1957) *The Uses of Literacy*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.
- LEFSTEIN, A. (2006) Dialogue in schools: towards a pragmatic approach. Working Papers in Urban Language and Literacies 33, Kings College, London.
- MICHAELS, S., O'CONNOR, C. and RESNICK, L. B. (2008) Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: accountable talk in the classroom and civic life. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 27.4, 283–297.
- MOSS, G. (2007) Lessons from the National Literacy Strategy. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the British Educational Research Association, September.
- NYSTRAND, M., GAMORAN, A., KACHUR, R. and PRENDERGAST, C. (1997) *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the Dynamics of Learning and Teaching in the English Classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- REYNOLDS, D., CREEMERS, B. P. M., NESSELRODT, P. S., SCHAFFER, E. C., STRINGFIELD, S. and TEDDLIE, C. (1994) *Advances in School Effectiveness Research and Practice*. Oxford: Pergamon.
- ROSE, J. (2009) *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: Final Report*. London: DCSF.

### CONTACT THE AUTHOR

Professor Robin Alexander, Faculty of Education,  
University of Cambridge, 184 Hills Road,  
Cambridge CB2 8PQ, UK.  
e-mail: rja40@cam.ac.uk