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Dear Emma

Ofsted's evidence to your 'Speak for Change' inquiry

Thank you for inviting Ofsted to give evidence to your group's inquiry. The response below sets out Ofsted's views on the current status and provision of oracy education in the England.

Developing pupils' spoken language

One of the prime areas of learning in the EYFS is communication and language. This is the foundation upon which spoken language in the National Curriculum is built. Ofsted follow the aims of the National Curriculum and in this reply will discuss developing pupils' confidence and competence in spoken language and listening skills.

For pupils to gain competence in spoken language, the curriculum must set out the necessary building blocks for success. It should be planned and sequenced so that new knowledge and skills build on what has been taught before. In particular, without good vocabulary and syntactic knowledge pupils struggle to express themselves confidently in speech. Research shows the impact of poor vocabulary on pupils' future success and life chances.

The use of speech and talk to develop vocabulary and syntax

Encouraging children to use the new words they encounter is important at all stages of education but especially in early years. In the early stages of children's

development, language acquisition, gained through listening and speaking is vital as



it allows the growth of children's vocabulary to explain the world around them. If undeveloped, limited vocabulary is a barrier to developing expertise in reading and writing. As the development of literacy skills is dependent on oral language competency, pupils who have speech, language or communication difficulties may also experience literacy difficulties.

Your inquiry has asked us to address a number of questions. We have focused on responding to those questions where we have the relevant evidence, expertise and experience to provide an answer.

1. Value and impact

Q1 Given many teachers recognise the importance of oracy, why does spoken language not have the same status as reading and writing in our education system? Should it have the same status, and if so why?

1.1 At the start of children's education in EYFS communication and language has status in the curriculum as one of the three prime areas of learning. However, inspection evidence suggests that at the start of reception many children struggle in this area. This may indicate that status alone does not lead to improved practice and outcomes.

1.2 Spoken language is not treated in the same way as reading and writing, because it does not have a defined and sequenced body of knowledge which supports pupils to progress in their spoken communication. It is difficult to conceptualise progression in spoken language because there is a lack of clarity about the curricular building blocks which lead to confidence in spoken language.

Q3 What is the value and impact of quality oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils (for instance pupils from varied socioeconomic backgrounds or with special educational needs)?

1.3 If children do not gain confidence with spoken language this can affect the quality of their adult life because they will struggle with communication. Children need to articulate and use the words they encounter through their own speech. Not enough pupils with special educational needs or from disadvantaged backgrounds learn the expressive language they will need for their later education.

1.4 Developing children's expressive language in the early years of schooling strongly supports them to read with understanding. If children's 'oral-aural

vocabularies' develop well, this will have a positive impact on their ability to read with comprehension.

1.5 As Gough and Tunmer's Simple View of Reading shows, all children need to gain expressive language. Without this, they are unable to read with understanding. Verbal language comprehension therefore, ideally needs to be well developed by the time children enter Reception. This will allow them to quickly learn to decode through effective phonics instruction and soon be able to read for themselves so they can make the transition from learning to read to reading to learn (by the end of Year 1 in the vast majority of cases).

Q4 How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?

1.6 The wider curriculum develops spoken language. Articulate teachers with great subject knowledge model successful oral communication to their pupils.

1.7 Oral articulation of vocabulary and ideas can often help children learn new words and crystallise and clarify their thoughts, particularly in preparation for writing.

1.8 The use of talk as a pedagogy should be dependent on how effectively it allows pupils to learn a given curricular goal. It cannot be assumed that pupil talk in lessons will improve learning of the subject or spoken language.

Q7 What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/mental health?

1.9 Many children enter early years settings 'language impoverished'. It is a matter of social justice to give these pupils the best possible language and communication development to lay the foundations for a successful education in key stage 1 and beyond.

1.10 Standard English is an essential element of formal communication. Pupils are disadvantaged by not being able to write and speak standard English. Rather than being seen as a means of perpetuating class hierarchies, it is now widely regarded as an instrument of social justice. It should be modelled in early years and taught explicitly as pupils move through the curriculum.

1.11 From research¹ we know that vocabulary development is also essential for future learning. We also know more about the negative effects of gaps in

pupils' vocabulary, the way these gaps widen over time and their impact on future life-chances.

2. Provision and Access

Q2 Can you provide evidence of how oracy education is being provided in different areas/education settings/extra-curricular provision, by teachers but also other practitioners that work with children?

2.1 Our inspection evidence shows that there is confusion between using spoken language as a pedagogy and spoken language as a curriculum object. Giving pupils opportunities to speak is not the same as delivering a curriculum plan with clear steps towards confident and sophisticated spoken communication.

2.2 Early reading and vocabulary are now centre stage in Ofsted's education inspection framework. Inspection evidence indicates that this emphasis is shining a light on the acquisition of vocabulary and therefore developing children's early spoken language.

2.3 Where practice is less developed (focusing on early years):

- Spoken language is too often seen as something that will develop naturally and is therefore not given the curricular thinking seen in other subjects - The statutory framework for the early years foundation stage sets out the characteristics of effective teaching and learning. These characteristics do not lend themselves to assessing the building blocks of effective spoken language communication.
- Some schools acknowledge children's low level of language and communication development on entry to school, but have not considered how they will counter this deficit.
- There is a lack of expertise and training to support staff in some early years settings and schools to develop children's knowledge of language.

Q4 Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?

2.4 Some schools teach rhetoric including sophisticated grammatical knowledge, as well as knowledge about public speaking.

- Our education inspection framework emphasises the relationship between language acquisition and early reading. Inspections tell us that there is now greater emphasis on reading to children more regularly in many schools. Listening to extensive stories, poems, rhymes and non-fiction gives children the language they can then use in their spoken communication.

2.5 Where practice is stronger it includes (this answer focuses on early years):

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- Tackling impoverished language through a structured, whole school approach with explicit teaching of curriculum content and terminology.
- Speech and language being modelled and explicitly taught so children can articulate their understanding through verbal expression.
- Oral and choral rehearsal in the classroom so children gain confidence speaking new words.

3. Barriers

Q1 What are the barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?

- 3.1 Within the early years sector, the importance of devising a clear plan for promoting communication and language is not always recognised. Such a plan should set out the building blocks required for young children to gain confidence in spoken language.
- 3.2 There is a lack of subject knowledge about the appropriate curriculum to develop spoken language. As a result, there is insufficient explicit teaching.

Q2 What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?

- 3.3 Training can support teachers. In particular, a language programme and training can help planning a curriculum which will lead to improved spoken language outcomes.

Q5 What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?

- 3.4 Formative assessment that is used to make checks on pupils' retention and understanding of the building blocks for learning, can help teachers adapt their instruction and support overall curriculum design.
- 3.5 In early years, many settings predominantly 'continually assess' children based on observations. This assessment takes staff away from directly teaching the building blocks required to support confident communication and language.
- 3.6 As seen from the English GCSE specifications preceding the current one,

formal spoken language/oral assessments that carry a tariff are problematic. Spoken language (including oracy) is hard to assess reliably:
- criterion-based assessment is subject to interpretation

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- reaching valid conclusions in formal testing requires standard conditions, which are known to be difficult to achieve in schools
- the quality of language a child produces depends in part on the quality of language of their interlocutor
- it is difficult to separate content knowledge from performance skills
- effective moderation of teacher-assigned marks/grades is not practicable.

3.7 Direct assessment of spoken language in qualifications can also lead to pupils practising the end-goal (composite final performance) rather than the curriculum elements required to achieve the composite at a high standard.

3.8 In the interests of both education quality and fairness, the current English Language GCSE addresses these concerns by including a spoken English component, for which a separate grade is now reported as an endorsement to the grade for written English.

Q6: Are the speaking and listening elements of the current curriculum sufficient in order to deliver high quality oracy education?

3.9 The 2014 version of the English national curriculum showed a welcome shift, with the emphasis on spoken language.

Q7. What is the best approach – more accountability within the system or less prescriptive approach?

3.10 More accountability is not necessarily a solution to improving children's spoken language because of the potential perverse consequences (as outlined under 'assessment' above).

3.11 Providing schools with a curriculum that sets out the necessary building blocks required for success will help teachers have confidence to include spoken language within the curriculum. In this way, the curriculum will 'do the work'.

Q8. Are there examples of other educational pedagogies where provision has improved and we can draw parallels and learn lessons?

3.12 The clearly defined sequence and reading of books within many systematic

synthetic phonics programmes provides an example of a carefully identified curriculum to achieve a high-level curriculum goal.

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I hope you find this information helpful. We look forward to giving oral evidence to your inquiry on Tuesday 14 July.

Yours sincerely

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National Director, Education

