

## ‘Speak for change’ inquiry – comment from Teach First

1. A key indicator of a well-functioning society is the ability of people from all backgrounds to speak up for themselves and others, participating in public and professional life on an equal footing.
2. Speaking well is not a skill that comes to anyone automatically. It is learned at through exposure and engagement at home, at school and through extra-curricular activities. It is a crucial skill to have for many purposes, not least career-related ones.
3. A survey by the Sutton Trust asking which attributes employers wanted to see in young people found communication and verbal/language skills among the top three priorities.<sup>1</sup> The Confederation of British Industry has repeatedly called for the cultivation of ‘softer’ skills and behaviours that can support leadership and team work in a future workplace.<sup>2</sup>
4. This wide emphasis on speaking skills unfortunately benefits some young people more than others. From an early age, children from disadvantaged backgrounds often face greater communication barriers. Only half as many children from disadvantaged backgrounds ‘exceed’ the communication and language learning goals at the end of early years education compared to peers from better off homes.<sup>3</sup> The Communication Trust has previously presented evidence on the impact this has on life chances, including that good oral language skills at age five is a significant predictor of attainment at age 14.<sup>4</sup>

### The knowledge and confidence to speak up

5. Communication barriers are largely about lack of vocabulary and subject knowledge. This especially becomes the case at later ages, where rather than being about the skill of speaking (e.g. phonics and learning the sounds of words), it becomes about knowledge. A child cannot be successful at oracy without meaningful subject knowledge, which must come first. Following this attainment of knowledge, it is then important for children and young people to have opportunities to improve their speaking skills. Both knowledge and opportunities to improve oracy can be gained at school. This is why we believe developing the quality of teachers in schools that serve disadvantaged communities is essential to tackling unequal access to oracy building opportunities.
6. One way of developing speaking skills is through extra-curricular activities. Evidence from the US suggests debating clubs help disadvantaged students, and in the UK after school clubs have been linked to both higher attainment and prosocial skills.<sup>5</sup> Sadly, the Sutton Trust has highlighted stark discrepancies in the accessibility of these activities, as schools with the lowest proportion of FSM

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<sup>1</sup> Sutton Trust, Life Lessons, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Confederation of British Industry, [Written evidence to Fourth Industrial Revolution Inquiry](#), Education Committee, 2018

<sup>3</sup> Department for Education, [Early years foundation stage profile results: 2017 to 2018](#), 2019

<sup>4</sup> The Communication Trust, [Written evidence to Life Chances Inquiry](#), Education Committee, 2018

<sup>5</sup> Sutton Trust, Life Lessons, 2017

pupils are twice as likely to offer debating clubs as schools with the highest (70% compared to 35%).<sup>6</sup>

7. While many employers cite the home environment as one place for young people to gain more of these desired communication skills, it is essential our education system and wider society provide opportunity for young people to gain them. This is where the importance of teachers and schools is immeasurable, and why Teach First exists: getting great teachers and leaders to the schools that need them most, making sure disadvantaged children don't miss out on the opportunities offered to their affluent peers.
8. It is also why we are proud that a Teach First alumnus, Oli de Botton was one of the co-founders of School 21. The school is achieving impressive results, supporting their pupils' ability to speak up, and we are delighted to continue to partner with them.
9. To give all children and young people the chance to develop their own strong voice, there are some areas we suggest to focus on:
  - Ensure all children have access to excellent early years education. The early years sector is struggling with attracting, developing and retaining their workforce, and it is clear this needs to be solved before children from all backgrounds can get the best start in life. This includes better professional development and pay for early years teachers and professionals, to ensure it is an attractive and well-qualified profession.
  - Ensure teachers and schools in disadvantaged areas have access to all the support they need. To achieve excellent oracy, it is essential for children to achieve deep and meaningful knowledge, and teachers are there to help them develop exactly that. If teachers are in a supportive and thriving environment, they have the space to provide a more rounded education, including a focus on speaking skills. We have looked at ways to help more teachers thrive, particularly in disadvantaged schools, in our report [Britain at a crossroads](#).

## About Teach First

Teach First is an education charity with a mission to build a fair education for all. Through a range of school leadership programmes the charity supports teachers, leaders and schools facing the biggest challenges, serving the most disadvantaged communities.

The charity has now recruited over 14,000 teachers and leaders, has over 60 head teachers in their alumni and has supported over a million pupils.

Those on the Training Programme commit to a minimum of two years at their partner school, where they teach a Newly Qualified Teacher (NQT) timetable; and around half stay on for a third year. More than half of all the teachers who've completed training since 2003 are currently teaching.

The charity supports whole leadership teams through Leading Together. Develops individuals to become effective leaders through Middle Leader, Senior Leader and Headship programmes leading to a National Professional Qualification. And provides Career Leader training to develop a long-term, school wide careers strategy to improve student opportunities after school.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



Teach First currently operates in Wales and in all regions across England: London, West Midlands, East Midlands, Yorkshire the Humber, North West, North East, South East, South Coast, South West and the East of England.

If you have any further questions about this submission please get in touch with [esundorph@teachfirst.org.uk](mailto:esundorph@teachfirst.org.uk)