

## ALL-PARTY PARLIAMENTARY GROUP (APPG) ON ORACY

Evidence session, 14 July 2020

### Short presentation by Professor Robin Alexander, University of Cambridge

In the matter of oracy, history is almost as important as evidence. Evidence tells us why oracy matters, what teachers should do, and what works. History tells us why, knowing the evidence, we haven't done it already.

My written submission surveys both evidence and history in greater detail than is possible today. Attached to it are a paper I wrote in 2012 for a DfE seminar on spoken language in the national curriculum, which at that time was under review; and an account of our 2014-17 trial of dialogic teaching by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF). Dialogic teaching is the distinctive approach to enhancing the quality and power of classroom talk on which I've been working since the 1990s.

The EEF trial, randomised control and independent, involved 5000 Y5 pupils, many of them disadvantaged, in three English cities. After a dialogic teaching intervention of just 20 weeks, the intervention group pupils were two months ahead of their control group peers in tests of English, maths and science.

In light of this and other evidence, what can we conclude? First, inclusive and cognitively challenging talk makes a demonstrable difference to pupil engagement, learning and attainment. Second, we can pinpoint the kinds of talk that exert the greatest leverage. But third, although talk is a universal feature of classroom life, talk of the quality required is not universal. Making it happen requires skill and training.

Your briefing asks about the value of oracy. That begs the question of what 'oracy' means. Too often, it's conceived as giving children confidence in presentational speaking, but little else. Too often it's mired in the politics of Standard English. Of course we want children to become confident communicators and to use appropriate linguistic registers. But we all know people who confidently communicate rubbish, whether in the pub, the office or PMQ. Some of them use Standard English.

Educationally productive talk aims higher than this. It blends the social with the cognitive, oracy for communicative competence with oracy for thinking and learning. At best, it helps children to articulate, explain, describe, imagine, speculate and hypothesise; to question, discuss, deliberate, reason and argue; to justify, defend, probe and challenge ... and more. Each of these is a way of thinking as well as speaking. Constrain the language and you constrain the thought; liberate one and you liberate the other.

Further, if children need talk to learn about the world, teachers need talk to learn about children. When talk is genuinely dialogic, it gives teachers access to children's minds. In John Hattie's phrase, it makes their learning *visible*, and by doing so it makes teaching more precise, targeted and effective.

So I'm wary of the term 'oracy'. In relation to my larger vision I worry about the narrow way it is often used. I worry about the danger of compartmentalising oracy and opposing it to literacy, when the spoken and the written are interdependent. And I worry that our wholly proper focus on the child may divert attention from the teacher's agency. Talk by its nature is contingent upon others, and children's talk develops through a range of interactions inside and outside school. But in classrooms it's chiefly through the teacher's talk, especially the way questions are posed and answers are handled, that the pupil's talk is encouraged, enriched and extended – or, sadly, inhibited. So the teacher's talk matters too.

Your briefing claims 'a growing consensus about the importance of oracy'. Yes and no. After all, the word 'oracy' was first coined in 1965. Since then there have been numerous research studies, national reports, a

National Oracy Project, and yes, growing interest in the professional and research communities, supported by evidence from large-scale projects like my EEF dialogic teaching trial and Neil Mercer's ESRC study.

But consensus has been cyclic and patchy. There have been good times for oracy and bad. Speaking and listening were prominent in all the earlier versions of England's national curriculum. In the current version they had to be fought for. Despite the advice of Tim Oates's Expert Panel in 2011 and the international evidence Lauren Resnick and I presented at that DfE seminar in 2012, ministers decided that from 2014 spoken language would not have a separate programme of study, and indeed would be barely mentioned. It was only after sustained lobbying by Jim Rose, Neil Mercer and myself that DfE changed its mind and sanctioned a spoken language programme of study, much of which was drafted by the three of us. But it was heavily constrained and less detailed than we wanted.

What about that consensus then? Well, professionally and evidentially we've made progress. Politically? I don't think so. The mindset that killed LiNC and the National Oracy Project remains alive and well.

So when you ask whether the speaking and listening requirements in the current national curriculum framework are sufficient to deliver high quality oracy education, I have to say, no they are not. They are too brief and generalised to provide teachers with the guidance on content and progression through the key stages that they need. Worse, their brevity signals that spoken language doesn't really matter. Years 1-6: 80 pages for reading and writing, two for speaking and listening.

You ask about statutory assessment. You'll not be surprised if I say: tread very carefully. Leaving aside the question of spoken language in GCSE English, ill-conceived national oracy tests could be disastrous. They could close talk down rather than open it up. And tests are individual but talk is collective and reciprocal: so how, if discussion and argumentation are as important as experts believe, do we measure the individual contribution?

In fact, talk of a truly dialogic kind is by its nature evaluative. In dialogic classrooms teachers and children listen, think carefully about what they hear, build upon what is said. The best kind of oracy assessment is formative, embedded in the teaching. And frameworks are available to support that task. That's where we should start, especially with younger pupils.

You ask about barriers. Here's a telling statistic from the national curriculum review: in 2011, only 41% of respondents to DfE's call for evidence agreed that speaking and listening should be statutory. I've mentioned political attitudes, but there are also questions about professional culture.

You ask how teachers can find time for oracy. I suggest that this question is misconceived. In classrooms talk is a constant, so it's a matter not of finding time but of using time well, ensuring that the talk that is already at the heart of teaching and learning becomes talk of the highest quality.

You ask whether teachers need support or professional development. We wouldn't dare claim that teachers need no knowledge or skill to teach reading and writing. Nor should we contemplate such a proposition for speaking and listening. There are several reasons why our EEF project raised standards, but here are three: it was firmly grounded in evidence; it made high quality talk central to both learning and teaching; and such talk was mapped and fostered through a carefully-structured programme of professional training and support. When oracy is properly conceived its teaching requires understanding and skill.