Response to call for evidence by All Party Parliamentary Group on Oracy

This response is on behalf of the United Kingdom Literacy Association (UKLA). In summary, the Association argues that:

- spoken language/oracy is central to life and learning;
- policy in England does not give sufficient status or value to oracy education;
- children's home language provides a rich resource to build on;
- oracy is important to learning and personal development;
- the Association can offer examples of effective oracy education which provide strong models for classroom work.

1. Value and impact

1.1 The status of spoken language

1.1.1   The relatively low status of spoken language in England is related to the high-stakes accountability system which focuses on reading and writing. In addition, the national curriculum for English in England devotes little space to spoken language and much more to grammar, spelling and punctuation, thus signalling that even specific aspects of written language are more important than talk.

1.1.2   There needs to be greater awareness of the difference between the structure, use and development of spoken language in relation to written language. As Professor Ron Carter pointed out: '*Conversational grammar is non-sentence based; co-constructed and highly interactive*' (Carter and McCarthy 2017). If spoken language is to have greater attention and status it must be seen as an area of study in its own right so that young people can develop ways of talking about language (developing a metalanguage) in order to learn about context, register and control in the context of authentic language use. High-quality talk *about* language is important in fostering students' understanding of the language choices they make in spoken and written language (Myhill 2016; 2020), including seeing the relationships and differences between written and spoken language.

1.1.3   Spoken language should have the same status as written language because it is fundamental to thinking and learning, as well as to communication (Alexander, 2008; Halliday, 1993).

1.1.4   People who speak more than one language have rich resources for learning. Rather than seeing bilingual learners as a 'problem' in the classroom, Kenner (2000) and Cummins (2000) argue that being bilingual and biliterate is an advantage for learning. An open-minded approach to children's funds of knowledge is therefore particularly important when considering bilingual children's language assets.

1.1.5   It is worth noting that not all people use spoken language as their main form of communication, and also that talk relies on modes other than spoken language (e.g. Taylor 2014).

1.2   Consequences for children and young people

1.2.1   Spoken language is the bedrock of children's personal, social, cultural, cognitive, creative and imaginative development. It is a means of thinking through ideas as well as a medium of communication and the most important resource for teaching and learning in and beyond the classroom.

1.2.2   Spoken language is not only the basis of reading and writing, but has a repertoire of its own which deserves equal attention in teaching.

1.2.3   If children do not have experience of oracy as a mode of learning and a means of expression, then there is a risk that their cognitive, personal, relationship and emotional development may be restricted. This is particularly relevant for boys' learning (Younger and Warrington, 2005).

1.3   Value and impact of oracy education at i) different life stages, ii) in different settings, and iii) on different types of pupils?

1.3.1   There are difficulties with these categories because there is: a) a lack of sustained research on which to build any views; and b) a tendency to link language delay with intellectual incapacity. There are, of course, studies which show a correlation between children's spoken language and their educational attainment (e.g. Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010; Roulstone et al. 2011), and this disadvantage can be the means through which inequality in education is perpetuated. However, the difficulty with this research is that it can present a deficit model of the spoken language of certain groups of children. Other research has questioned the instruments used within such studies (Baugh, 2017; Letts et al., 2013) and focused on difference rather than deficit when considering how children from different socio-economic groups deploy language (e.g. Brice Heath 1983; Manison Shore, 2015). Manison Shore found that teaching which focused on the development of vocabulary and extending repertoire allowed all children to access learning and communication more readily, irrespective of social class.

1.3.2   Other studies suggest that quality oracy education can benefit learners for whom English is not a first language (The Communication Trust 2013); and that oracy can help to develop greater self-esteem and reduce anxiety (Trickey and Topping 2006).

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

1.4.1   As noted above (1.1.3), oracy is fundamental to learning across the curriculum, as it is through talk that we can build, share and make visible our understanding (Resnick et al. 2015). There is a substantial body of research from around the world which emphasises the importance of generating rich talk opportunities in a range of curriculum subjects, including Mathematics, Science and Geography as well as English (Alexander 2000; Dawes et al. 2005; Hanley et al. 2015; Mercer 1995; Mercer et al. 2009; Michaels and O'Connor 2015; Gillies 2016; Wegerif 2013; Wilkinson et al. 2015). This kind of talk is **exploratory**, encouraging speculation, reflection, questioning and hypothesising; and **collaborative**, involving shared discussion, problem-solving, team-working and learning how to build on others' contributions.

1.5   ***Impact on future life chances***

1.5.1   UKLA has no specific evidence but the ability to expand on ideas orally has always been seen as very important for employment.

1.6   Future skills for entering employment

1.6.1   UKLA has no research evidence related to this question but oracy is clearly essential for controlled self-expression and relationships with others. (See 2.1.2 on collaboration)

1.7   UKLA has no research evidence related to questions 1.7 and 1.8.

2.   Provision and access
2.1   *High quality oracy education*

2.1.1   High-quality oracy education includes both formal and informal talk, and both presentational and exploratory talk. This diversity is central to a rich oracy curriculum (see Alexander, 2008), which should provide opportunities for children to:

- hear good models of spoken language
- speak audibly and fluently
- listen and respond appropriately, adapting spoken language to a wide range of contexts
- explore and discuss features of spoken language; distinguish between formal and informal types of spoken language and know when it is appropriate to use each
- participate actively in collaborative conversations, in groups and class and use the conventions of group discussion
- ask relevant questions to extend understanding to seek information, views and feelings and build a spoken language repertoire
- speculate, hypothesise and explore ideas
- give extended spoken responses to questions, books, poems and visual texts
- articulate and justify answers, arguments and opinions
- give clear descriptions and explanations
- listen and respond to a range of fiction, poetry, drama and media texts through the use of traditional and digital resources
- explore the richness and diversity of language and its personal and creative purposes
- reflect on and explain their literacy and thinking skills, using feedback to refine ideas and sensitively provide useful feedback for others
- engage in a range of imaginative and creative spoken language, for example, drama, role play, storytelling, poetry, presentations, performances and debates.

(Bearne and Reedy 2018)

2.1.2   It is worth emphasising the importance of including opportunities for collaboration. As Alexander states:

> *Children construct meaning not only from the interplay of what they newly encounter and what they already know, but from interaction with others. In turn this interaction is critical not just for children's understanding of the kind of knowledge with which*

schools deal……but for the development of their very identity; their sense of self and worth. (Alexander 2008, 11)

Alexander implies that, if educators do not get it right, they undermine not only development in domains of knowledge but pupils' own sense of who they are.

2.2   Examples of oracy education
2.2.1   UKLA can provide a range of case studies from primary schools, secondary schools and EY settings, especially those with bilingual learners - for example, UKLA publications include:

Drama: Reading, Writing and Speaking Our Way Forward
Practical Bilingual Strategies for Multilingual Classrooms
Talk for Reading
Talk for Spelling
Tell Me Another - Speaking, Listening and Learning Through Storytelling
English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19: Talk
English, Language and Literacy 3 to 19: Drama

We could also select relevant articles in the teacher magazine *English 4-11* and the journal *Literacy.*

2.3   Views of teachers, school leaders and educational bodies
2.3.1   The response from teachers in England differs from that of teachers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales where the curriculum for oracy is much broader and implies a more positive attitude towards the role of talk in the curriculum. In England, teachers find it regrettable that many supportive publications produced by QCA were deleted from the internet by the 2010 government, e.g. *Language for Learning in Key Stage 3* (2000); [*Teaching Speaking and Listening in Key Stages 1 and 2* (2001)](); *New Perspectives on Spoken Language in the Classroom: Discussion papers* (2003).

2.3.2.   UKLA sees spoken language as the foremost medium of learning which includes the full potential range of oral forms and functions and the ability to draw on a wide, diverse and flexible repertoire as well as indicating the social, cultural and individual nature of language. In the classroom, spoken language is a vehicle for learning but should also be seen as an area of language study in its own right. The Association argues that policy in England does not yet reflect this perspective.

2.4   Examples of good practice
2.4.1   There is a rich and varied range of evidence of good practice. The Education Endowment Foundation's *Oral Language Interventions* provides a recent summary of studies of the effects of oracy education on students' achievements. Earlier work, which emphasised the importance of shifting from teacher-centred monologic talk to dialogic ways of teaching (Mercer 1995; Skidmore 2000), informed a range of projects designed to generate high-quality classroom talk (e.g. the *Thinking Together* work of Mercer's team at Cambridge; Myhill's work with schools in West Sussex [2006]; and Alexander's work with

schools in North Yorkshire [2005]). Further examples are found in projects undertaken by Escott and Pahl, (2017) and the Plymouth Oracy Project (Dartmoor TSA 2019).

2.5. Factors creating unequal access
2.5.1   See 2.3.1 above: policy in England is relevant to regional issues. One key factor which contributes to unequal access is teachers' confidence in managing high-quality classroom talk.

2.6   How should an oracy-focused approach be altered depending on the context?
2.6.1 As above.

3. Barriers
3.1   Barriers faced by teachers
3.1.1   Government policy, particularly in England, undervalues oracy, thus signalling to other sectors that spoken language is less important than reading and writing (Jones, 2017).

3.2   Support for teachers
3.2.1   Teachers need sustained professional development to develop their confidence in, and understanding of, high-quality oracy education (Michaels and O'Connor 2015). The research on oracy education repeatedly signals that teachers in English classrooms tend towards more teacher-centred and controlling talk which does not realise the learning benefits of high-quality oracy education (Alexander 2000). This is not to criticise teachers for their current practices, but rather to recognise that leading classroom talk and creating opportunities for peer-to-peer talk requires a significant shift in thinking about the role of the teacher and involves complex and sophisticated professional skills. Myhill et al.'s (2006) work with West Sussex schools and Coultas' work on in-school teacher development (2016) demonstrate the potentiality of well-planned professional development.

3.3   Accountability for spoken language
3.3.1   There is currently little accountability in England because spoken language is not formally assessed, despite its importance within English language GCSE and A level specifications. Equally, there is no specific reference to oracy in the 2019 Ofsted Inspection Framework.

3.4   The role of government
3.4.1   As described above, the government's role is central in supporting (or, at present, restricting) the development of spoken language.

3.5   Assessment
3.5.1   Assessment has an essential role to play in describing how children develop the ability to deploy the range and repertoire of spoken language. However, any assessment depends on agreement on the scope and nature of spoken language competence. It is not simply a matter of technical expertise or learning a wide vocabulary. See Bearne and Reedy

(2018, 103-104) for discussion and an example of a comprehensive development continuum for spoken language. See also the Cambridge Thinking Together Oracy Toolkit, developed with teachers (http://www.educ.cam.ac.uk/research/projects/oracytoolkit/)/

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

3.6.1 No. They do not systematically address the following:

The different functions of language:
- *social functions of spoken language*
- *communicative functions of spoken language*
- *cultural functions of spoken language*
- *cognitive functions of spoken language.*

The different purposes for language:
- *formative language:* reflective (exploratory talk to help shape and develop ideas - particularly in group work)
- *informative language*
- *performative, expressive or presentational language*
- *reflective and evaluative language*

3.7 What is needed – more accountability or a less prescriptive approach?

3.7.1 A less prescriptive approach than is currently adopted for reading and writing in England is necessary. However, see the points above about the need for a comprehensive spoken language curriculum.

3.8 Examples of improvement

3.8.1 See the work of Alexander (2000, 2008; 2010; 2018); Coultas (2007); Cummins (2000); Kenner (2000); Myhill et al., 2006); **Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002).**

References
Alexander, R.(2000) *Culture and Pedagogy.* Oxford: Blackwell.
Alexander, R.J.(2005) *Talk for Learning: the second year*. Northallerton: North Yorkshire County Council.
Alexander, R.(2008) *Towards Dialogic Teaching: rethinking classroom talk*. Cambridge: Dialogos.
Alexander, R.(Ed.) (2010) *Children, their World, their Education.* Abingdon: Routledge.
Alexander, R.(2018) Developing dialogue: Genesis, process, trial. *Research Papers in Education*, 33(5), 1-38.
Baugh, J. (2017) Meaning-Less Differences: Exposing Fallacies and Flaws in "The Word Gap" Hypothesis That Conceal a Dangerous "Language Trap" for Low-Income American Families and Their Children. *International Multilingual Research Journal*,11(1),39-51.
Bearne, E. and Reedy, D. (2018) *Teaching Primary English: subject knowledge and classroom practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Brice Heath, S.(1983) *Ways with Words: Language, Life and Working Communities and Classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Carter, R. and McCarthy, M. (2017) Spoken Grammar: Where Are We and Where Are We Going? *Applied Linguistics*, 38(1), 1–20.
Coultas, V. (2007) *Constructive Talk in Challenging Classrooms*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Coultas, V. (2016) Case studies of teachers' understandings of the pedagogy of classroom talk: some critical moments explored. *Literacy,* 50(1),32-39.

Cummins, J. (2000) *Language, Power and Pedagogy: Bilingual children in the crossfire.* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Dawes, L. English, J., Holmwood, R. Giles, G. and Mercer, N.(2005) *Thinking Together in Geography.* Stevenage: Badger Publishing.

Education Endowment Foundation EF (no date) *Oral Language Interventions.* https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/evidence-summaries/teaching-learning-toolkit/oral-language-interventions/

Escott, H. and Pahl, K.(2017) Learning from Ninjas: young people's films as a lens for an expanded view of literacy and language. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 1-13.

Gillies, R.(2016) Dialogic Interactions in the Cooperative Classroom. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 76, 178-189.

Halliday M.A.K.(1993) Towards a Language-Based Theory of Learning. *Linguistics and Education,*5, 93-116.

Hanley, P., Slavin, R. and Elliott, L.(2015) *Thinking Doing Talking Science: Evaluation Report and Executive Summary.* London: Education Endowment Foundation.

Jones, D.(2017) Talking about talk: reviewing oracy in English primary education, *Early Child Development and Care,*187 (3-4),498-508.

Kenner, C.(2000) *Home Pages: Literacy links for bilingual children.* Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Letts, C., Edwards, S., Sinka, I., Blanca, S. and Gibbons, W.(2013) Socio-economic status and language acquisition: children's performance on the new Reynell Developmental Language Scales. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 48 (2),131-143.

Manison Shore, L.(2015) Talking in Class: a study of socio-economic difference in the primary school classroom. *Literacy,* 49(2),98-104.

Mercer, N.(1995) *The guided construction of knowledge: talk amongst teachers and learners* Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.

Mercer, N. Dawes, L. and Kleine Staarman, J.(2009) Dialogic teaching in the primary science classroom. *Language and Education*,23(4),353-369.

Michaels, S., and O'Connor, C.(2015). Conceptualizing talk moves as tools: Professional development approaches for academically productive discussion. In L.B. Resnick, C. Asterhan and S.N. Clarke (Eds.), *Socializing intelligence through talk and dialogue.*Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.

Myhill, D., Hopper, R., Jones, S.(2006) *Talking, Listening and Learning.* Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Myhill, D.A. and Newman, R.(2016) Metatalk: Enabling Metalinguistic Discussion about Writing. *International Journal of Education Research* 80,177-187.

Myhill, D. Newman, R. and Watson, A.(2020) Going Meta: Dialogic Talk in the Writing Classroom. *Australian Journal of Language and Literacy.* Forthcoming.

Plymouth TSA (2019) *An Evaluation of the Impact of The Plymouth Oracy Project.* https://www.dartmoortsa.org.uk/uploads/8/0/6/1/80615962/the_plymouth_oracy_project_-_final_outcomes_report.pdf.

Resnick, L.B. and Schantz, F.(2015) Talking to Learn: The Promise and Challenge of Dialogic Teaching. In L. B. Resnick, C. S. C. Asterhan and S. N. Clarke (Eds.), *Socializing Intelligence through Academic Talk and Dialogue.* Washington, DC: AERA.

Roulstone, S., Law, J., Rush., R., Clegg, J. and Peters, T.(2011) *Investigating the Role of Language in Children's Early Educational Outcomes*. Research Report DFE-RR134 (9).

Skidmore, D. (2000) From pedagogical dialogue to dialogic pedagogy. *Language and Education* 14(4),283–296.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R., and Bell, D.(2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years. Research Report 356.* REPEY Technical Paper. London: DfES.

The Communication Trust (2013) *A Generation Adrift.* London: The Communication Trust (16).

Taylor, R.(2014). Meaning between, in and around words, gestures and postures – multimodal meaning-making in children's classroom discourse. *Language and Education*, 28(5),401-420,

Trickey, S., and Topping, K. J. (2006) Collaborative Philosophical Enquiry for School Children: Socioemotional Effects at 11–12 Years. *School Psychology International*,27,599–614.

Waldfogel, J. and Washbrook, E.(2010) *Low Income and Early Cognitive Development in the UK*. London: Sutton Trust (3).

Wegerif, R.B.(2013) *Dialogic: Education for the Internet Age.* London: Routledge.

Wilkinson, I. A. G., Murphy, P. K., and Binici, S. (2015) 'Dialogue-Intensive Pedagogies for Promoting Reading Comprehension: What We Know, What We Need to Know', in L. B. Resnick, C. S. C. Asterhan and S. N. Clarke (Eds.), *Socializing Intelligence Through Academic Talk and Dialogue*. Washington: AERA.

Younger, M. Warrington, M. Gray, J., Rudduck, J., McLellan, R., Bearne, E., Kershner, R. and Bricheno, P.(2005) *Raising Boy's Achievement.* Research Report RR636. DfES.