ORACY EDUCATION COMMISSION

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This submission:

- *Shows how during the past five decades national policy has fluctuated between encouraging and restricting evidence-led efforts to raise the profile and quality of talk in England's schools, to the detriment of steady educational progress.*
- *Recounts the struggle to secure even minimal requirements for spoken language in England's current National Curriculum.*
- *Sets out a comprehensive case for prioritising talk in learning, teaching and across the curriculum.*
- *Briefly outlines the author's work in this field, including the successful 2014-17 Education Endowment Foundation trial of his approach to dialogic teaching.*
- *Examines the concept of 'oracy' and its sometimes problematic usage.*
- *Emphasises the interdependence of oracy and literacy.*
- *Considers what aspects of classroom talk make a particular difference to children's learning.*
- *Argues on the basis of the policy record of the past 50 years that the task of raising the educational profile of oracy and maximising the quality and impact of talk in educational settings must rest with teachers, school leaders, teacher educators and researchers rather than government, and that this has implications for initial teacher training and CPD which the Commission will need to address.*

Introduction

1. The Oracy Education Commission is the latest in a long line of attempts to raise the profile of spoken language in schools, so the 'growing consensus' celebrated by its immediate predecessor, the 2019-21 Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG)[1], is not as recent or steady as is claimed. Crucially, however, that consensus has frequently eluded policymakers, and herein lies one of the 'barriers' which the Oracy APPG inquiry explored. Another is the professional culture of schools themselves, even though most teachers are well ahead of most policymakers in their understanding of the developmental and educational importance of talk and their desire to act on that understanding in children's interests. But a third barrier is the insidious legacy of the mindset that shaped state education in England in the 19th and early 20th centuries and yielded a curriculum in which what is deemed 'basic' to children's education is still perceived by some in pretty well the same terms as it was before the 1870 Education Act. Thus, for example:

   > (1861) The duty of the state in public education is … to obtain the greatest possible quantity of reading, writing and arithmetic for the greatest number.
   > (1993) The principal task of the teacher … is to ensure that pupils master the basic skills of reading, writing and number.[2]

2. That formula, notable as much for what it excludes as what it includes, has been trotted out by ministers at regular intervals since the first national curriculum was introduced in 1989, and if the Commission is to make a difference it needs to understand this history and to learn from previous attempts to expand the vision. Having been professionally involved in education since 1964 I have witnessed many of these attempts and have been party to several of them; the most recent episodes are particularly relevant because they relate to the version of England's national

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1 Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (2021) *Speak for Change: final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry.* https://oracy.inparliament.uk/sites/oracy.inparliament.uk/files/2021-04/Oracy_APPG_FinalReport_28_04%20%284%29.pdf (accessed May 2024).

2 From the 1861 Newcastle Commission Report on elementary education and the 1993 Dearing Report on the National Curriculum. Quoted in Alexander, R.J. (1995) *Versions of Primary Education*, London, Routledge, 270.

curriculum that was introduced in 2014 and with which at the time of this inquiry England's schools are still expected to comply, so I shall refer to them in greater detail.

3. Expanding the vision isn't only about making room for oracy. What also needs to be challenged is the assumption that the pursuit of excellence in the 3Rs is incompatible with a broad and rich curriculum that includes not only oracy but also the arts, sciences, humanities and more. As the Cambridge Primary Review records, it was a Conservative Government White Paper that, as far back as 1985, exposed the folly and evidential frailty of this belief, while since then HMI and Ofsted have consistently shown that primary schools that perform well in literacy and numeracy embed that work in a broad curriculum and can achieve excellence across the board.[3]

4. By way of staking my claim as a credible witness I should perhaps mention the following:

   4.1 Over the past 25 years I have developed a theory and practice of what I call 'dialogic teaching', a pedagogy that prioritises oracy but also goes beyond its conventional definition. For although the quality of the student's talk must always be our central concern, classroom dynamics inevitably make such talk dependent on that of the teacher, and in particular on whether the teacher limits the student's opportunities to giving required answers to closed questions – the traditional teaching default of 'recitation' – or opens up the student's talking and thinking through 'extending' moves and structured discussion. 'Oracy' focuses on the pupil; dialogic *teaching* attends to and nurtures the talk of all parties.

   4.2 As it progressed through projects in primary schools in Barking and Dagenham, Bolton and North Yorkshire, this approach was evaluated, refined and disseminated to secondary schools as well as primary, and between 2004 and 2018 sales of successive editions of the teachers' manual *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* exceeded 20,000.[4]

   4.3 Then, from 2014-17, the approach was subjected to randomised control trial by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in a project directed by Frank Hardman and myself and involving nearly 5000 Year 5 students in socially disadvantaged areas of Birmingham, Bradford and Leeds.[5] The intervention deployed bespoke professional materials, brief but intensive training of the teachers involved, and the use of peer mentoring and video for their professional planning, development and support. The independent evaluation reported that after only 20 weeks students in the intervention group were up to two months ahead of their control group peers in standardised tests of English, mathematics and science.[6] This evidence prompted EEF to list *Dialogic Teaching* alongside *Philosophy for Children*, *Talk for Literacy* and *Thinking, Doing, Talking Science* as particularly promising initiatives in this area.[7]

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3 The 1985 White Paper *Better Schools.* The HMI and Ofsted evidence is itemised and discussed in Alexander, R.J. (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London, Routledge, p 278, footnote 16; and Alexander, R.J. (2013) *Curriculum Freedom, Capacity and Leadership in the Primary School,* Nottingham, National College for School Leadership.

4 Alexander, R.J. (2017) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (5th edition), York, Dialogos. After five editions and 22 reprints this has been superseded by Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, London: Routledge. Other publications, including links to the various evaluations, at https://www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Alexander-dialogic-teaching-bibliography-March-2019.pdf

5 Further information and publications at https://cprtrust.org.uk/research/classroom-talk/

6 For a full account and discussion of the EEF project see Alexander, R.J (2018) Developing dialogue: genesis, process, trial. *Research Papers in Education* 33(5), 561-598. For the independent evaluation report, see Jay, T., Taylor, R., Moore, N., Burnett, C., Merchant, G., Thomas, P., Willis, B. and Stevens, A. (2017) *Dialogic Teaching: evaluation report and executive summary.* London: Education Endowment Foundation with Sheffield Hallam University. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Projects/Evaluation_Reports/Dialogic_Teaching_Evaluation_Report.pdf

7 https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/tools/promising/

4.4 Dialogic teaching, as I have defined and developed it, is a pedagogy of the spoken word that harnesses the power of talk to stimulate and extend students' thinking, learning, knowing and understanding, and to enable them to discuss, reason and argue. Holding firmly to the principle that while children and classrooms have much in common every educational setting and encounter is unique, the approach eschews the methodology of 'one size fits all'. Instead it presents repertoires of teacher and student talk on which the teacher draws according to circumstance and need while having regard to certain non-negotiable dialogic principles. It thus provides teachers with a flexible framework for action rather than a formula. It does, however, highlight specific key talk moves on which the quality of student's talking and associated thinking have been shown particularly to depend.[8]

4.5 Between 2006 and 2010 I directed the Cambridge Primary Review, the UK's most comprehensive enquiry into primary education since the 1960s. Extensive evidence received by the Review enabled it to recommend that spoken language should be given much higher priority in the curriculum, teaching and teacher training.[9] The Review's successor, the Cambridge Primary Review Trust, built on these recommendations by joining forces with the University of York and the Education Endowment Foundation in the dialogic teaching project and trial referred to above.

4.6 On the strength of all this work the Cambridge Primary Review and I gave evidence to the coalition government's 2011-13 review of the National Curriculum (our own recommendations on the curriculum having been taken up by many schools but ignored by the previous government). Separately, between 2011 and 2014 I entered into extended correspondence and had numerous meetings with DfE ministers and officials about the place of talk in the national curriculum and schools more generally. This protracted but only partly successful effort to get government to take the matter as seriously as the evidence by then dictated is summarised in paragraphs 17-24 below.[10]

Oracy: justifications, definitions, problems

5. The term 'oracy' was coined in 1965 by Andrew Wilkinson in conscious counterpoint to 'literacy' and in an effort to give speaking and listening parity with reading and writing,[11] and the term was revived during the 1990s by the National Oracy Project. Meanwhile, pioneering work on talk in learning and teaching was being undertaken by Douglas Barnes, James Britton, Harold Rosen and Frankie Todd in the UK and by Courtney Cazden and Hugh Mehan in the US.[12] These researchers contrasted talk's formidable *potential* to advance children's learning and understanding with the *actual* character and quality of the talk offered and experienced in many classrooms, dominated as it then was by the three-move initiation-response-evaluation (IRE) exchange of 'recitation' teaching: closed teacher question, required student answer, positive or negative teacher evaluation. Since then, researchers have recorded the dogged persistence of recitation while advocating and evaluating various alternatives, for while recitation teaching prompts and tests recall, and indeed

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8 For the current iteration of this approach, together with a comprehensive review of the contingent research and frameworks for teaching and professional development, see Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, London: Routledge.

9 Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review*, London, Routledge, especially pp 268-271 (spoken language in the curriculum) and 305-7 (oral pedagogy). For information about the Cambridge Primary Review and Trust, and access to their numerous publications: www.cprtrust.org.uk .

10 The episode is also recounted in Alexander, R.J. (2012) Neither national not a curriculum? *Forum*, 54(3), 369-84, and Alexander, R.J. (2014) Evidence, policy and the reform of primary education: a cautionary tale, *Forum* 56(3), 349-375.

11 Wilkinson, A. (1965) *Spoken English*, Birmingham, Birmingham University Press.

12 Barnes, D., Britton, J. and Rosen, H. (1969) *Language, the Learner and the School,* Harmondsworth, Penguin; Barnes, D. and Todd, F. (1995) *Communication and Learning Revisited,* Portsmouth, NH, Heinemann; Cazden, C.B. (2001) *Classroom Discourse: the language of teaching and learning*, Portsmouth NH, Heinemann; Mehan, H. (1979) *Learning Lessons: social organization in the classroom,* Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press.

the student's ability to spot the 'correct' answer, it does not meet the most important criterion of productive classroom talk, namely that it should 'require students to think, not just report someone else's thinking.'[13] There are various responses to this challenge,[14] and much of the underlying research has been brought together in two recent collections of papers.[15] It is also reviewed in my most recent book on dialogic teaching.[16]

So how might we make the case for prioritising classroom talk? Not just any talk, but talk of a kind that engages, provokes, stimulates and challenges, and that advances learning, understanding and a wide range of oral, cognitive and social capacities? I suggest that the educational case comprises, as an absolute minimum, the eight purposes listed in Figure 1.

Figure 1

MAKING THE EDUCATIONAL CASE FOR TALK

- ***Talk for communicating.*** We use language of all kinds to exchange and negotiate meaning and engage in everyday transactions; but it is principally through spoken language that we do so.
- ***Talk for relating.*** Talk builds and consolidates social relationships and gives us the confidence and competence to handle them. Reading and writing are largely solitary, and in some circumstances competitive too. Talk by its nature is interactive, collaborative and inclusive.
- ***Talk for thinking.*** Talking and thinking are intimately related. Language builds connections in the brain; during the early and pre-adolescent years pre-eminently so. As we talk and exchange thoughts with others, so do we learn to think for ourselves.
- ***Talk for learning.*** Learning is a social process, and talk helps to scaffold thinking from the given to the new. Within classrooms, talk also engages students' attention and motivation, increases their time on task and produces observable and measurable learning gains.
- ***Talk for knowing.*** Through talk, students deepen their understanding within each curriculum domain, subject or area of learning, acquiring familiarity with its register, taking ownership of its language and concepts, and working towards epistemic fluency and mastery.
- ***Talk for teaching.*** Well-structured talk gives teachers access to students' thinking, and thereby helps them to diagnose needs, devise learning tasks, probe understanding, assess progress, provide meaningful feedback, and support students through the challenges they encounter; and hence teach more effectively.
- ***Talk for acculturation***. Talk expresses and helps us to engage with what we have in common with others in our community and culture. It locates the individual within society, and society within the individual.
- ***Talk for democratic engagement***. Talk is vital for civic participation and engagement. Democracies, and institutions at every level within them, need people who can argue, challenge, question, present cases and evaluate them; and who can test the argument and rhetoric of others.

Source: Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, London, Routledge, 130 (re-ordered)

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13 Nystrand, M., with Gamoran, A., Kachur, R. and Prendergast, C. (1997). *Opening Dialogue: Understanding the dynamics of language and learning in the English Classroom*, New York, Teachers College Press, 72.

14 For the most useful reviews of the various approaches see Lefstein, A. and Snell, J. (2014) *Better Than Best Practice: developing teaching and learning through dialogue*, London, Routledge; and Kim, M-Y. and Wilkinson, I.A.G. (2019) What is dialogic teaching? Constructing, deconstructing and reconstructing a pedagogy of classroom talk, *Language, Learning and Social Interaction*, 21, 70-86.

15 Resnick, L.B., Asterhan, C.S.C. and Clarke, S.N. (ed) (2015) *Socializing Intelligence Through Academic Talk and Dialogue*, Washington DC, AERA; Mercer, N., Wegerif, R. and Major, L. (ed) (2019) *The Routledge International Handbook of Research on Dialogic Education.* Abingdon: Routledge.

16 Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, London, Routledge.

6. But here paths diverge, for while many advocates of dialogic education and pedagogy conceive of talk and its educational impact along the broad lines set out above, the term *oracy* is often conceived more narrowly. So, for example, Voice 21 has defined it as 'the ability to communicate effectively', asserting that 'one of the biggest barriers to young people getting on is a lack of eloquence. Employers put good oral communication at the top of their requirements for employees. Yet we rarely teach it systematically in schools.'[17] Oracy Cambridge has expressed the task in similar terms: 'In the world of work, the value of effective spoken communication is almost universally recognised. Job adverts emphasise the importance of being a confident communicator, or a strong "team player" '.[18] And now the Oracy Education Commission itself seems to have signed up to this predominantly instrumental and work-place-oriented argument, giving prominence to findings from a YouGov poll that 'Eight out of ten business leaders want more time spent on speaking and listening in schools, demonstrating the ongoing impact these skills have throughout adult life and in the workplace.'[19]

7. It is tempting, and indeed understandable, to try to 'sell' oracy by appealing to business leaders and politicians on the grounds of its workplace relevance and utility, but the Commission should surely aim to lead received opinion rather than merely follow it. In the specifications exemplified in paragraph 6, the function of oracy is limited not merely to communication, but to communication of a particular kind and for a particular purpose. Though communication skills are undeniably important – witness its firm place in my own list in Figure 1 – children's lives as adults extend well beyond the workplace, and our world needs people who can do rather more with spoken language than 'communicate effectively.' Note, too, that Andrew Wilkinson, who invented the term 'oracy', himself had in mind a broader definition. He distinguished between *oracy as competence* (i.e. 'communication skills' as above) and *oracy for learning*; while in pursuit of the latter the National Oracy Project argued - adapting the words of Lev Vygotsky - that 'talking together, with adults and with peers, is the most important means by which children learn to think',[20] and the NOP's publications ranged widely across the fields of cognition, learning, teaching and social development.

8. My own eight purposes extend the case further still in respect of both 'oracy for learning' (thinking, learning, and knowledge mastery) and 'oracy as competence' (relating as well as communicating) and beyond both of these into the socio-cultural domain that provides the glue for the good society (acculturation and democratic engagement - the latter surely a critical social and civic 'competence' and one that is currently being sorely tested worldwide). To all these I have added a vital *pedagogical* purpose: talk for teaching itself. It isn't only students who need high quality talk: teachers do too. Traditional patterns of classroom talk function chiefly as checks on the student's grasp of what the teacher wishes him or her to know. They are the basic tool of an education that is viewed more as transmission than exploration, and of knowledge seen as fixed rather than as shifting, cumulative and necessarily open to question. Such kinds of talk are less able to encourage critical and open-ended thinking and reasoning, or to penetrate the way the student thinks and reasons and the degree to which he or she genuinely understands something. It is a truism, but a well-evidenced one, that the teacher's capacity to probe students' misunderstanding is the prerequisite for advancing their understanding. This, then, is the oral dimension of assessment for learning (AfL). The quality of the student's talk matters: it is of course our central concern. But the quality of the teacher's talk matters too, because given the basic nature of the teacher-student relationship it is through the teacher's talk that the student's talk – and hence his or her thinking – is unlocked, empowered and advanced, or, all too often, inhibited and restricted. Hence my emphasis on dialogic *teaching*.

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17 Voice 21 home page: https://www.school21.org.uk/voice21 (Accessed July 2019).

18 Oracy Cambridge homepage and masthead: https://oracycambridge.org (Accessed July 2019).

19 Oracy Education Commission (2024) Parents and employers united in demand for more focus on speaking skills in schools, https://oracyeducationcommission.co.uk/parents-and-employers-united-in-demand-for-more-focus-on-speaking-skills-in-schools/ (Accessed May 2024).

20 Norman, K. (ed) (1992) *Thinking Voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder, (ix).

9. I would urge the Commission to spend some discussing the arguments presented here, and in any event to reach beyond the view that oracy is largely or even solely about the development of communicative competence. The Commission might go further still, and ask itself whether 'oracy' is the right term, for apart from its inescapably instrumental connotations, its relationship to literacy is implicitly and unhelpfully oppositional. Even if it is deemed necessary for advocacy purposes, positioning oracy in contradistinction to literacy, let alone confining its outcomes to communication, is to risk perpetuating what anthropologist Jack Goody called the 'grand dichotomy'. This presents the oral and the written as hierarchical and mutually exclusive and written proficiency as the true measure of education. Though we know that talk comes first both historically and for the developing individual, human language has evolved primarily for face-to-face interaction. The balance and function of the oral and written vary across cultures but both are profoundly important.[21] Lest this be regarded as a merely theoretical proposition it should be noted that when Ofsted inspectors check children's 'work', they mean their *written* work. A headteacher with whom I once worked bucked this trend when after much resistance he managed to persuade Ofsted to view, alongside the usual written work, a videotape of pupils engaging in intense and purposeful classroom discussion, arguing that this too was work. The lead inspector had the grace to admit to having his eyes (and ears) opened. Talk is an educational end in itself, not merely the servant of literacy.

10. Gordon Wells summmarises the essential differences between spoken and written discourse in familiar terms (concrete/abstract, dynamic/synoptic, social/individual, action/reflection and so on) before commenting:

> What such an ... account fails to capture ... is the more dynamic manner in which talk and text can complement and enrich each other through an exploitation of the … relationships between them. For it is when participants move back and forth between text and talk, using each mode to contextualise the other, and both modes as tools to make sense of the activity in which they are engaged, that we see the most important form of complementarity between them. And it is here, in the interpenetration of talk, text, and action in relation to particular activities, that ... students are best able to undertake ... the[ir] … apprenticeship into the various ways of knowing.[22]

11. Talk, text and action. So, as Shirley Brice Heath has also argued, the oral and the written are best understood not as the dichotomy that Jack Goody deplores but as overlapping continua with structures, functions and registers that are both distinct and shared.[23] Further, as Wells shows, each form is immeasurably enriched if the teacher encourages them to interact in the way he/she plans and conducts lessons. The dialogic relationship that Wells posits is very different from the way that in many classrooms oral discussion precedes the inevitable 'Now write about it', as if talk is no more than prelude to something much more important and, especially, more worthy of assessment. This, I should add, is a very English approach and from my classroom research in other countries I can show that it is far from universal and that an approach closer to what Wells advocates is readily observable elsewhere.[24]

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21 Goody, J. (1993) *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

22 Wells, G. (1999) *Dialogic Inquiry: towards a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 146-7.

23 Heath, S.B. (1999) *Ways With Words: language, life and work in communities and classrooms*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 111.

24 Alexander, R.J. (2001) *Culture and Pedagogy: international comparisons in primary education*, London, Wiley.

Oracy, policy and politics: milestones, warnings and lessons

12. To return to 1965 and all that. After Wilkinson's coining of 'oracy' and the seminal *Language, the Learner and the School* of Barnes, Britten and Rosen, the next milestone was the 1975 Bullock Report *a Language for Life*, one of several major reports that deserved much more attention than they received.[25] Its powerful chapter on oral language remains highly pertinent and many of its recommendations, notably on oracy and language across the curriculum, have yet to be implemented. A 2019 publication from the Education Endowment Foundation seems to echo Bullock in proposing 'disciplinary literacy across the curriculum'[26] though this welcome idea focuses more on subject-specific vocabularies and concepts than the way that language works within and across subjects and in both its oral and written forms, as proposed by Bullock and, earlier, by Harold Rosen.[27]

13. A decade or so later, in 1989, England's first national curriculum made 'speaking and listening' a formal requirement, both within the newly-designated 'core' of English, mathematics and science, and across the curriculum. The Kingman and Cox reports of 1988 and 1989 examined questions of content and implementation and concluded, among other matters, that a major bar to reform was teachers' inadequate knowledge about language, or KAL. Simultaneously, the National Oracy Project worked with and through teachers to monitor and advance the quality of classroom talk. Taken together, these various initiatives marked a high point in official recognition that the oral needed to be treated no less seriously than the read and written.[28]

14. The backlash was not long in coming. While the National Curriculum English Working Group had endorsed the principle that through talk children should explore ideas, develop genuine understanding and learn to think for themselves, others insisted that education is necessarily a transaction between the knowledgeable teacher and the ignorant pupil and that time should not be wasted on uninformed pupil opinion or aimless chatter. And while the Working Group argued that oracy was essential to democratic engagement and that in this process the understanding of the varieties, uses and misuses of language was essential, the same critics argued that the task of schools was to inculcate Standard English. As a result, the extensive materials piloted by the National Oracy Project to support the Speaking and Listening component of the 1989 National Curriculum disappeared almost without trace, and the government's Language in the National Curriculum (LINC) project was closed before its work was complete. Oracy was, and remains, an intensely political matter,[29] and tempting territory for a culture war.

15. Nevertheless, the 1989 National Curriculum Speaking and Listening requirements remained in place, and they survived the 1997-1998 review and re-emerged, slimmed down but intact, in the National Curriculum as revised for introduction in 2000 (I was on the Board of the Qualifications and

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25 Department of Education and Science (1975) *A Language for Life: report of the committee of inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA,* London, HMSO. See especially chapter 10 and recommendations 108-120.

26 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) *Improving Literacy in Secondary Schools: guidance report,* London, EEF.

27 Department of Education and Science (1975) *A Language for Life: report of the committee of inquiry appointed by the Secretary of State for Education and Science and the chairmanship of Sir Alan Bullock FBA*, London, HMSO; Rosen, H. (1971) Towards a language policy across the curriculum: a discussion document prepared and introduced by Harold Rosen on behalf of the London Association for the Teaching of English, in D.Barnes, J.Britton and H.Rosen, *Language, the Learner and the School*, London, Penguin, 117-168.

28 DES (1988) *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into the Teaching of English Language* (the Kingman Report), London, HMSO; DES (1989) *Report of the English Working Party 5 to 16* (the Cox Report), London, HMSO; Norman, K. (ed) (1992) *Thinking Voices: the work of the National Oracy Project*, London, Hodder.

29 Barnes, D. (1988) The politics of oracy. In M.MacLure, T.Phillips and A.Wilkinson (eds), *Oracy Matters: the development of talking and listening in education*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press; Edwards, A.D., Westgate, D.P.G. (1994) *Investigating Classroom Talk*, 2nd edition, London, Falmer Press; Carter, R. (1997) *Investigating English Discourse: language, literacy and literature,* London, Routledge.

Curriculum Authority – QCA, by then the responsible quango - during this period and witnessed the deliberations at first hand).

16. However, a different kind of broadside was fired by the government's 1998 National Literacy Strategy (NLS), which effectively overrode the revised national curriculum and sharply downplayed spoken language. Indeed, when in 2003 the literacy and numeracy strategies were merged within the Primary National Strategy (PNS), talk was not mentioned at all in its manifesto *Excellence and Enjoyment*.[30] In response to widespread criticism, talk was subsequently patched back in, though neither effectively nor enthusiastically.

17. Meanwhile, building on my own international classroom video and transcript data, QCA began from 2001 to develop multi-media materials to support a more rigorous approach to the handling of talk in primary classrooms. David Reedy, David Rosenthal and I filmed in classrooms in different parts of Britain, I drafted the handbook, and we waited for publication. In the end, the initiative fell foul of turf wars between QCA and the government-controlled PNS, and in a re-run of the LINC episode only a single clip from the dozens of videotaped lessons was ever released. But the handbook survived and from 2004 onwards, no longer subject to government control or permission, it was taken up by many schools.[31]

18. Spoken language featured prominently in the final reports of both the Rose review of the primary curriculum and the Cambridge Primary Review,[32] but with the change of government in 2010 Rose was dropped and a new review of the entire National Curriculum was launched. Paradoxically, at a time when research was yielding more and more evidence on the importance of talk in learning and teaching, and teachers were increasingly and enthusiastically opting into the agendas of oracy, dialogic teaching, exploratory talk, accountable talk and other talk-rich approaches, spoken language was marginalised by ministers to an extent not witnessed since long before Bullock.

19. In September 2011 I attended an international conference in Pittsburgh at which leading researchers pooled their evidence on the educational impact of high quality classroom talk and concluded that there could no longer be any doubt that it made a significant difference in terms not only of students' oral capacities but also their engagement and tested learning outcomes. On my return I immediately wrote to the Secretary of State, summarising the evidence, urging that it be acted on, and requesting that DfE organise an in-house seminar to review the implications for the National Curriculum Review.[33] He agreed, and the seminar took place in February 2012, with keynotes from myself and, by videolink from the US, Professor Lauren Resnick (organiser of the 2011 Pittsburgh conference). I also provided a paper reviewing progress since Bullock, current evidence, and future options.[34]

20. Attendees, including the minister, judged the evidence and arguments to be timely and convincing. Yet we were informed that the government would not act on them for fear of (i) distracting teachers from the task of raising literacy standards, and (ii) encouraging 'idle chatter in class.' Both objections, which eerily echoed those of two decades earlier to Cox, LINC and the National Oracy Project, were as contrary to the evidence and our intentions as it is possible to imagine. Combining

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30 DfES (2003) *Excellence and Enjoyment: a strategy for primary schools*, London, DfES.

31 Alexander, R.J. (2004) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk* (1st edition), York, Dialogos. The 5th edition was published in 2017.

32 DCSF (2009) *Independent Review of the Primary Curriculum: final report,* London, DCSF; Alexander, R.J. (ed) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education: final report and recommendations of the Cambridge Primary Review,* London, Routledge.

33 Letter from Professor Robin Alexander to Secretary of State Michael Gove, 30 September 2011.

34 Alexander, R.J. (2012) *Improving Oracy and Classroom Talk in English Schools: achievements and challenges*, paper for DfE Seminar on *Oracy, the National Curriculum and Educational Standards*, 20 February 2012. https://www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/DfE-oracy-120220-Alexander-FINAL.pdf

the oral with the written demonstrably enhances literacy, and the kind of talk we were advocating was purposeful and rigorous.

21. Nevertheless, after the seminar I logged the following recommendations for the National Curriculum with the Secretary of State:

- A separate and greatly strengthened spoken language component in the English programme of study.
- A fuller articulation of the relationship between speaking, reading and writing.
- A clear statement on the central role of spoken language in every other area of the curriculum, tailored to show the relationship between the kind of talk required and the distinctive register, vocabulary and conceptual framework of each subject.

22. Yet when the draft programmes of study for the revised National Curriculum appeared in June 2012, spoken language was no longer an explicit strand in the programme of study for English - as it had been since 1989 - and elsewhere it featured scarcely at all.[35] The reasoning, apparently, was that talk is merely the medium of teaching and not a curriculum matter, so its use is for teachers to determine. On 14 August 2012, Neil Mercer, Jim Rose (of the Rose review and Ofsted) and I wrote to the Secretary of State to protest, reminding him of the evidence and the February 2012 recommendations, and challenging the following ministerial reservations of which we had been made aware:

- That raising the profile of spoken English would encourage not rigorous and high quality talk but 'idle chatter'.
- That raising the profile of spoken English would deflect attention from reading and writing and hence frustrate efforts to raise literacy standards.
- That spoken English has no content other than what arises from reading and writing.
- That the advocacy of talk was merely an expression of a soft-centred 'educational establishment' agenda.[36]

23. DfE agreed that modifications were possible and invited us to join officials in drafting them. During the next few months we had several meetings at DfE and exchanged numerous drafts, but there was a pervasive tension between our desire to secure for spoken language the prominence we believed it deserved and the duty of officials to respect ministers' desire to keep its profile as low as possible. Overly favouring the latter, the subsequent proposals still failed to recognise spoken English to the extent we advocated, and we again complained about this to the Secretary of State.[37] The compromise outcome, in the revised National Curriculum as published in September 2014, was the reinstatement of spoken language as a statutory requirement for English with a generalised programme of study that would apply to Years 1-6 and a strong prefatory statement applying to all four Key Stages. Similar statements were inserted into the requirements for mathematics and science. (A later Freedom of Information request to DfE from a PhD student at the University of York confirmed that what persuaded ministers to change their minds was my DfE paper of February 2012).[38]

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35 http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/curriculum/nationalcurriculum/b0075667/national-curriculum-review-update

36 Letter from Professor Robin Alexander, Professor Neil Mercer and Sir Jim Rose to Secretary of State Michael Gove, 14 August 2012.

37 Letter from Professor Robin Alexander, Professor Neil Mercer and Sir Jim Rose to Secretary of State Michael Gove, 14 April 2013.

38 DfE (2013) Department of Education Freedom of Information response: Case Reference 2013/0047506.

24. Yet although we ensured that spoken language had a statutory presence and the requirements, as far as they went, were sound, they remained minimal. 81 pages of the current National Curriculum Framework Document are devoted to reading and writing during the primary years. Spoken language has just two.[39]

25. In curriculum terms this brings us up to date, and the contrast between the view of oracy in schools and policy has rarely been this stark, notwithstanding the occasional emollient ministerial or opposition statement during the past year or two. Of course, it could be argued that if all teachers shared our view of spoken language in learning and teaching and had the professional knowledge and skill to enact it there would be no problem, and spoken language would achieve its required prominence and impact without ministerial intervention. But in matters of curriculum and assessment England's system of public education is highly centralised and many teachers feel compelled to concentrate on what is required and tested at the expense of what they may believe to be educationally desirable or even essential. Within this culture of compliance, reducing spoken language to two pages out of 83 delivers a pretty unambiguous message about what really matters, and Ofsted inspections reinforce it.

26. So policy must change and in this as in other matters it really should not require the strenuous and protracted efforts recorded above to get ministers to attend to evidence, especially when they make so much of 'evidence-based policy.' Yet there are other levers. For example, with the personal advocacy of its former CEO, Kevan Collins, the Education Endowment Foundation has devoted a significant part of its budget to 'what works' projects that foreground the power of high quality classroom talk with disadvantaged pupils, and – as we have seen - independent evaluations have shown this expenditure to be amply justified. And the research keeps mounting up. Evidentially, there is now no room for doubt that such talk, provided that it is genuinely and rigorously dialogic, really does make a difference to students' motivation, engagement and learning outcomes, as well as to their capacities of a specifically oral and generically cognitive kind.

27. We are also much clearer about what it is about such talk that makes this difference. Space does not allow me to go into detail, but it is clear from the ESRC project of Howe, Hennessy and Mercer,[40] the EEF project led by Frank Hardman and myself,[41] and the work of Michaels, O'Connor and others in the US,[42] (a) that high quality and genuinely reciprocal talk builds the metacognitive capacities that are essential to students' 'learning how to learn' and becoming autonomous thinkers and reasoners, and (b) that, operationally, a great deal hangs on what linguists call the 'third turn'. That is to say, on what, having asked a question and received an answer, teachers do with what their pupils say; and, in discussion, on how both teachers and pupils respond orally to each other's contribution. Do they ignore it? Do they receive it without comment? Do they comment briefly upon it but then move swiftly on (as in traditional classroom exchanges)? Or do they engage with it and thereby extend the dialogue, probe the reasoning, bring others into the discussion, and collectively deepen the understanding?[43] It is to the latter pattern of talk that our

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39 DfE (2013) *The National Curriculum in England: framework document*, London, DfE.

40 Howe, C., Hennessy, S., Mercer, N., Vrikki, M. and Wheatley, L. (2019), Teacher-student dialogue during classroom teaching: does it really impact on student outcomes? *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, DOI: 10.1080/10508406.2019.1573730.

41 Alexander, R.J (2018) Developing dialogue: genesis, process, trial. *Research Papers in Education* 33(5), 561-598.

42 Michaels, S., O'Connor, C. and Resnick, L.B. (2008) Deliberative discourse idealized and realized: accountable talk in the classroom and in civic life. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 27(4), 283-97; Park, J., Michaels, S., Affolter, R. and O'Connor, C. (2017) Traditions, research and practice supporting academically productive classroom discourse, *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, December, Oxford University Press, https://oxfordre.com/education/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.001.0001/acrefore-9780190264093-e-21 ; Resnick, L.B., Asterhan, C.S.C. and Clarke, S.N. (ed) (2015) *Socializing Intelligence Through Academic Talk and Dialogue,* Washington DC, AERA.

43 There is a full assessment of what makes the difference in Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, London, Routledge, chapter 6.

efforts should be chiefly directed, for the sake of our democracy as well as the education of our children.

28. We also know why it is that traditional, monologic IRE/recitation teaching persists. It persists partly because it most aptly expresses the traditional view that education is a process of transmission from those who know to those who don't; partly because it gives the teacher security, for who controls the talk controls both the behaviour and the direction of epistemic travel; and partly as a matter of professional socialisation and habit: this is how we have always taught and how we ourselves were taught, so why should we change? It is therefore heartening to note that there is no barrier to the transition to dialogic teaching. In our EEF project some of the most enthusiastic practitioners of dialogic teaching were the recently-qualified teachers, yet some of the most impressive were in their middle and later careers. The younger group had no deeply-rooted habits to unpick; the older group combined embedded mastery with the confidence to try something new.

Conclusion

29. The definition and nature of oracy can no more be treated as givens than can agreement about its educational importance. In this submission I have argued that prevailing definitions of oracy are sometimes needlessly restricted or too exclusively instrumental and as a consequence oracy's importance may be understated and its treatment in schools may be somewhat narrow. My eight-part case for prioritising talk in education (Figure 1), and the extensive work I have undertaken over many years in order to translate that case into a comprehensive framework for professional thinking and action,[44] aim to enlarge both the vision and the practice.

30. Here, history is as important as evidence. Evidence tells us why oracy matters, what teachers should do to advance it, what works, and how. History prompts us to ask why, despite the evidence, we haven't done it already. This submission has briefly tracked the way policymakers have handled oracy since the 1970s. The record is consistently dispiriting. There have been several impresssive initiatives, but few have been sustained and some have actually been sabotaged by governments that either didn't understand why talk is, or should be, so central to children's development and education, or feared the challenge that it posed. That challenge, as I noted in paragraph 28, pivots on control: government control of the curriculum not only as specified but also as taught; and teachers' control of what students say, think and know. Nor, by and large, have policymakers been overly interested in looking beyond their preconceptions or prejudices. Too often, as a result, oracy has been conceived as giving children confidence in speaking, but little else. Too often it has been mired in the politics of Standard English and Received Pronunciation (RP). 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 the House of Commons. Some of them use Standard English.

31. Educationally productive talk aims higher than this. It blends the social with the cognitive, and talk for communicative competence and confidence with talk for thinking and learning. At best, it helps children to articulate, explain, describe, imagine, speculate and hypothesise; to question, discuss, deliberate, reason, assert 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.

32. Further, if children need talk to learn about and act upon the world, teachers need talk to learn about and act upon children's thinking. When talk is genuinely dialogic, it gives teachers access to

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[44] I.e. what I have called 'dialogic teaching' as trialled by the EEF and adumbrated in Alexander, R.J. (2020) *A Dialogic Teaching Companion*, Routledge.

children's minds. In John Hattie's phrase, it makes their learning *visible*, and by doing so it makes both teaching and assessment for learning more precise, targeted and effective.[45]

33. My experience of engaging with policy and policy makers on this and other matters goes back several decades, and it has included working on the inside – at DfE and its predecessors, and as a member of various official enquiries and quangoes – as well as the outside. On the basis of this experience I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that national policy is not a viable route to reform, in this aspect of education at least, and that whatever enthusiasm for oracy a political party may claim when in opposition, such enthusiasm rapidly wains once that party gains power. And that is to assume, in any case, that the claimed enthusiasm is accompanied by a proper understanding, which all too often it is not.

34. So the role of policy, it seems to me, is to provide a permissive framework, a declaration that talk matters and that schools should accord it the highest priority, whether in the national curriculum or teacher education, but to leave the working out of the detail to a partnership between teachers and contingent professional agencies and communities. For once policymakers intervene at the levels of definition, justification and specification, oracy is likely to be reduced to its lowest common denominator, or to be caught up in yet another culture war; for as I've noted and shown, the teaching of language in all its aspects, including spoken language, is always politically charged.

35. But is the profession up for it? A DfE survey undertaken as part of the 2011-13 National Curriculum review found that only 41% of teachers agreed that 'Speaking and Listening must … be a central element in the statutory curriculum at every key stage and that the ability to communicate effectively is fundamental to all aspects of human development'.[46]

36. Did this finding really reflect a majority view among teachers that oracy is neither educationally important nor developmentally fundamental? Or did it speak to the opposite: a feeling, born of hard experience, that oracy is one of those aspects of education that is actually too important, and too complex, to hand over to here-today-gone-tomorrow politicians? I would like to believe the latter, and know many teachers who are intensely committed to oracy and oral pedagogy and who find policy interventions in this area singularly unhelpful to their professional mission. Unfortunately, the DfE finding as quoted rather suggests that many other teachers thought it was precisely because oracy is not sufficiently important developmentally that it should not be statutory educationally.

37. Moreoever, whenever it is argued that x should be included in the school curriculum there are always those who worry that the curriculum is too overcrowded to permit any such addition, as indeed at least one submission to the present Commission reminds us: 'Oracy is valued by schools, but demands on the timetable mean it is not always prioritised. Any recommendations from the commission which propose an addition to the curriculum must also consider what could be removed to accommodate this. The commission must also be mindful of the impact on teacher workload. If oracy is seen as "another thing to do" or the latest gimmick, then it is unlikely to have a positive impact.'[47]

38. A 'bolt-on' approach to curriculum development – that is, adding subjects without regard to the implications for timetabling or staffing – is of course to be avoided, but oracy is not a subject, or 'another thing to do', in the sense that the quoted submission implies, still less a mere 'gimmick'.

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45 Hattie, J. (2009) *Visible Learning: a synthesis of over 800 meta-analyses relating to achievement*, Routledge.

46 Department for Education (2011) *Review of the National Curriculum in England: summary report of the call for evidence*, DfE, 17.

47 Submission from ASCL, May 2024, paras 8-9. https://www.ascl.org.uk/ASCL/media/ASCL/Our%20view/Consultation%20responses/2024/Oracy-commission.pdf (Accesssed May 2024).

(The fact that a professional association should anticipate that some of its members might hold this view is in this context both salutary and worrying). Since in classrooms a great deal of talking already goes on, and indeed without it most teachers would find their job inconceivable, the issue here is not its addition or subtraction but the form that it takes and the purposes it serves. We were able to persuade schools to participate in the 2014-17 EEF dialogic teaching project partly because they understood the importance of talk and were keen to discover ways to maximise its quality and impact, and partly because it was clear that participation would be less about *what* they taught than *how*, and therefore it would only minimally affect schools' curriculum planning and management. That 'how' entails questions not only about the teacher's and student's repertoire of oral genres, exchanges, moves and acts, but also about the ways these relate to the traditional linguistic and pedagogical defaults of reading and writing, and the balance in each lesson of the oral and the written. Oracy, then, is not a curriculum bolt-on but a particular, and a particularly potent, way of teaching across the *existing* curriculum.

39. But it does demand expertise. That expertise comprises knowledge and understanding as well as executive skill, and it commands attention to what briefly and commendably emerged during the 1990s as knowledge about language (KAL) before being sidelined by the then government (see paras 13-14). And, more specifically in relation to oracy, it commands attention to the wealth of developmental and pedagogical evidence that has appeared since the 1990s on talk for thinking and learning, and more recently still, on the way that the handling of classroom talk raises essential questions about student voice, agency and rights. So if it is indeed the case, as history readily demonstrates, that in the matter of oracy we can and should expect little from government and national policy, and indeed that such policy is as likely to obstruct our efforts as to enable them, it is to initial teacher training, CPD, school leadership and inspection that we should turn.

40. Precisely what is required from each of these sectors would require an additional submission of some length. It is also important that the Commission learns from those whose work in this field is firmly grounded in both research and classroom practice. In fact, the field is crowded, and in as far as oracy has become something of a bandwagon the submission I quoted in paragraph 37 is right to alert us to gimmickry. Not all those who claim to be experts on oracy have the requisite breadth and depth of understanding, and not all of the support materials and training packages now commercially available in some abundance are of adequate quality and provenance. There is, sadly, quackery out there as well as gimmickry.

41. Yet professional expertise, training, development and leadership in relation to oracy do not feature in the Commission's published list of themes. This is a grave omission in any event, but especially if my argument is accepted that progress in this matter is unlikely unless teachers themselves fully understand what is at stake and take the lead. The closing date for submissions has now passed, so I suggest that one way to address the lacuna would be for the Commission to invite a small number of individuals from the constituencies of research, teaching, training, development and school leadership, each with proven and respected expertise and experience in oracy/talk/spoken language, to come together to address the question of how the profession can most effectively and appropriately be prepared, empowered and supported for the task ahead. This group would then formulate recommendations for the Commission to draw upon in its report.

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