



**'Speak for Change' Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry:
Durham University Response**

Both contributors are members of the multi-disciplinary research team for the Durham Commission on Creativity and Education, a partnership between Durham Commission and Arts Council England which investigate, and seeks to promote, the teaching of young people to be creative, and to think creatively. David Waugh is Professor of Education in the School of Education, and has extensive teaching experience in schools and Universities. He has substantial research expertise in teacher training, especially teaching literacy and in primary education. Simon J. James is Professor in the Department of English Studies, and is the Principal Investigator for the Durham Commission. His research interests include the relationship between literary production and the new reading public created by the 1870-71 Education Acts.

The Group asked contributors to consider the following:

- i) Value and impact:** What is the impact of oracy education at different life stages from early years through to employment, and how can the delivery of effective oracy education contribute to individual and societal outcomes?
- ii) Provision and access:** What is the current state of provision of oracy education across the UK, who is missing out and what factors create unequal access to oracy education?
- iii) Barriers to improving oracy education:** What are the barriers to provision of a quality oracy education for all, and what is the role of government and other bodies in incentivising provision?

Value and impact

If oracy is to be a valuable and integral part of children's education, it is important to recognise that oracy can take different forms for different purposes. Glazzard and Palmer (2015) describe three key types of classroom talk: *exploratory*, *presentational* and *narrative*.

Exploratory talk

Exploratory talk takes place as we try to work out our ideas. Early years settings include a lot of this kind of talk as children explore floating and sinking, building with bricks and so forth. They try things out and talk with others about possibilities and probabilities.

Presentational talk

Presentational talk requires us to consider an audience and might range from answering questions to formal presentations.

Narrative talk

Narrative talk involves story-telling recounting real or imaginary events. There will be a structure to the narrative and some planning and preparation may be necessary.

A key challenge for teachers is to balance the types of talk in the classroom. If children do not have sufficient opportunities for exploratory talk, they may be less successful when asked to present their ideas or provide a narrative. One solution can be to incorporate exploratory talk into class discussions through *dialogic teaching*. Alexander (2008) developed the concept and defined it as 'reasoned discussion' which might occur in small groups and in whole class discussions. Talk is used to stimulate and extend thinking and understanding. Used well, dialogic teaching involves questioning to promote and extend learning. It emanates from 'Socratic questioning' in which each answer gives rise to another question.

Research undertaken for the Durham Commission has demonstrated the importance – for the development of skills and competencies required in education and in employment after schooling – of young people being encouraged to express themselves through exercising their creativity. The expressive arts have a particular role to play in the early years, as children develop language, as well as empathy and social skills: think, for example, of the importance of singing to the sonic environment of early years learning settings, and of storytelling and make-believe for children's sense of identity and self-efficacy. The affective properties of arts education in primary and secondary school can also help with the engagement of learners who are not academically achieving at a high level, or who are experiencing difficulties in their home lives which have an adverse effect on their experience of education.

Provision and access

A good starting point, when looking at the recent history of language and communication in primary schools, is The Bullock Report of 1975. Its title, *A Language for Life*, indicates its broad scope. While it covers all aspects of English, there is a remarkably strong focus on language development in the early years, language for learning in the middle years, and language across the curriculum. Government interest in language in schools peaked in the 1980s, and from 1987 to 1993 the *National Oracy Project* attempted to give more priority to *oracy*, a word invented by one of the first people to study classroom talk in this country, Andrew Wilkinson, to parallel literacy and numeracy. As part of the project a set of imaginative and well-designed training materials for teachers, the LINC materials, were produced, along with a new acronym – KAL, or knowledge about language. However a change of government prevented the materials from ever being made available to the profession, except in unofficially circulated form. The first National Curriculum (DES, 1989) made speaking and listening the first attainment target, ahead of reading and writing, and the symbolism of this was important. However the National Literacy Strategy, introduced in 1998, again prioritised reading and writing, as its name suggested. As the National Strategies project grew, detailed and useful speaking and listening materials were produced, and the *Every Child a Talker* initiative of 2008 focused on developing early language.

Throughout the period research into language in the classroom was continuing, increasing understanding of how talk works in schools and beginning to show evidence of the impact of high-quality classroom talk on attainment (Mercer and Dawes, 2014). In recent years Robin Alexander's (200 major cross-cultural study comparing education in five countries led to his influential *dialogic teaching* initiative, which focused on improving language for learning. The government appointed Jean Gross as children's Communication Champion, to identify and

promote good practice, while the Bercow Report (2008) and the resulting *Better Communication Research Project* focused on children with speech and language communication needs. However, all these very positive developments were taking place against a background of growing concern about children's language skills, exemplified by reports such as I CAN's *The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication*, and the spread of new ideas and approaches has been patchy, with implementation more difficult than might have been thought. The well-attested decline in arts education over the last ten years in state education has had negative effects on young people's oracy. Teachers have told us that where activities such as drama or debating have been withdrawn from the curriculum and extra-curricular programmes, there has been a negative effect on learners' self-confidence and articulacy across their participation in all subject learning. Schools that have been able to maintain thriving arts programmes report a correspondingly positive effect on self-confidence and pupil behaviour. Pilot projects such as *In2*, a partnership between arts organisations and schools in Darlington, demonstrate an improvement in oracy and wellbeing in pupils selected to take part in music, drama and cookery activities. Room 13 is an art school in Hareclive school in Bristol where children not only undertake art activities, but also collaborate in running the studio through its management committee, which helps teach children behaviours around speaking and listening that are transferable to employment in adult life. Billesley School in Birmingham uses the Philosophy for Children programme to encourage primary learners to debate how knowledge is constructed, and to encourage tolerance for diverse points of view.

Potential barriers

The history of language and communication in schools has at times seemed to be a history of periods of neglect interspersed with periods of concern and new initiatives. Attitudes to language skills have been inconsistent: on the one hand, it is recognised that these are important for children's learning in school and their success in life. Both in their working lives – interviews, meetings, working with others – and in their private lives, developing and maintaining relationships – good language skills matter. However, one of the challenges teachers face when establishing a talking classroom is convincing parents and children of the value of working in this way. For adults whose experience of school may have been rather passive, with the teacher doing most of the talking and children spending much of their time working quietly and independently, the notion of a talking classroom may seem strange. Children too may associate talk with recreation rather than work, not feeling that they have been working hard unless they have covered lots of paper with writing or calculations.

Even when language and communication are seen as important, they are problematic aspects of the curriculum. Oral language is by its nature ephemeral, and therefore difficult to assess, and there is an understandable tendency to give more weight to aspects of the curriculum which are relatively straightforward to assess. There is also a difficulty in disentangling what we speak about from how we do it. If a pupil speaks fluently and confidently but conveys very little, is that effective speaking? How do we compare that with a child whose talk is concise and informative but whose style is not particularly engaging? In England, statutory end of key stage assessment in English has focused on reading and writing, with speaking and listening, the first attainment target of the 'old' National Curriculum programme of study covered only by teacher assessment. Added to this, speaking and listening is often seen as much more difficult to manage in the classroom than paper and pencil based tasks (Coulthas, 2012). When teachers are responsible for the learning and

management of large groups, they can be reluctant to encourage discussions which might appear noisy and ill-disciplined both to casual observers and to children. Mercer and Dawes (2008) maintain that ground rules for talk reflect the need for social order in classrooms. Such rules are by no means peculiar to educational settings. Think about the situations in which you are aware of appropriate behaviours such as turn-taking, speaking through a chairperson or paying attention and responding in appropriate ways. These might include committee meetings, courtrooms, interviews, religious ceremonies and telephone conversations. Without some rules, conversation can be difficult and unproductive. We recommend that a key element of teachers' training in class management should focus on managing oracy. In classrooms where, for example, co-operative learning techniques are deployed there are established signals for regaining children's attention and for regulating noise levels and the etiquette of discussion.

Employers who have engaged with the Durham Commission report that capacities that are not currently developed by English state education as currently framed include public speaking and teamwork. These are clearly competencies that are key for many aspects of working life, but an examination system that measures, as has been reported to us, individual achievement in knowledge recall does not seek to develop this kind of employability in young people. Teachers report that institutionalised pressure to prioritise examination results, and frameworks such as Progress8 and Ofsted inspection, inhibit more creative forms of learning which might help develop young people's oracy. We have encountered multiple examples of good practice, but they are imperfectly distributed: some schools have individual teachers and senior leaders who recognise the value of, and promote, these activities. The issue here is of equity, and of these kinds of outcome often being delivered in spite of, rather than because of, the framework by which the success of schools is assessed by Government.

We would be happy to supply further information.

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