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Speak for Change

Executive Summary



Executive summary from the final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry

April 2021

What is oracy?

Oracy is our ability to communicate effectively using spoken language. It is the ability to speak eloquently, articulate ideas and thoughts, influence through talking, listen to others and have the confidence to express your views. These are all fundamental skills that support success in both learning and life beyond school. It is purposeful classroom talk which develops children's speaking and listening skills, and enhances their learning through the effective use of spoken language.

About the Speak for Change Inquiry

The Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group launched the Speak for Change Inquiry in 2019 to improve oracy education for every child in every school. The Inquiry aimed to investigate the provision of oracy education in the UK, assess its impact, and identify actions to enable all children to access the benefits of oracy.

With the Covid 19 pandemic emerging part-way through the Inquiry, we extended the scope of the inquiry and issued a new call for evidence regarding the impact of school closures and disruption to teaching and learning on oracy. We welcomed written and oral evidence from hundreds of contributors from the education sector, businesses, academia, teachers, parents, and children.

Why oracy matters

Throughout this Inquiry we have heard compelling evidence of the educational benefits of effective and purposeful talk at every stage of schooling and how a greater focus on oral language improves outcomes for the most disadvantaged students. The ability to communicate effectively is an essential ingredient to both success in school and beyond. Evidence shows that oracy:

1. Improves academic outcomes

Engaging in high quality oracy practices during lessons deepens understanding and is linked with improved test scores and exam grades as well as greater knowledge retention, vocabulary acquisition and reasoning skills. The Education Endowment Foundation's (EEF) trials of oral language interventions in schools have demonstrated that pupils make approximately five months additional progress over a year, rising to six months for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Speaking skills are essential to students all the way through their education. It is very clear that when young people are learning new concepts and ideas that being able to articulate those ideas verbally is a precursor to them being able to write those ideas down." (Teacher)

2. Underpins literacy and vocabulary acquisition

Contributors to the Inquiry have stressed the specific role of oracy in relation to language development, vocabulary acquisition and literacy. Oral language and literacy are described as 'inseparable friends' who take turns to piggy-back on each other during the school years and beyond. The importance of spoken language

years and beyond. The importance of spoken language is highlighted in the EEF's improving literacy guidance for Primary and Secondary schools.

3. Supports wellbeing and confidence

The Covid-19 pandemic has wrought havoc on many young people's wellbeing. Teachers think oracy plays a critical role in supporting young people's wellbeing and mental health by providing students with the skills and opportunities to express their thoughts, feelings and emotions, ask for help, interact effectively and positively with peers and adults, and feel listened to and valued. Oracy supports young people to develop their confidence and sense of identity.

"We all need to talk, to be able to make sense of what is going on. We need to give young people the tools to articulate and express their fears and anxieties at this unprecedented time." (Teacher)

"It has been a stressful and uncertain year for a lot of us. Being able to talk over technology has been crucial to keep contact with friends and family." (Pupil)

4. Enables young people to have access to employment and thrive in life beyond school

Many Inquiry contributors have emphasised the critical role of oracy in supporting young people's transitions into further and higher education, training and employment. With improved oracy comes better academic outcomes and greater self-confidence, enabling young people to access and thrive in post-secondary pathways. The Social Mobility Commission has found that strong communication skills are important for improving social mobility and workplace opportunities.

"Speaking skills are essential to students all the way through their education. It is very clear that when young people are learning new concepts and ideas that being able to articulate those ideas verbally is a precursor to them being able to write those ideas down".

5. Develops citizenship and agency

The Inquiry has taken place against a backdrop of seismic social and political upheaval. Oracy is critical in giving children and young people a voice, literally and figuratively. Providing opportunities for students to express their ideas and critically engage with their peers in dialogue, deliberation and debate are essential if young people are prepared to leave school as active, engaged, and reflective citizens.

"Oracy heightens a community's ability to belong to each other, whilst valuing individuality. It makes every voice matter; these processes are built on the principles of a democratic society." (Teacher)

Who needs oracy education most?

Oracy education matters for all children and young people, the benefits are accretive and go beyond addressing deficits, but our Inquiry found that oracy education can have a disproportionate impact on the learning and life chances of some children and young people for whom the blight of an absence of oracy in their education will also be most damaging.

Children and young people experiencing disadvantage and poverty: Research consistently finds that children from low-income homes start school with lower language levels than their more advantaged peers, and these gaps grow as children move through school. Of the children who persistently experienced poverty, 75 % arrive at school below average in language development. Around 50% of children in some areas of deprivation begin school with delayed language. The pandemic has also widened the language gap. Research shows a greater focus on oracy can enable disadvantaged students to fulfil their potential and narrow the attainment gap between them and more advantaged peers.

Children with Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN): SLCN experts contributing to the Inquiry highlighted how universal oracy provision, complementing targeted and specialist provision, has the potential to help transform schooling for children with these needs. Oracy can improve access to and subsequent inclusion in education for children with SLCN and with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).



What needs to change and why?

The APPG believes that there is an indisputable case for oracy as an integral aspect of education and that all children and young people should benefit from high-quality oracy education as a consistent and comprehensive entitlement of their education in school. However, our evidence has shown that the status and provision of oracy education falls significantly short of this vision. Our findings show:

1. An absence of oracy education hampers children and young people's future opportunities

The absence of a focus on oracy in education hampers children and young people's long-term opportunities and capabilities, with disadvantaged children and young people experiencing the most detrimental effects.

Unemployed young people are almost twice as likely as those in employment or full-time students to feel that their schooling did not give them sufficient oracy skills for success in later life. They are also around twice as likely to say that their education did not help them develop good oracy skills.

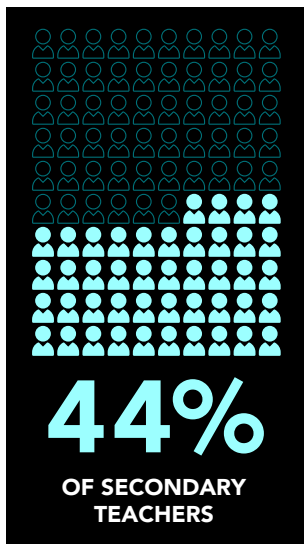
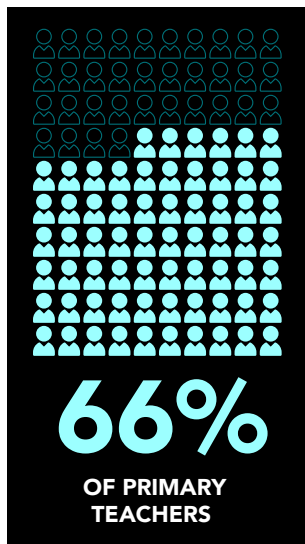
"When I left university and I was going to grad schemes and interviews, everyone seemed to be extremely polished...I struggled with interviews." (Young person)



2. The Covid-19 pandemic has widened the language gap

The pandemic has widened the language gap across all ages and increased the imperative to act now in order to narrow gaps in outcomes.

Two thirds of primary teachers (69%) and nearly half of secondary teachers (44%) say school closures had a negative effect on the spoken language development of students eligible for pupil premium, compared with 1 in 5 teachers for their most advantaged pupils.



said school closures during the pandemic had a negative effect on the spoken language development of pupils **eligible for free school meals**

THE ECONOMIST EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION'S BURNET NEWS CLUB PROGRAMME AT NEWBURY PARK PRIMARY SCHOOL



3. There is consistent concern across primary and secondary about the negative impact of school closures on spoken language

Concern about the negative impact on spoken language is consistent between Reception and KS1 teachers (71%) and KS2 teachers (63%) highlighting that despite the importance of early intervention to develop children’s speech and language, this is not only an early years issue.

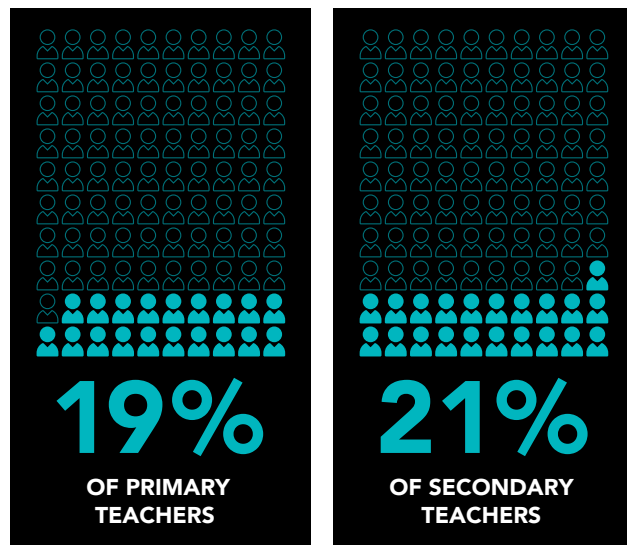
“Many of our children will not have had a full conversation in the whole lockdown period. They may not have been asked a question higher than a comprehension level. They will have missed out on hundreds of hours of exploratory, story and formal language.” (Teacher)

There is a concerning variation in the time and attention afforded to oracy across schools leaving the development of many children and young people’s oracy skills and ability to chance. Research shows how the development of spoken language skills requires purposeful and intentional teaching. While some schools give oracy a high priority, many schools are not meeting the statutory requirements for spoken language.

Less than half (46%) of primary teachers and a quarter (23%) of secondary teachers say they are confident in their understanding of the ‘spoken language’ requirements outlined in the National Curriculum.

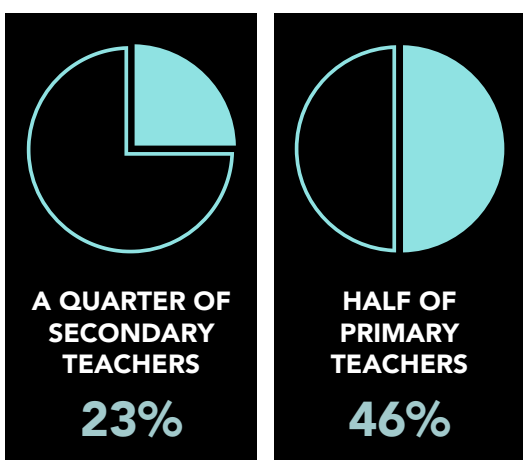
Only 14% of classroom teachers felt that their school was meeting the spoken language requirements of the National Curriculum to a ‘great extent’ compared to 40% of School Leaders.

“I am worried about the focus on written skills and reading and how the bedrock of these skills is speaking and listening and this is being underplayed in the classroom as a skill.” (Teacher)



said school closures during the pandemic had a negative effect on the spoken language development of their **most advantaged** pupils

LAURUS TRUST



said they are confident in their understanding of the statutory ‘spoken language’ requirements outlined in the National Curriculum

What the Oracy APPG is calling for

We know that the ability to speak and communicate clearly is an essential ingredient to future success, yet it remains undervalued in our education system. The Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry has collated evidence from across the education sector and wider society. We've spoken with hundreds of teachers to better understand why schools' approaches to oracy remain inconsistent and what can be done to ensure teachers and schools are better supported to maximise the potential opportunities to accelerate and amplify oracy education.

We want to see a shift in emphasis on oracy in our education system which:

1. Raises the status and priority of oracy education

The status of oracy in the architecture of our education system does not fully reflect its value and importance to children and young people's outcomes in school and life. For example, in 2019 only 8% of Ofsted inspection reports mentioned oracy or associated terms. Contributors to the Inquiry have argued that oracy is positioned as a peripheral rather than central concern. The lack of focus and emphasis on spoken language across educational policy and currency in the qualifications system, the challenges of assessing oracy, and the pressures to meet external accountability targets disincentivises schools and teachers from giving it the attention they feel it deserved.

2. Sets out shared expectations for oracy across schools

These shared expectations would outline that oracy should be explicitly taught, to all children and young people across all ages and stages of education, increasing understanding of how this can be achieved alongside an expectation that schools will monitor students' progress in oracy. There is currently a disconnect in expectations and understanding of oracy that results in patchy provision of variable quality. Oracy is seen as optional and without shared expectations and understanding, provision too often depends on an individual teacher's perceptions of the value of oracy, their subject area, and the particular challenges their school faces.

3. Empowers and equips teachers and schools to develop their students' oracy skills

This can be achieved by increasing teacher confidence and capability in oracy, developing high quality tools and resources to support oracy teaching, and supporting leadership in oracy to enable a positive culture and the conditions for oracy to thrive in schools. Whilst

increasing the status and developing shared expectations and understanding of oracy should serve to galvanise and incentivise improvements to access, provision and effectiveness of oracy education, children and young people's experience of oracy education will ultimately depend on what happens in their schools and classrooms every day.

4. Supports Covid-19 education recovery

With research, evidence submissions and polling demonstrating the impact of school closures as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic on pupils' spoken language development as well as on their wellbeing and mental health, ensuring schools and teachers are enabled to provide high quality oracy education should be a priority of 'catch-up' support.

THE OAKS PRIMARY SCHOOL



Key recommendations

- DfE should develop non-statutory guidance to support schools to embed the statutory spoken language requirements within the National Curriculum which sets out clear expectations for oracy teaching and learning, including a learning progression for students.
- DfE should include evidence on the role of oracy in closing the attainment gap and improving outcomes for pupils from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in guidance for schools on how to use the pupil premium and catch-up funding.
- DfE should recognise the ongoing importance of oracy and language development beyond early years by extending catch-up investment for oral language and fully integrating oracy into all policies relating to literacy, pupil premium, social mobility, area-based initiatives, teacher development and school improvement.
- Ofsted should develop training and guidance for inspectors on how to inspect schools' oracy provision and make clear through communication with schools that oracy is valued at inspection.
- Ofqual should reinstate an improved form of the spoken language assessment as a contributory element of the GCSE grading, reviewing the best means of assessing spoken language at GCSE to ensure assessment at this vital stage is fit for purpose.
- DfE should ensure funding is available for schools to access high-quality continued professional development for oracy which can be used to share training and resources across schools, and extend the remit of English hubs beyond Year 1 with oracy as a key support area.

Taking these steps will help meet the needs of students and their teachers, ensuring that all children and young people develop the oracy skills they need to become confident communicators and thrive in school, life and work.

Our full recommendations for change are set out in our Speak for Change Inquiry report which can be downloaded at: <https://oracy.inparliament.uk/speak-for-change-inquiry>



What do teachers think?

81%

OF HEADTEACHERS SAID ORACY SHOULD BE ESSENTIAL OR HIGH PRIORITY AS SCHOOLS RE-OPEN



"Children need the conviction to talk. We don't want passive learners in the classroom, we want all our children to have something to say. We want them to be heard. And we want them to hear the opinions of others and be open minded. These building blocks are our children's meal ticket to skills for life, for the world of work, and also to improving social mobility." (Teacher)

What do young people think?

"In our opinion we think that parliament needs to hear that everyone in the world needs to know about oracy and feel comfortable to use their voice in all subjects. You should use oracy to help you feel confident and valued in everyday use, whatever age you are." (Pupil)

60%

OF CLASSROOM TEACHERS SAID ORACY SHOULD BE ESSENTIAL OR HIGH PRIORITY AS SCHOOLS RE-OPEN



"We think that actually oracy should be something that doesn't add to teacher workload necessarily but becomes more of the vehicle that leads learning across the curriculum... it's not just that it's an add on, but it's a golden thread that goes throughout your curriculum." (Teacher)

"Oracy should be taught more in schools...At the end of the day communication skills help you get on in life. Exam results are important but you need good communication in everyday life because you're always communicating with others." (Pupil)

78%

OF YOUNG PEOPLE SAID SCHOOLS SHOULD PRIORITISE ORACY 'A LOT'



32%

OF YOUNG PEOPLE SAID THEIR SCHOOLS/EDUCATION PRIORITISED ORACY 'A LOT'