

Mr Stephen Tierney  
On behalf of Headteachers' Roundtable

10<sup>th</sup> June 2020

Dear Emma,

### **'Speak for Change' Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry**

Thank you for providing the opportunity for Headteachers Roundtable to respond to the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group's Inquiry. We appreciate the group considering our response, as detailed below.

#### **Value & Impact**

1. Starting with the development of speech, language and communication in Early Years; through phonics, early reading and the acquisition of an extended vocabulary, oracy is an integral part of children developing the necessary literacy skills to be successful at school and beyond. This includes the development of disciplinary literacy that supports further academic and vocational studies and employment.
  - a) Being able to articulate increasingly complex ideas verbally has a direct correlation with written quality; if you can say it, you can write it. Thus, test and examination outcomes, though based on the written word, are part determined by oracy skills. These oracy skills need to be honed within the classroom through the appropriate use of peer to peer and pupil to teacher engagement.
  - b) Where the prerequisite oral skills and phonological awareness are missing the impact on the development of literacy is profound. Whilst there are medical reasons why this affects some children and young people; there are also roots in early child care and development. Hence, these issues are more prevalent amongst children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. In a Key Stage 3 Literacy (Reading) Project in Blackpool secondary academies, GL Assessment New Group Reading Test (NGRT) data identified 10% of pupils in the lowest stanine (nationally 4% of pupils are in stanine 1). These pupils do not have the reading ability required to access the curriculum. The percentage of pupils in the local PRU in stanine 1 was 31%. There appears a correlation, exacerbated by deprivation, from poor oracy through to exclusion.
2. Children and young people must be given the opportunity and means to voice their thoughts, hopes, concerns and desires at a personal, community, national and international level. That is, they are empowered individually and collectively, within the democratic and societal processes, to bring purpose, direction and dignity to the lives of themselves and others. They need to be taught the skills and that they have a right to be heard and the responsibility to exercise this right legally, responsibly and appropriately.
  - a) Having the ability to speak effectively promotes the ability to think more deeply including through engagement with other people's ideas and perspectives. The more people within a society who think deeply and communicate reasoned arguments, the more sophisticated, democratic and successful the society.
3. Oracy is a fundamental life skill that enables young people to present, inform, discuss and converse with others. This helps them, for example, to succeed at interview – whether for paid employment; leading to high quality apprenticeships or for a place at a prestigious university and in the workplace.
  - a) Being able to develop and promote ideas verbally builds confidence. This reciprocal process enables some young people to aspire towards: leadership positions; a range of more highly paid professional careers and positions where political power may be exercised. Children and young people from more affluent backgrounds with enhanced social and cultural exposure are advantaged. The reverse is true for pupils from disadvantaged

backgrounds - outside of their immediate context or community – partially because of a historical discourse in England that has associated “high culture” with being educated. These differences in confidence and levels of oracy are part of root cause of a number of inequities within our society.

### **Provision and Access**

1. Oracy education is currently weak. There are few, if any, specific, evidence informed pedagogical oracy practices that are well-promoted in education and consistently adopted across schools.
2. Some schools provide opportunities, for example, through pupil leadership so that pupils have a platform to speak; the pupils are required to think about their speech and how they express themselves. It is easier to provide pupils with these opportunities when there are fewer pupils within the educational establishment or in the class. Generally, pupils attending private schools have an advantage in the range of opportunities available to them due to the significantly lower teacher:pupil classroom ratio and the extended opportunities afforded them outside of taught lessons due to their significantly higher levels of funding. This exacerbates equity and increases inequality.
3. Much of oracy education is completed outside of the classroom and even outside of school. Families who are communicative and have sustained discussion with their children versus those who are not is what creates the greatest inequity in oracy ability. The quality of oracy that one is exposed to also weighs heavily on one’s oracy skills. Though it fell out of fashion, and was deemed as not politically correct in the late 1970s, Bernstein’s work on the Elaborated Code and Restricted Code is critical in understanding the oracy skills of young people. While Bernstein’s work was focused on language being class-dependent, our more meritocratic society in 2019 means access to what Bernstein calls the Elaborated Code is not simply about wealth and class but dependent upon the education of parents.
4. Early Years providers and primary schools, in particular, have a critical role to play as they are the first substantial and significant influence on children outside of family and friends. Establishing strong oral skills and a willingness to speak and listen as a part of a child’s self-identity, at an early stage, is important. Oracy skills can then be further developed in secondary schools. If pupils reach the age of 11, without strong oracy skills and a varied vocabulary, they are likely to increasingly fall behind their peers.

### **Barriers to Improving Oracy Education**

1. Speaking and listening skills have long been the Cinderella of the curriculum, particularly at a secondary level. Whilst their importance is acknowledged in terms of accessing learning and as life skills, there hasn’t been proper investment and priority given to oracy in schools.
2. The current emphasis by the Department for Education and Ofsted on cultural transmission and the high stakes, subject based, written terminal examination assessment system places severe limitations on oracy for personal empowerment and citizenship within the school curriculum. This lack of time is the greatest constraint on developing oracy education; it is simply perceived as less important. Following recent curriculum changes, the greater emphasis placed on the written component of external qualifications has increased the value of the written word and further overshadowed the importance of developing oracy in education.
3. For example, the introduction of the new GCSE English specification removed speaking assessments that previously contribute towards students’ outcomes in the subject. It is worth noting, however, that the speaking and listening element of examinations can lead to the engineering of artificial situations with responses determined by a marking rubric rather than the development of a deep understanding and oral fluency. Therefore, care should be taken and great thought given, in recommending the inclusion of oracy within examination syllabi and associated assessments. The problems associated with marking rubrics and reliability may require us to value and prioritise oracy without the usual levers of the examination and accountability systems.
4. We believe the impact of school funding cuts, over the past decade, has led to a reduction in time for speech and language therapy in Early Years and Primary schools with the greatest impact on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged pupils in our schools. Schools’ inability to close the speech, language and communication gap at an early stage of a child’s education is part of the reason why the attainment of children from more advantaged backgrounds diverges from that of children from deprived backgrounds. We hope this inquiry will be able to elicit to what extent this concern can be supported by data from schools nationally.

5. There can be a social stigma among teenagers, even those with strong oracy skills, that to be well-spoken is unpopular. Those with strong oracy skills can though, when it is demanded, utilize their oracy skills and not feel embarrassed about using them in such situations. However, the media promotes many people who do not have strong oracy skills and these are people who are successful and are looked up to by young people.

### **Suggestions for Consideration by the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group**

1. At a national level, there needs to be a rebalancing of the key purposes of education. Whilst retaining a strong element of cultural transmission there needs to be sufficient time and importance attached to the personal empowerment of children and young people, with the aim of greater social transformation. The tension between these two outcomes of education needs greater recognition within: the curriculum and examination syllabi; the accountability system and the leadership of our schools. There will also need to be recognition that the value of oracy cannot only be assessed through standardised tests and examination outcomes.
2. A long term, targeted, incremental, well-funded, longitudinal national research project needs to be established to elicit the most suitable means for closing the gap in the speech, language and communication outcomes for pupils from the most disadvantaged and deprived backgrounds, in the Early Years and Foundation Stage. The project must target schools with the highest percentage of pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly where there is a depth of disadvantage; for example, long term entitlement to Free School Meals or high levels of children from the bottom 10% of most deprived Lower Level Super Output Areas in England.
3. Elements that may be worthy of inclusion within the research programme, in these schools, include: reducing the teacher pupil ration to 1:15 in reception with enhanced training for teachers and support assistants in the development of speech, language and communication; extending the early Career Framework to include an additional element on the development of speech, language and communication; substantially increasing access to a trained Speech & Language Therapist who has been trained to work in an Early Years setting.
4. Initial and in-service training will need to include specific elements around the importance and development of different elements of oracy education, if teachers are to have the knowledge and skills required to effectively deliver oracy education. There will also need to be time and support available in schools for teachers to develop and hone their skills; this will mean at a national, regional and local level other initiatives and requirements on schools are removed, reduced or delayed.
5. These changes will provide the context in which schools could significantly extend education and opportunities associated with oracy education including within the wider curriculum; for example, debating competitions; school radio stations; student leadership with opportunities to talk in front of audiences; school councils; interviews by local employers or to be school prefects; providing tours around the school to visitors and prospective parents, talking to other students in assemblies or mentoring younger students.

Yours sincerely,



Chair of Headteachers' Roundtable

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*The Headteachers' Roundtable was established in October 2012. We are a non-party political headteachers' group operating as a think-tank. Our core purpose is exploring policy issues from a range of perspectives. Our goal is to provide a vehicle for people working in the profession to influence national education policymakers so that education policy is centred upon what is best for the learning of all children. Its origins and subsequent growth are down to the power of Twitter as a tool for connecting people to try and bring about change where they feel it is needed. Over recent years we have held a number of significant and well attended conferences as well as speaking at numerous events and responding to various requests from the media.*