

## Written evidence

Members of the Oracy APPG will consider written, verbal and audio-visual evidence and oversee oral evidence sessions. All evidence will inform the final report.

The extended deadline for submitting written evidence is 20th September 2019. We would appreciate if the submissions would follow the following guidelines:

- Be in a Word format
- No longer than 3000 words
- State clearly who the submission is from, and whether it is sent in a personal capacity or on behalf of an organisation
- Begin with a short summary in bullet point form
- Have numbered paragraphs
- Where appropriate, provide references

Please write your evidence below and email the completed form via email to [inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk](mailto:inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk) with the subject line of 'Oracy APPG inquiry'

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School or Organisation:

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Role:

Written evidence:

## Summary

- This is a report on an 18 month, DfE Strategic School Improvement Fund (SSIF) Project – Round 3, designed to close the ‘Word Gap’<sup>1</sup> in Early Years and improve the life-chances and social mobility of children across the Black Country.
- *Language First* aims to improve Early Years’ outcomes (Good Level of Development - GLD), across the Black Country, so that the 4 Black Country Local Authorities’ GLD moves from the bottom quintile to at least the 4<sup>th</sup> quintile nationally.
- This is being done initially, by supporting 32 of the lowest performing schools in the area, over 18 months, through the use of specific research from University of Oxford (URLEY)<sup>2</sup> using three Language Learning Principles (Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) research)
- Specialist language coaches linked to University of Oxford are working with our Specialist Leaders of Education (SLEs) in Early Years and 15 Centres of Excellence across the region to: model; support; coach and develop best practice in our schools.
- Other recognised partners, Walsall Speech and Language Therapy and Elklan trainers are invested in providing specific professional development to support with interventions to close the word gap for vulnerable children, or those with specific needs.
- There is a specific focus on the teaching of phonics, by developing the key early language and literacy skills, which enable children to decode and apply unfamiliar words, so that children are secure in their phonological awareness in preparation for Year1 National Curriculum. Children will have strong foundations in *Letters and Sounds*, promoting secure speaking and listening, communication and language skills and decoding skills for reading new words which they see and hear.
- The quality of teaching and learning in all schools involved will be no less than consistently good, and all Ofsted judgements rising or no less than good for Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), with enhanced intentional practice.
- All practitioners need to develop a growth mindset and openness to change - all receive the core training, rather than a cascaded model.
- Children demonstrate depth and breadth of language and vocabulary (grammar communication and narrative)
- Parental Engagement in applying the *Language First* principles at home are also crucial to the children’s success. Parental workshops provide support, modelled strategies and suggested resources to promote language development at home.
- A sustainable model will be created from the DfE funded project, with the Oxford research delivered by local experts/trainers within two Teaching School Hubs (developed in Year1 of the Project), so that a growing community of practice may evolve, joined by new self-funding schools through a cost-effective and combined model of bespoke training and in-school support from SLEs (shown to be the most effective model of professional development)<sup>3</sup>

### 1.0 The Word Gap<sup>1</sup>:

1.1 The term “word gap” is typically used to refer to children in Early Years’ settings or pupils entering primary school, with a vocabulary far below, age-related expectations. This increasing challenge, which is compounded by children’s lack of cultural capital and their social issues are much talked about, but what does it really mean and what is the impact upon our children? Oxford University Press’ (OUP) report<sup>1</sup> (p2), reveals that, *‘We know from other research that the size of a child’s vocabulary is the best predictor of success on future tests and children with a poor vocabulary at five are four times more likely to struggle with reading in adulthood and three times more likely to have mental health issues.’*

1.2 We also know that vocabulary is a major factor in predicting how far children from any background will succeed at school and beyond, a crucial element in tackling social mobility. It is crucial then that the ‘word gap’ is tackled at the very earliest opportunity, with 69% of the

primary school teachers who took part in the OUP survey<sup>1</sup> believing that the number of pupils with limited vocabulary is either increasing or significantly increasing in their schools compared to a few years ago.

1.3 There is a strong correlation between the number of words a child comes in contact with on a daily basis and the breadth of their vocabulary<sup>4</sup>. It is therefore our responsibility in schools to ensure that children 'bump into words' and have time to explore and experiment with new vocabulary. The best way to achieve this is through the children's high-quality interactions with the adults around them in early years and to share these strategies with parents.

2.0 Why the focus on Oracy in Early Years?

2.1 Early Years Education is the important starting place to develop children's Oracy, defined as the 'ability to express oneself fluently and grammatically in speech'. The *Language First* Project ensures that all Early Years practitioners working with children know what environments and interactions children need in order to progressively build fluency and grammatical accuracy, as they begin their journey to become confident and capable communicators within a range of contexts.

3.0 What are the 3 Language Learning Principles (URLEY, University of Oxford), which are proven to enhance language acquisition and best support learning?

3.1 All staff learn how to:

3.1.1 Be a magnet for communication

- Help children to feel valued and noticed.
- Use descriptive commentary to narrate a child's actions.
- Be an active listener and a responsive language partner.
- Show interest by using body language, using their name and going down to their level.
- Observe, wait and listen before speaking, to allow the child space and time to think and respond.
- Let children know you have understood them by confirming, repeating and extending their communication

3.1.2 Be a language radiator

- Model rich language and thinking.
- Talk often in different contexts, using varied and rich vocabulary which is just above children's level.
- Pay attention to using correct words and grammar to provide a good language model.
- Use opportunities provided by resources and activities to introduce new words, and make sure you plan for this.
- During play activities and routines, use techniques such as commenting and running commentaries to model the language for what children and adults are doing, experiencing and thinking.
- Read books with children daily, including reading aloud to children and reading with children.

3.1.3 Be a conversationalist

- Create a culture in your classroom of adult-child conversation
- Discuss a wide range of subjects with children, including non-present as well as present topics.
- Use a range of techniques to keep discussions and conversations going, including commenting, questioning, explaining, speculating, adding information and ideas to what children say, and encourage children to use new words themselves.

- Read and discuss books with children often and re-read books to allow for more in-depth discussion in later-readings.

#### 4. What is Intentional Teaching?

4.1 This focuses on our quality interactions with children - playful, thoughtful and purposeful. It requires a wide-ranging knowledge:

- about how children typically develop and learn;
- of individual children, their stage of development; interests and how they learn
- about when to use a given strategy to accommodate the different ways that children learn and the specific content they are learning.

#### 5. What are Meaningful and Irresistible Contexts for Language Learning?

5.1 Children are most confident and motivated to talk about things:

- of which they have experience
- in which they are interested
- which are meaningful to them

5.2 In creating meaningful and irresistible contexts for learning, we will intentionally:

- Build on children's interests and existing knowledge
- Provide rich and varied resources and experiences
- Make the most of play, exploration and investigation
- Offer repeated opportunities for children to 'bump into'/use new language
- Provide meaningful experiences over time

#### 6. Structuring the Early Years' day to support Language Learning

6.1 This focuses on ensuring optimum time and space for communication, including making sure that any whole-group times are rich opportunities for children to *use* as well as to *hear* language.

6.2 Ingredients of an effective language-supporting day include:

- daily shared reading
- small-group opportunities for talk
- language through play
- incidental and informal chat
- conversation during routines
- individual conversations

#### 7. What is the role of assessment/appropriate form of assessment within EYFS?

7.1 The *Language First* Project uses internationally validated tools to audit effectiveness: The Environmental Rating Scales (ERS) and Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being Tool (SSTEWS) are tools used to audit the quality of Interaction and the Learning Environment, helping to identify next steps, in order to drive forward best practice and measure progress.

7.2 The *Language First* Project uses internationally validated tools to create a baseline for improvement:

The Teacher Rating Scale of Oral Language and Literacy (TROLL); WELLCOMM screening tool and Conversation Styles Audit Tool (HANEN) are used to allow practitioners to look more forensically at their children and plan how best to interact with them; to provide interventions and create an enabling environment, which will best develop the children's communication and language skills.

## 8. Outcomes and Learning from Year1 of the *Language First* Project:

- 8.1 Initial training for all staff in the team (a shared language) must be supported with follow on coaching in school, but also complemented by peer-to peer collaboration in localities. This enables schools to identify the application and impact of the programme in other settings, often in similar circumstances and to develop that unconditional drive and ambition to overcome barriers for their children, no matter what their starting points.
- 8.2 Fidelity to the project principles is crucial, but at the same time, a real focus on dealing with the individual needs and gaps in learning within the cohort, using evidence-based research, in order to raise outcomes across all areas of learning in every school.
- 8.3 Sharing a core set of behaviours and beliefs is a driving force for continuous improvement: to overcome barriers and create an open culture for change, in order to equip children with the foundations for their life-skills for future learning and the world of work (even in EYFS) – a determination that no child should be left behind, especially due to poor language skills.
- 8.4 Creating staffing stability and leadership capacity within the team as part of a sustainable model is vital to the continuing success of each school within the project, but also to the community of practice created as a result, which can be strengthened through the use of technology; an on-line presence as a resource for staff, and continued professional development, with sharing of good practice by the experts emerging from within the group.

## 9. What is the role of government and other bodies in creating greater incentives and how can this be realised?

- 9.1 To be proactive in sharing successful strategies; further promoting and funding successful projects into language acquisition and oracy, at the earliest opportunity in a child's school career, funded through savings made on later inevitable SEND funding; pupil referral units; mental health and probation services, and unemployment costs when people are unable to express themselves and communicate effectively later in life.
- 9.2 To target more Government funding towards high level professional development of language in the EYFS workforce, to enable this level of training and coaching to be rolled out nationwide, in locality groups, so that *The Word Gap* can be closed before starting Year1, giving every child full access to the National Curriculum and future learning. Year 2 of this project will demonstrate that this can be done very cost-effectively in a strong community of practice.
- 9.3 Educate parents in their crucial role of promoting language acquisition in 0-5 year-olds, and the impact that either high-functioning Oracy or The Word Gap has on their children's future.

## References:

<sup>1</sup>Why Closing the Word Gap Matters: Oxford language Report (Oxford University Press, 2019)

<sup>2</sup>URLEY – Using Research Tools to improve Language in Early Years (University of Oxford) EEF Research

<sup>3</sup>EEF, Putting Evidence to Work – A School’s Guide to implementation, (February 2018)

<sup>4</sup>Hart, B. and Risley, T. (2003) ‘The Early Catastrophe – The 30 Million Word Gap by Age 3’. American Educator. 27, pp.4-9.