

## 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'

---

Full name:

School or Organisation:

Role:

Written evidence:

This evidence was written by Professor Julie Dockrell on behalf of the government funded Better communication research programme (BCRP <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/better-communication-research-programme>) and the UCL Institute of Education. This evidence draws on current research providing empirical evidence about the importance of oral language skills on academic attainments and children's well-being. Relevant references can be provided.

### Key points

- Language skills on school entry matter for all children, the education system and society more widely.
- Poor language skills are directly implicated in reading and writing difficulties and poorer academic attainment.
- The driver of strong oracy skills is frequent, effective and high quality language learning interactions.
- Oracy skills are not formally assessed in school and teachers do not have a strong grounding in the development of speaking and listening.
- There are major challenges where the children with the poorest language levels are least responsive to intervention and practitioners in these settings find difficulty in identifying and implementing effective strategies
- The resistance to intervention and the stability of the children's language trajectories further emphasise the need for oracy to be firmly embedded within the school curriculum in a systematic fashion.

## 1. Background

1.1 Developing strong oracy skills is the key to effective communication for both the oral and written language. There is consistent evidence that when children experience difficulties with oral language literacy, behaviour, mental health and academic attainment are often affected. Although language difficulties/language learning needs are the most common problem of early childhood, difficulties with speaking and listening are under researched and not well detected at school. Because oracy has not had the attention it deserves within policy and training school staff are not well prepared to meet children's oracy needs and are not equipped to be reliable judges of children's language levels.

## 2. Value and impact

2.1 Strong oracy skills including vocabulary, grammar, narrative discourse, and pragmatics are predictors of academic outcomes

including reading; they also impact directly on spelling and writing. Language skills emerge as the most consistent predictor of subsequent skill levels across academic and social domains. Yet at no point in a child's school career are oracy skills formally assessed.

2.2 Children need to develop proficiency in oral language skills to 'navigate' complex language environments and interactions with teachers. Language at school entry predicts overall performance in language, mathematics, reading, and social skills (but not behavior problems) and higher language skills at school entry predict larger gains over time in reading. Reading is particularly susceptible to the impact of oral language. Oral language skills at kindergarten are the strongest overall predictor of reading performance, stronger even than early reading skills themselves, while grammar is more predictive than other measures such as vocabulary. In sum, language acquisition in preschool and kindergarten is critical to later reading success and school achievement. Given the key role oral language plays in learning it is important to support education practitioners in identifying children whose language trajectories signal potential negative sequelae.

2.3 Children who experience significant language problems (speech language and communication needs, SLCNs) educated in mainstream schools are mainly supported by additional teaching assistant time and receive less support than peers with other special educational needs who have better language skills.

### 3. Provision and access

3.1 Many children (7 to 16 per cent) enter school with poor language skills unexplained by other developmental challenges. This percentage is significantly higher in areas of social disadvantage, although fewer children are identified as having SLCN in the most deprived schools resulting in reduced levels of support. A key challenge has been to distinguish children who have persistent versus transient delays.

3.2 One possible explanation of delayed language learning is that children simply are not receiving sufficient language input. There is consistent evidence of differential disadvantage in relation to language development, where children from areas of social disadvantage or who speak English as an additional language are more likely to have poorer language skills. There is also consistent evidence that children from lower socio-economic backgrounds are exposed to less high quality language both at home and in school and that this leads to poorer vocabulary, grammar and language processing.

3.3 Although disadvantaged populations in England receive greater levels of service from speech and language therapists (SLTs), there are

still large inequalities in provision among socially deprived groups and the disproportionate number of children with EAL who have language learning needs is not reflected in SLT service statistics. In sum, certain population characteristics are associated with SLCN but there are disparities in their use as flags to provide additional services or monitor progress and in the extent to which different professional groups are alert to these disproportionalities. Better understanding of population parameters within local areas, such as social disadvantage and EAL, enhances planning service provision and the identification of children's needs.

3.4 A major problem in tracking language development is the fact that there is no gold standard for identifying language difficulties or benchmarks. Tests vary markedly in their ability to discriminate between children with significant language-learning needs. Nor are there unequivocal language behaviours that allow the early identification of language problems in a reliable and valid way. There is also considerable variability longitudinally in the development of the different components of language in children under the age of five. This has led researchers to focus more on growth trajectories and learning and to emphasise the importance in education settings of enhancing oracy skills and monitoring development rather than focus on a child's performance at a particular point in time. Acknowledging that the driver of strong oracy skills is frequency of effective language and high quality language learning interactions

3.5 One approach is to explore a child's response to intervention. Response to intervention (RTI) focuses on the child's ability to respond, i.e. children's capacity for change or "modifiability". These interventions are considered to be more culturally fair to those from different linguistic or cultural backgrounds. They also may be more sensitive for measuring change in language over time. This approach has demonstrated accuracy in identifying children whose language is delayed, but whose capacity for learning language is not affected. Tests are not sufficiently accurate so a system of teacher observation tasks through RTI is needed.

3.6 The child's language learning environment both at home and at preschool is pivotal to the development of strong oracy skills and individual differences in rates of language acquisition are, partially, explained by variability in these settings. Moreover, there are differential effects of these different learning environments. There is consistent evidence that children in families which provide them with exposure to rich and varied linguistic experiences develop wider vocabularies and more complex grammar. These differences are in place early, where children from lower and higher economic backgrounds show differences

in vocabulary and in processing oral language by the age of two years. It is the talking with children in specific ways that matters. Linguistically rich environments support language growth in the early years. The opportunities to support language learning in early years settings can be separated into environmental features, opportunities for talking and the oral language interactions which occur. There is evidence that each of these dimensions can support children's oracy skills. However, it is the teacher's communication facilitating behaviours which plays the most significant role in language growth. These are behaviours which support children's engagement in conversations using a slow pace, including open ended questions and developing interactions.

3.7 Universal provision of high quality language and communication support addresses the needs of all children. Examples include high quality pre-school education which is appropriate to the needs of all children who attend. In areas of social disadvantage, the "universal" level should differ from that provided in affluent areas and this has been referred to as "universal targeted".

3.8 Interventions have aimed to support parents in their language learning interactions with their children by increasing the amount of contingent talk or increasing the range of vocabulary children are exposed to. Meta-analyses of family-based emergent literacy interventions have found moderate effects on expressive language. However, the effectiveness was substantially reduced in "at risk" children in families with low incomes or less educated mothers. This group will require additional support.

3.9 One particular approach to support these experiences is through book reading, particularly interactive book reading. There have been a number of meta-analyses pointing to the important role of a specific form of interactive book reading (dialogic reading) but also studies now show that shared book reading with parents has significant positive effects.

3.10 Professional development interventions aim to build capacity within the education workforce based on the principle that knowledgeable and skilled practitioners are central to providing effective language support. They aim to develop skills by increasing knowledge and understanding. Given evidence that initial training is often lacking in content relating to oral language development, such professional development is necessary to ensure that the workforce is adequately prepared.

#### 4. Barriers

4.1 The Better Communication Research Programme highlighted the need for effective oral language support in schools and a recent survey of teachers and speech and language therapists has identified barriers to effective practice.

4.2 The major barrier to practice identified was the lack of training of education practitioners and this was reflected by the difficulties they experienced with terminology and oral language markers of language development. To date there is limited work examining language behaviour in the classroom that might indicate that a child has oral language needs.

4.3 Professional development approaches have challenges, particularly in relation to effective implementation, fidelity and dose. Several large-scale random controlled trials in Canada and the United States have explored the effectiveness of professional development for pre-school educators. A recent meta-analysis of studies of professional development focusing on language and/or literacy found moderate effects on adult-child interactions and large effects on the physical classroom space, but no significant effect on educator knowledge. Few studies of staff development have reported on child outcomes.

4.4 Teachers also highlighted the need for bespoke resources to meet children's language learning needs. Evidence informed resources (specifically for upper primary and secondary) are lacking and not typically addressed in initial teacher training.

4.5 Speech and language therapists indicate that knowing how to support children with language learning needs in the classroom was a major barrier and a significant minority highlighted challenges in identifying children with language problems. This raises challenges for some current models of SLT working practices (Ebbels, McCartney, Slonims, Dockrell, & Norbury, 2019) where both universal and targeted support for oracy skills is seen as the responsibility of education practitioners .

4.6 There are few assessment tools that education practitioners might use to identify children's oracy skills and those that are commonly available only capture language skills in younger children up to the age of six. The most common tool in use in England (Early Years Foundation Stage profile) lacks sensitivity and specificity for identifying language skills. More recently, as a result of the Better Communication Research Programme a tool (Communication supporting Classroom Tool) has been developed to help school staff profile the strengths of their language learning environment (Dockrell, Bakopoulou, Law, Spencer, & Lindsay, 2015) This tool has been now been used in other international contexts.

The development of effective services for children's oracy development depends on both mapping provision and examining professionals' understanding so as to develop effective collaborative practice. The Supporting spoken language in classrooms programme (SSLIC) developed by the centre for inclusive education is aimed to address this aspect of service provision directly (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/centre-inclusive-education/supporting-spoken-language-classroom>).

4.7 Despite the evidence that training education and SLT students together improves linguistic and curricular knowledge the impact of such training has not been reflected by instructional practice to date.

17/09/2019

Julie Dockrell FAcSS, FRCSLT

Professor of Psychology and Special Needs

Julie Dockrell is Professor of Psychology and Special Needs at the UCL, Institute of Education and qualified as both a clinical and educational psychologist. Her research interests are in patterns of language development and the ways in which oral language skills impact on children's learning, interaction and attainments. A central theme in this research has been the application of evidence based research to support children's learning. She has published in a wide range of journals and written books and book chapters on language development and difficulties. She was the previous editor of the British Journal of Educational Psychology, associate editor for JSLHR and Learning and Instruction. She was a co-director of the Better Communication Research Programme.

References:

Dockrell, J. E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. *Child Language Teaching & Therapy*, 31(3), 271-286. doi:10.1177/0265659015572165

Ebbels, S. H., McCartney, E., Slonims, V., Dockrell, J. E., & Norbury, C. F. (2019). Evidence-based pathways to intervention for children with language disorders. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 54(1), 3-19. doi:10.1111/1460-6984.12387

Additional guidance:

## Value and impact

1. 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?
2. What are the consequences if children and young people do not receive oracy education?
3. 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)?
4. How can it help deliver the wider curriculum at school?
5. What is the impact of quality oracy education on future life chances? Specifically, how does it affect employment and what value do businesses give oracy?
6. What do children and young people at school and entering employment want to be able to access, what skills do they want to leave school with?
7. What is the value and impact of oracy education in relation to other key agendas such as social mobility and wellbeing/ mental health?
8. How can the ability to communicate effectively contribute to engaging more young people from all backgrounds to become active citizens, participating fully in social action and public life as adults

## Provision and access

1. What should high quality oracy education look like?
2. 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?
3. What are the views of teachers, school leaders and educational bodies regarding the current provision of oracy education?
4. Where can we identify good practice and can you give examples?
5. What factors create unequal access to oracy education (i.e. socio-economic, region, type of school, special needs)? How can these factors be overcome?
6. Relating to region more specifically, how should an oracy-focused approach be altered depending on the context?

## Barriers

1. What are the barriers that teachers face in providing quality oracy education, within the education system and beyond?
2. What support do teachers need to improve the delivery of oracy education?
3. What accountability is currently present in the system? How can we further incentivise teachers to deliver more oracy education to children and young people?
4. What is the role of government and other bodies in creating greater incentives and how can this be realised?
5. What is the role of assessment in increasing provision of oracy education? What is the most appropriate form of assessment of oracy skills?
6. Are the speaking and listening elements of the current curriculum sufficient in order to deliver high quality oracy education?
7. What is the best approach – more accountability within the system or a less prescriptive approach?
8. Are there examples of other educational pedagogies where provision has improved and we can draw parallels and learn lessons?

