

Voice 21 Submission to APPG on Oracy



1. Introduction

1.1 What is Voice 21?

- I. Voice 21 is the national oracy education charity dedicated to ensuring that economically disadvantaged children develop the spoken language skills they need - alongside reading, writing, numeracy, and subject knowledge - to realise their full potential in school and life.
- II. Since our launch five years ago at School 21 (a pioneering state school in East London), Voice 21 has supported over 1,100 state schools and 6,000 teachers across the UK. We work in one- to three-year partnerships with state schools (primaries, secondaries, and pupil referral units) to ensure each one can deliver a high-quality oracy education for their students. Through our evidence-based, whole-school improvement and professional development approaches, schools transform into places where every oracy is the responsibility of every teacher and the entitlement of every child.
- III. We target our work with schools with above-average levels of pupils from economically disadvantaged backgrounds: 71% of current Voice 21 schools are within this target population.
- IV. Over the last three years, we have seen significant growth in demand for our work, increasing our reach by over 300 schools a year (from 140 schools in 2017 to 759 schools in 2020). Independent evaluation of our work by the Education Endowment Foundation showed signs of promise within our approach, and, on average, teachers consistently rate our professional development at 4.7+ out of 5. There has been a corresponding increase in interest in oracy with an over 400% growth in searches for the term on Google over this period.

1.2 Our vision

- I. Voice 21 believes that all children and young people, regardless of background, should be enabled to find their voice for success in school and in life. We work to achieve this by building the capacity of teachers and schools serving economically disadvantaged students to provide a high-quality oracy education while developing and promoting a compelling evidence base for the impact and importance of oracy.

- II. The ability to speak eloquently, articulate ideas and thoughts, influence through talking, collaborate with peers, and have the confidence to express your views, are fundamental skills that support success in both learning and life in general. Through a focus on oracy in school, children and young people learn how to express themselves and communicate clearly. They become able to explain ideas and emotions to other people, not only in a school setting but in their lives outside the classroom too. They develop the skills to listen effectively, discuss and respond with meaning, and debate and disagree agreeably. They gain confidence, self-belief, and courage to speak in public and share their thoughts, intellect, and creativity with the world.
- III. Voice 21 does not provide one-day inset or prepackaged lesson plans, and we do not arrange student workshops or extra-curricular debate clubs. Instead, we work in partnership with teachers, schools, and areas to build their understanding, confidence, and expertise in oracy to make sustainable changes in curriculum, pedagogy, and practice every day, for every child and young person.
- IV. Despite the widespread recognition of its importance, only a minority of schools have consistent, coherent, or adequately resourced provision to develop oracy and with an identified need for expert support in developing oracy in schools (CFEY report 2016). Voice 21 is dedicated to changing this.

2. Summary

- I. Oracy is a fundamental part of education and supports academic achievement, wellbeing and confidence, civic engagement, employability, and social mobility.
- II. Oracy can and should be taught at all stages of education.
- III. Oracy education should encompass learning to and learning through talk.
- IV. Spoken language skills are inconsistently taught; too often it is assumed that students arrive at school with developed speaking and listening skills and as a consequence, these skills are not explicitly taught to students, exasperating gaps in opportunity and achievement
- V. Oracy is complex, both everywhere and nowhere within a school. With scant coverage in the national curriculum, a lack of focus on oracy in teacher development, and without national standards or qualifications to work towards, it is often overlooked, under-resourced and undervalued.
- VI. Oracy should be a golden thread of education from early years to employment.
- VII. Oracy education is an issue of moral purpose and social equity - a high-quality oracy education should be the entitlement of every child.

- VIII. There is a strong and growing evidence-base and body of practice from schools on the impact and efficacy of oracy education.
- IX. There is a lack of shared understanding and guidance, but organisations like Voice 21 have made efforts to address these gaps with the creation of frameworks, toolkits, and benchmarks.
- X. There is significant untapped potential in oracy education, and with the right support and prevailing conditions, it could have a transformative impact on outcomes.

“Talk has always been one of the essential tools of teaching, and the best teachers use it with flair. But talk is much more than an aid to effective teaching. Children, we now know, need to talk, and to experience a rich diet of spoken language, in order to think and learn. Reading, writing and numeracy may be the acknowledged curriculum ‘basics’, but talk is arguably the true foundation for learning.”

Professor Robin Alexander

3. What is oracy?

- I. There is a lack of consensus around what we mean by the term ‘oracy’ amongst those working within the sector, with many organisations and individuals keen to separate oracy as pedagogy and oracy as curriculum. It would be helpful to have a shared understanding of oracy across the education sector to better support its implementation in schools.
- II. For the avoidance of doubt, it is worth stating that oracy education is not just any talk that happens to occur in the classroom, nor is it elocution lessons or limited training on a specific context or aspect of speech.
- III. For Voice 21, oracy is at the intersection of curriculum and pedagogy; it is both learning *to* and *through* talk. It is a set of teachable skills essential for life (learning *to* talk) and a teaching methodology in which talk is used as a tool for learning (learning *through* talk). Both are essential elements of a high-quality oracy education.
- IV. It is *through* talk, students harness their collective thinking power to build their understanding, negotiate complex ideas, and problem solve. Vygotsky’s now widely accepted theory positions learning as a social-communicative process; through language, children make sense of the world and learn to think. However, to reap the benefits of learning *through* talk, students must also learn *to* talk. To engage in high-quality exploratory talk in which students develop their knowledge and understanding, for example, students must be taught to challenge, probe, and build on each other’s ideas.

- V. To develop their confidence and competence in oracy, students should also learn the skills needed *to* talk in various contexts for a range of different purposes. For example, how to engage in a formal debate or explain an idea or concept to a particular audience. The oracy skills needed *to* talk effectively are set out in the Oracy Framework developed by Voice 21 and Oracy Cambridge. The Framework breaks down the skills within oracy into four distinct but interlinked strands: physical, linguistic, cognitive, and social & emotional.

- VI. Listening is another important aspect of oracy, enabling students to engage critically with complex ideas, learn from their peers, and hear new vocabulary in context. To speak well, students must first learn to listen well but it is also an important skill in its own right and is crucial if students are to engage with and learn from the world around us. However, just like speaking, listening is a skill that needs to be taught; students must learn to become great listeners. In the EEF pilot of Voice 21's initial school development programme in 2016, teachers reported improvements in listening as the first observable impact of the introduction of an oracy education with increased emphasis on purposeful and structured talk within their Year 7 classrooms.

- VII. It is important to recognise that the need for an increased focus on oracy on education is not a new idea. The term oracy was first coined by Andrew Wilkinson in the 1960s and has oscillated in popularity and recognition ever since, with the National Oracy Project of the late eighties and early nineties a particular high point. In 2012, the Labour Party undertook a Policy Review on speaking skills in education¹ and in recent years, the former Secretary of State for Education Damien Hinds and Schools Minister Nick Gibb have spoken publicly about the value of improvements in speaking skills and structured, purposeful talk both educationally and in terms of character development.

4. Value and impact

4.1 Oracy and educational outcomes

- I. There is a compelling case for the role of oracy in improving educational outcomes. By verbally elaborating on their ideas, building on others' contributions, and questioning the basis of each other's thinking, learners actively engage in and monitor their learning, deepening their understanding of concepts and ideas.

¹ https://www.yourbritain.org.uk/uploads/editor/files/SPEAKING_SKILLS.pdf

- II. As well as being an essential component of a broad, rich curriculum in its own right, oracy also enables learners to develop knowledge and skills across the curriculum and, as a result, learn well. The cognitive benefits of quality classroom talk evidenced in measurable improvements in academic attainment (Alexander 2012)² include retention of subject-specific knowledge, vocabulary acquisition, and reasoning skills (Millard and Menzies 2016)³. The impact of talk-rich, dialogic teaching and learning is not isolated to English or the humanities and can be found across the curriculum in mathematics and science (Jay, Willis, Thomas, Taylor, Moore, Burnett, Merchant, and Stevens 2017)⁴.
- III. Oracy is particularly potent in supporting vocabulary development and the narrowing of the word gap. Oral language & literacy have been described “as ‘inseparable friends’ who take turns to piggyback on each other during the school years & beyond” (Snow, 2016). On entry to school, disadvantaged children’s spoken language development is significantly lower than their more advantaged peers. These gaps in language development grow as children move through school, with the reading age gap between children with good oral language & those with poor oral language skills widened from just a few months at aged six to five years’ difference by the age of 14 (Hirsch, 1996).
- IV. Addressing the gaps in vocabulary that emerge in the early years and sustaining a focus on vocabulary development throughout education is key to improving learner outcomes. The first way a child learns language is from others’ mouths: in speech, in context. It tends to be the case that as children get older, the words they hear in speech are ones that they already know, and so “the source of later vocabulary learning shifts to written contexts—what children read.” However, as Beck et al. note, this does not recognise the continued and unique efficacy of well-planned and structured talk on childrens’ vocabulary development: “The problem is that it is not so easy to learn word meanings from written context. Written context lacks many of the features of oral language that support learning new word meanings, such as intonation, body language, and shared physical surroundings. As such, written language is a far less effective vehicle for learning new words than oral language.”

4.2 Oracy and confidence, self-esteem, citizenship & employability

- I. Being able to articulate our emotions, listen empathetically and talk through problems is essential to our wellbeing. Spoken communication is the primary means by which young people develop relationships, express views, learn from and understand the

² <http://www.robinalexander.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/DfE-oracy-120220-Alexander-FINAL.pdf>

³ Millard, W. and Menzies, L. (2016) ‘The State of Speaking in Our Schools’ London: Voice 21/LKMCo

⁴ Jay, T., Willis, B., Thomas, P., Taylor, R., Moore, N., Burnett, C., Merchant, G., Stevens A., 2017. ‘Dialogic Teaching: Evaluation Report and Executive Summary’ London: EEF

perspective of peers and adults, and signal their sense of self at a given time. Young people with poor communication skills are one and a half times more likely to have mental health difficulties, even after taking account of a range of other factors.⁵

- II. Oracy education can enable students to become agile, confident and empathetic communicators who can self-regulate, articulate and explore their intellect, ideas and emotions and interactions through spoken language. This was evident in Voice 21's recent research project (Get Talking in PRUs) exploring the impact of oracy education on the emotional intelligence, social and emotional competence and perceptions of self of excluded students (in Pupil Referral Units). In our impact reporting, Voice 21 teachers (in mainstream and AP settings, and across phases) often identify positive effects of a focus on oracy on students' behaviour, self-regulation and ability to manage conflict outside the classroom.

"I've been observing a debate between the [primary-age] children and they've been able to go, 'I agree on this point but I disagree on this point', and things like that might seem little to a lot of people but for children who find it really difficult to self-regulate, being able to voice that they disagree on some things without getting really upset is huge, so that's been wonderful."

(Oracy Lead, PRU 10, GTPRU Evaluation Report, Voice 21)

- III. Surveys show that verbal communication skills are highly sought after by employers repeatedly topping lists of desired skills in the Labour Market. In 2015 almost half of British employers reported concerns with young people's communication skills entering the workplace. Employers rate students' oral communication skills consistently at a lower level than the corresponding ratings from teachers and students themselves. Without focusing on oracy, schools risk not adequately equipping young people with the communication, presentation, and interpersonal skills needed to enter and thrive in employment.

"Employers need staff to be able to, with confidence, articulate information clearly and coherently, to extract key details from conversations and to be ready to present a case to peers and colleagues. Leaving compulsory education without adequate spoken and communication skills is a serious blight on young people's lives and a major handicap when they're looking for work."

The CBI (Confederation of British Industry)

- IV. As technological advances enable the automation of so many of the skills that are prized today, oracy's value in the labour market is likely to increase. Deloitte's Power Up

⁵ Communication Trust 2017, Talking About a Generation

Skills report⁶ investigated the current provision for the skills deemed most valuable in the future workforce and found that 91/100 teachers, recruiters, and experienced workers felt that extra support was needed to help young people apply communication skills to customer services, and 93/100 felt that young people are inadequately prepared by state education in critical thinking skills, one of the essential attributes for jobs in the UK.

- V. Providing opportunities for students to express their ideas and critically engage with their peers in dialogue, deliberation and debate are essential if young people are prepared to leave school as active, engaged, and reflective citizens. As Professor Robin Alexander states, “Talk is a fundamental prerequisite for democratic engagement.” In an increasingly polarized world, schools must explicitly teach young people to deliberate, reason, and negotiate their knowledge and ideas. Creating platforms for students’ voices to be listened to also increases their sense of efficacy and belief that their voice has value; this is particularly important in ensuring underrepresented voices are heard in school and beyond. As Voice 21 Founder Peter Hyman states, ‘Oracy is about finding your voice metaphorically as well as physically.’

5. Provision and access

- I. Research commissioned by Voice 21 in 2017 found that despite teacher and school leaders' recognition of the importance of oracy, provision was patchy and inconsistent with little dedicated teaching time, planning, professional development, or resources. (Millard and Menzies, 2016)⁷.
- II. The most disadvantaged learners disproportionately bear the consequences of neglecting spoken language in the classroom. Research consistently finds that children from low-income homes start school with lower language levels than their more advantaged peers: of the children who persistently experienced poverty, 75 percent arrive at school below average in language development (The Communication Trust, 2017)⁸. If learners do not acquire this language at home, school is their second and perhaps only chance but currently gaps in language development between more and less socioeconomically advantaged children tend to widen rather than narrow as children progress through school.
- III. There is a significant disparity between the time and resources dedicated to the teaching of oracy in the independent sector, compared to the state sector (Millard and

⁶ <https://www2.deloitte.com/uk/en/pages/innovation/articles/power-up-uk-skills.html>

⁷ <https://www.lkmco.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Oracy-Report.pdf>

⁸ https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/540327/tct_talkingaboutageneration_report_online.pdf

Menzies 2016)⁹, which is reinforced by evidence from the Sutton Trust on the propensity of debate and public speaking training with the state and independent sector. This risks widening the gap, with children from privileged backgrounds taught to talk at school, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds, who on average arrive at school with less language, have less opportunity to acquire it.

- IV. The impact of Covid-19 has sharpened focus on many of these issues. Remote and online learning has reduced the opportunities for discussion and dialogue - whether this is academically supportive talk - rich with vocabulary; or social interactions - supportive of students' well-being.

5.1 Implementation of oracy education: risks and barriers

- I. As with any well-evidenced approach, it is only through effective implementation that the benefits of oracy education are realised. As the EEF reminds us, 'it doesn't matter how great an educational idea or intervention is in principle; what really matters is how it manifests itself in the day-to-day work of people in schools' (*A School's Guide to Implementation*, 2019)
- II. When teachers do not have a thorough understanding of oracy and how it can be developed in the classroom, we have found that they are more likely to introduce blanket, linguistically inappropriate expectations such as 'students must speak in full sentences', rather than teaching their students about the changing expectations for talk in different contexts. It is this lack of confidence and expertise which leads to misguided but well-intentioned attempts to police students' language with 'word jails,' a perverse incentive for students to use Standard English in the classroom] risking alienation and the devaluing of their linguistic repertoires.
- III. Given the ubiquitous nature of talk, there is a risk that it remains "everywhere and nowhere in a school." The National Curriculum emphasises how spoken language development cross-cuts subject areas, however without an individual or department to lead on a clear plan for its development across the school, it can be overlooked or addressed tokenistically in a themed day or week. Through our Oracy Leaders Programme, ran in conjunction with Oracy Cambridge, we found that clear leadership of oracy can transform provision across a school, ensuring oracy is understood and prioritised by staff across the school, and we are proud to continue to develop leaders of oracy within schools to create coherence and constituency and sustain momentum on oracy development.

⁹ Millard, W. and Menzies, L. (2016) 'The State of Speaking in Our Schools' London: Voice 21/LKMCo

IV. Research for Voice 21, has identified a number of barriers teachers and schools face in sustaining an ambitious, consistent and comprehensive approach to oracy education. These include:

- Lack of time; perceptions that oracy based approaches can be challenging to manage and are therefore not always time-efficient and the pressures of getting through curriculum content can inhibit the use of talk
- Anxiety that shy and under-confident pupils might struggle, or that pupils' behaviour will get worse;
- Priority being given to other tasks (in particular, pupils' writing) as a result of accountability targets;
- A lack of confidence and expertise, exacerbated by a paucity of training, resources and guidance;
- Perceptions that oracy is only occasionally relevant when teaching or relevant only in certain subjects such as English; and

These barriers are explored in full in [Oracy: The State of Speaking in Our Schools](#).

5.2 A high-quality oracy education for all

- I. As stated, it is Voice 21's view that a high-quality oracy education should become the norm for all children; however, without national standards and expectations, there is a lack of clarity as to what constitutes a high-quality oracy education. Based on the available evidence and research and the experiences, insights, and impact reporting from the thousands of schools and teachers Voice 21 has worked with, we have identified the intent, conditions, and practices necessary for high quality oracy education within a school.
- II. Voice 21 has distilled these 'active ingredients' of high quality oracy education into a set of Benchmarks at a whole school and teacher level.
- III. The Benchmarks highlight the importance of an ambitious vision for oracy which is clearly articulated by leaders who value oracy as an essential element of how their school provides an effective education. They advocate building a culture of oracy across a school in which students have opportunities to use their voices in meaningful contexts both in and beyond the classroom. They recognise the importance of a sustained and wide-ranging curriculum for oracy which is intentionally designed to develop students' speaking skills whilst also stressing the value of oracy as a conduit to learning with the potential to deepen and enhance students' knowledge and understanding across the curriculum. Finally, they emphasise the need to appraise the

impact of oracy across a school in order to enable leaders to refine and improve their school's approach to this important area of education.

6. Recommendations

6.1. Oracy to be viewed as an integral part of all children and young people's education

- I. To realise the wider societal benefits of oracy such as social mobility, oracy must be an integral part of every child's education. It is important then that there is equality of provision across all schools. Oracy should not, for example, be annexed to a one-off themed week or an after school debating club for a self selecting few, although these could be valuable enrichments to an oracy education.
- II. Voice 21 welcome references to the importance of oracy in a speech made by the Schools Minister, Nick Gibb in January 2019 and in a subsequent meeting with Voice 21 in November 2019 where he called for 'purposeful discussion to sharpen thought and challenge perception of the world'. We also support the recent investment in oral language interventions for early years. But the Government must go further in advocating the centrality of oracy across all phases of education and support schools serving areas of deprivation to amplify the quantity and quality of oracy education particularly in light of the impact of Covid 19.

6.2 Schools should adopt the Oracy Benchmarks to inform the development and implementation of a high quality oracy education for all children and young people

- I. As with many important things in education, there is no one single 'right' way to provide a high quality oracy education. Recognising the diversity and complexity of schools and classrooms across the UK, we have sought to create benchmarks that schools and teachers can meet in a myriad ways, consistent with their different approaches. Through identifying and exemplifying the active ingredients that make a high quality oracy education, we hope to both motivate and guide educators towards ensuring oracy becomes a typical part of every student's education. We therefore recommend that schools adopt the Oracy Benchmarks and use these to guide the implementation of high quality oracy education in their setting.

6.3. Guidance to support the implementation of a high quality oracy education

- I. Voice 21 recognises that there is a spoken language programme of study in the National Curriculum and oral language skills are further integrated within other areas of the curriculum but evidence from schools suggests that these are not being realised. We fear that due to the overarching and vague references to spoken language, oracy is

viewed as everywhere, and therefore nowhere, in the curriculum and this lack of clear expectations results in wide variations and inconsistencies in provision across schools. Voice 21 would welcome the opportunity to work with the Department of Education to produce non-statutory guidance on how schools can fully and effectively realise the ambitions of the National Curriculum in relation to spoken language to ensure all pupils benefit from the education in spoken language that the Government wants and expects for them. This guidance should include reference to the Oracy Benchmarks and Oracy Framework and draw on exemplary practice from schools that have evidence of impact from the successful implementation of oracy education at all ages and stages of schooling.

6.4. Mapping of age related expectations for oracy

- I. The lack of shared age-related expectations for oracy beyond early language acquisition has been highlighted as a barrier to designing and sequencing an ambitious oracy curriculum. Voice 21 has found that too often schools underrate expectations on student oracy. This leads to tasks that lack challenge and a repetition of a narrow set of oracy skills across age groups without progression. A coalition of academics, teachers, schools and other experts should be formed to comprehensively research and map specific oracy skills and understanding against ages and stages of education.

6.5. Increased prominence of oracy in Ofsted inspections

- I. Ofsted's inspection framework and guidance to inspectors and schools should explicitly recognise the importance of oracy in the 'provision of an ambitious curriculum which provides students with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life
- II. Schools we have worked with have reported references to the quality of spoken language, articulacy of pupils or ambition of their oracy curriculum in Ofsted inspection reports and other schools have contacted Voice 21 for support following negative feedback from Ofsted on the quality of classroom talk in their schools. However, these seem to be the exceptional cases.
- III. Ofsted should ensure that schools are able to articulate their intent for the development of their students' spoken language, demonstrate how this is realised through teaching and learning and the impact this is having on outcomes both in how oracy supports learning and personal development in general, and how students specifically develop the spoken language skills require to succeed beyond school.

- IV. In considering the effectiveness of a school's provision to close gaps in attainment, Ofsted should recognise the role of purposeful and explicit oracy teaching in closing the language gap between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers.
- V. In addition, Ofsted should ensure that schools have appropriately high expectations for learners' oracy skills and that schools offer a wide range of contexts and opportunities for learners to develop and practise these skills to enable them to become agile communicators equipped to succeed in life.

6.6. Access to and funding for professional development for oracy across phases

- I. Research commissioned by Voice 21¹⁰ has found that a majority of teachers have not received professional development on oracy and this contributed to a lack of confidence amongst teachers- we therefore recommend investment in a national programme of Oracy Professional Development for all phases of education, starting in the Opportunity Areas.
- II. In addition, schools highlighted as having outstanding oracy practice should be funded to act as hubs for their locality. Voice 21 has already designated Hub Schools in our Voice Areas (multi-school, cross phase oracy improvement partnerships in a locality) and these have proven invaluable in sustaining area wide improvements and innovation in oracy. This national network of exemplar schools and our national Oracy Leader network of teachers provide the basis of a powerful schools-led, self-improving community.

6.7. International research and impact analysis

- I. There is growing international interest in the value and impact of oracy education. Voice 21 was selected as one of the top educational innovations by HundrED (along with other oracy based interventions including CHATTA) and our website and resources are accessed by schools and teachers across the world. We are regularly invited to present at international education events and addressed the OECD education group in Lisbon in 2017. England and other UK nations have the opportunity to be world leaders in oracy education and we would recommend that research is conducted to compare the status of oracy education and approaches to the teaching and assessment of spoken communication skills in other education jurisdictions (particularly those with high performing systems) and the applicability of these in a UK context.

¹⁰ Millard, W. and Menzies, L. (2016) 'The State of Speaking in Our Schools' London: Voice 21/LKMCo

- II. Closer to home, the impact of the high priority given to oracy in the curriculum for Wales should be tracked and reported over time to inform developments in England and beyond.

6.8. Adequate provision and funding of Speech and Language therapy and services in all areas

- I. Voice 21 supports the recommendations of the Bercow 10 years on review and calls for these to be adopted in full. To ensure that all children's voices are valued, those most in need must have the specialist speech and language therapy they need, when they need it. Delays in accessing provision can have serious long-term implications on pupil's progress academically and socially and no child should miss out on this essential support due to where they live and the availability of services in their area. For those children and young people with an identifiable speech and language need, a universal approach to oracy and spoken language is no substitute for specialist provision and without it they risk being further excluded from fundamental aspects of education.

6.9. Curriculum reform for KS3/4 English language

- I. In our work with secondary schools, Voice 21 has heard repeated concerns about the quality and effectiveness of the secondary English Language programme of study and we think that reform of the English Language curriculum to increase the focus on the actual study of language development and usage would serve to improve student's understanding and awareness of spoken language. We welcome the recommendations of The Forgotten Third Commission to include a significant oral language component in a reformed GCSE and would call on the DfE to fully investigate this option. In addition, the Department should review the current spoken language assessment in the English GCSE to ascertain the value and impact of the current position (compulsory but decoupled from the results).

Appendix 1: List of additional submissions

1. [Oracy: The State of Speaking in Schools](#) - Millard, W. and Menzies, L. (2016) on behalf of Voice 21
2. [The Oracy Benchmarks - Voice 21](#)
3. [The Oracy Framework](#)
4. Recordings of interviews with Voice 21 Oracy Schools (video files)
5. Recordings of Oracy October sessions (video files)

Appendix 2: Oracy and Covid-19

The pandemic and resulting school closures have had a negative impact on student oracy. A report on the vocabulary gap released in October 2020¹¹ reported that 92% of teachers believe school closures have contributed to a widening of the gap and, we know from previous research, that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to catch up.¹² This chimes with reports from our network of schools, many of which have reported that students have returned to school less well-equipped in terms of language to deal with the rigours of school life.

School is only the second chance for many students to have a rich language experience. However, given the increased pressure on schools for students to learn more in less time, there is a risk that teachers return to so-called ‘transmission teaching’ in which they try, in vain, to transmit knowledge directly to the learner’s head, instead of fostering the dialogic interactions that nurture students’ curiosity and stimulate and extend their thinking.

For many students, it was the opportunity to discuss, debate and collaborate with others that they missed most when schools were closed and we have heard from our network of schools that students returned to school in September ready and eager to use their voices. Given research¹³ which has found that progress made to narrow the attainment gap between the most and least advantaged students since 2011 is likely to be reversed as a result of school closures, it is more important than ever to ensure that every child is able to benefit from an oracy-rich education and, amongst other benefits, the improved academic outcomes associated with this approach.¹⁴

The Chartered College of Teaching’s report on the impact of school closures highlights the importance of ‘helping children reestablish social relationships and make connections with others [...to support] their wellbeing by promoting stability and recovery,’ emphasising the importance of promoting ‘interaction between students in the form of supportive partner work, team projects and class discussions [...] after long periods of social distancing’. Our own research into oracy has found that a focus on talk in the classroom can lead to improved confidence and self-esteem in pupils.

¹¹ Menzies et. al. *Bridging the Word Gap at Transition*. (Oxford: OUP: 2020)

¹² J. Law et al., cited in Communication Trust, *Talking about a Generation*

¹³ Coe R., Weidmann, B., Coleman, R., *Impact of School Closures on the Attainment Gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment*. (London: Education Endowment Foundation: 2020)

¹⁴ Jay, T., Willis, B., Thomas, P., Taylor, R., Moore, N., Burnett, C., Merchant, G., Stevens, A. *Dialogic Teaching Evaluation Report and Executive Summary*. (London; Education Endowment Fund: 2017)

Given the link between a child's ability to use spoken language and his or her level of educational attainment, as well as the sobering statistic that young people with poor communication skills are one and half times more likely to have mental health difficulties, a focus on oracy in the current climate is not just a nice-to-have but rather a moral imperative.