



Oracy APPG's 2019 Inquiry: Speaking for Change

Written evidence submitted by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

Summary

- A child's oracy skills – encompassing their skills in speech, language and communication – are fundamental to their educational attainment across the curriculum.
- They also impact on their long-term outcomes related to employment, mental health, and potential involvement in the justice system.
- Despite this, the education system does not give communication skills adequate status, with reading and writing consistently prioritised as more important.
- 10% of children and young people have long-term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN); in areas of social disadvantage the number of children with delayed language development and SLCN increases to 50%. For these children and young people, access to oracy education is crucial.
- Access to oracy education is unequal due to a number of factors: the absence of speech, language and communication in teacher training; inequitable access to speech and language therapy; and the fact that there are no incentives for schools to prioritise communication skills. These factors are compounded in areas of social disadvantage.
- There are a number of practical recommendations which if implemented would help to overcome these factors:
 - Training for new teachers on how to support speech, language and communication skills, and how to identify and support SLCN as part of the early career framework.
 - Guidance for commissioners on an integrated pathway to support children and young people's speech, language and communication from age 5 to 25.
 - Guidance for schools on the importance of supporting speech, language and communication skills in order to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.
 - Training for Ofsted inspectors to evaluate the impact of oracy education in schools.

1. Defining oracy

The discourse around oracy can sometimes focus on a narrow set of skills, such as vocabulary knowledge or voice projection. It is important that any discussion of oracy education should take a more holistic view, considering all the skills that young people need to thrive, across speech, language and communication, as defined below.

- **Speech:** saying sounds accurately and in the right places in words. It also relates to speaking fluently, without hesitating, prolonging and repeating words or sounds. It also means speaking with expression in a clear voice, using pitch, volume and intonation to add meaning.
- **Language:** understanding and making sense of what people say. It also includes using words to build up sentences which are used in longer stretches of spoken language and to build conversations.
- **Communication:** how we interact with others; being able to talk to people and take turns as well as change language to suit the situation. It includes non-verbal communication, for example eye

contact, gestures and facial expressions. In addition, communication relates to being able to consider another person's perspective, intentions and the wider context.¹

It is also vital to recognise that forms of communication other than spoken language, such as British Sign Language and Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) methods, are equally valid and important.

2. The value and impact of oracy

2.1 Communication skills are fundamental

2.11 Communication skills are fundamental and the foundation of education. They are strongly associated with academic achievement in both English and maths:

- Children's language skills at age five are the most important factor in reaching the expected levels in English and maths at age 11, more important than poverty or parental education.²
- Children with poor language at age five are six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English at age 11 than those with good language, and 11 times less likely to achieve the expected standard in maths.³
- Vocabulary skills at age 13 strongly predict GCSE results in both English and maths.⁴

2.12 Indeed, given that spoken language is the primary medium through which teaching is delivered across all subjects, the ability to express yourself, to understand spoken language and to interact with others, is vital in order to access all areas of the curriculum.

2.13 Moreover, communication skills actually underpin the development of reading and writing skills: language and phonological skills are the foundations of literacy development⁵ with phonological awareness – that is, the ability to manipulate individual sounds in words, and the development of skills such as judging whether two words rhyme – the ability most strongly related to literacy.⁶

2.2 The long-term impact of poor oracy skills

2.21 The impacts of low levels of communication skills are far reaching, extending beyond school to employment, mental health, and potential involvement in the justice system.

2.22 Research has found a clear link between communication skills and employability:

- Those with poor vocabulary skills at age 5 were twice as likely to be unemployed when they reached adulthood.⁷
- A study of unemployed young men found that 88% had some level of language difficulty.⁸
- A 2016 survey by the CBI and Pearson found that 50% of businesses were not satisfied with school leavers' skills in communication, compared to 32% for literacy and 29% for numeracy.⁹

2.23 The evidence of the link between communication skills and mental health is also compelling:

- Children with vocabulary difficulties at age five are three times as likely to have mental health problems during adulthood.¹⁰
- Studies observe a higher rate of past early language problems among adults with anxiety disorders.¹¹
- A survey commissioned by NHS Digital found that children with a mental disorder were about five times more likely to have speech or language problems than those without.¹²

2.24 More than 60% of young people in the youth justice estate can have difficulties with speech, language and communication.¹³

2.3 Oracy skills and social disadvantage

- 2.31 The most disadvantaged children and young people are at higher risk of having poor communication skills; in areas of socioeconomic disadvantage the number of children who start school with delayed language or identified speech, language and communication needs increases to around 50%.¹⁴
- 2.32 The gap between children from disadvantaged areas and their peers cannot all be attributed to the pre-school years. Analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study found that even if children from disadvantaged backgrounds do well in vocabulary tests at age five, they are almost as likely to have below average reading ability at age seven (50%) as those children who had below average vocabulary at age five but who had never experienced poverty (52%).¹⁵
- 2.33 In order to give children and young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged areas the knowledge, skills and “cultural capital” they need to succeed in life, the school system must adopt an approach that supports all learners’ communication skills.

2.4 The status of oracy education

- 2.41 Despite the overwhelming evidence of the importance of communication skills, spoken language is not given the same status as reading and writing in our education system. As we reported in *Bercow: Ten Years On*, following the removal of speaking and listening from the grading of GCSEs, there is now no requirement for schools to monitor or report on pupils’ communication skills once they have completed their reception year. This reinforces the unhelpful perception that speech, language and communication is only the business of early years teachers. As part of the same review, 53% of survey respondents felt that the way children and young people learn in schools does not support their speech, language and communication development.¹⁶
- 2.42 There are some reasons to be hopeful. The Department for Education’s Early Career Framework (2019) refers to new teachers “modelling and requiring high quality oral language.” However, the document frames oral language as a means to developing reading and writing skills, rather than an end in itself. Similarly it implies a limited conception of high quality oral language, providing examples of “requiring pupils to respond to questions in full sentences [and] making use of relevant technical vocabulary.”¹⁷
- 2.43 The new Ofsted school inspection handbook requires that teachers “ensure that their own speaking, listening, writing and reading of English support pupils in developing their language and vocabulary well,” and recognises that giving children the skills to communicate is part of giving them the foundations for future learning.¹⁸ The handbook nonetheless falls short of giving communication skills the parity of esteem they deserve, prioritising reading as the most important skill in order to access the curriculum, without recognising the equal importance of speech, language and communication.

3. Provision and access

3.1 What factors create unequal access to oracy education?

- 3.11 In any discussion about oracy education, it is vital that we do not forget about children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). This is not a small group or rare condition. On average, two children in every classroom have developmental language disorder (DLD), a condition where children have problems understanding and using spoken language.¹⁹ That number is in addition to the substantial group of children and young people who have communication difficulties associated with another need, such as autism or hearing impairment, or those with another primary communication need, such as children who have difficulties producing speech sounds or those who stammer. In total, more than 10% of all children and young people have long-term SLCN, which will require some level of support and differentiation. Without this support and differentiation, these children will not have equal access to oracy education.
- 3.12 Unfortunately the extent to which teachers have been trained to identify and support children with SLCN, as well as to support the development of speech, language and communication skills, is highly variable. A survey by The Communication Trust found that 42% of teachers reported receiving no learning about how to identify and support children with SLCN in their initial training, and 39% had not received learning about speech, language and communication development.²⁰
- 3.13 While appropriately trained teachers and other education staff have an important role in supporting speech, language and communication, some children will require assessment and intervention from a speech and language therapist, who is uniquely skilled and qualified to identify and support SLCN. Speech and language therapists also play a key role in providing training to teachers and other school staff on developing a whole school approach to supporting speech, language and communication, as well as more individualised training and advice on how to adapt teaching and resources for children's needs.
- 3.14 Variation in access to speech and language therapy is therefore another important factor creating unequal access to oracy education, particularly for the 10% of children and young people with long-term SLCN. The report from the Children's Commissioner – *We Need To Talk* – found enormous levels of variation, with the top 25% of areas reporting spend of at least £16.35 per child, and the bottom 25% reporting spend of just 58p or less per child.²¹ *Bercow: Ten Years On* found that just 15% of people felt speech and language therapy was available as required in their local area.²²
- 3.15 The variation in teacher knowledge and skills, combined with the inequity in access to speech and language therapy, is particularly concerning for areas of social disadvantage where as many as half of children start school with delayed language or other SLCN (see para 2.31). Without additional support to develop their communication skills, these children and young people are unlikely to break out of the intergenerational cycle of speech, language and communication risks – see Appendix 1.
- 3.16 The lack of accountability for schools in relation to oracy education, and the fact that progress in communication skills is not monitored in schools beyond the early years, means there are no incentives for schools to prioritise speech, language and communication development. This in turn contributes to unequal access to oracy education.

3.2 How can these factors be overcome?

3.21 Teacher knowledge and skills

The Department for Education is currently planning for national roll-out of an early career framework for new teachers from autumn 2021; this presents an ideal opportunity to ensure a consistent level of training for all new teachers in speech, language and communication and awareness of SLCN.

- The Department for Education, in the roll out of the Early Career Framework (ECF), should ensure that the ECF curricula and training materials are informed by speech and language experts and include knowledge and understanding of how to support speech, language and communication skills, and how to identify and support SLCN.

3.22 Access to speech and language therapy

Public Health England and the Department for Education are currently developing guidance for commissioners on an integrated speech, language and communication pathway for children up to the age of five. This approach could be extended to benefit school-age children.

- The Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Education should jointly develop an evidence-based integrated pathway for children and young people's speech, language and communication from age 5 to 25, building on the pathway which Public Health England is developing for children aged 0-5.

3.23 The intergenerational cycle of speech, language and communication risks:

There is strong evidence of the impact of supporting children and young people from areas of social disadvantage with their speech, language and communication skills, including from the Education Endowment Foundation. This evidence should be shared with schools in the form of national guidance.

- The Department for Education should issue guidance for schools which highlights the importance of supporting speech, language and communication skills in order to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers.

3.24 Accountability

Building on the revised school inspections handbook, Ofsted should provide training to inspectors to ensure they can make an appropriate judgement on a school's approach to oracy education.

- Ofsted should ensure that school inspectors understand the importance of speech, language and communication skills, and are trained how to evaluate the impact of oracy education in schools, including for the most disadvantaged and those with special educational needs and disabilities.

4. About the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT)

The RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists, speech and language therapy students and support workers in the UK. We have more than 17,000 members. We promote excellence in practice and influence health, education, employment, social care and justice policies.

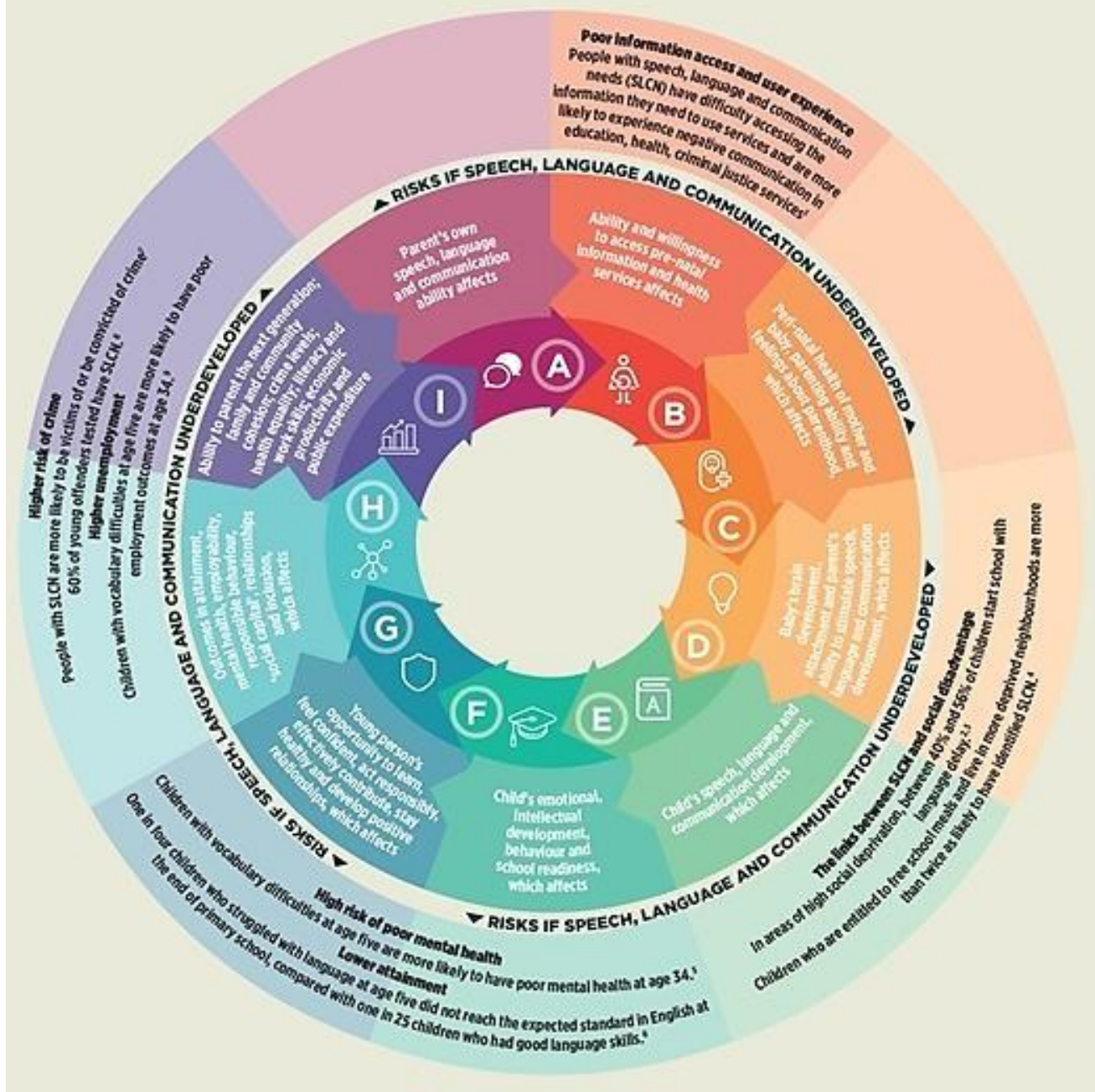
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To find out more about or to get involved with the inquiry please email inquiry@oracyappg.org.uk

Appendix 1



The Intergenerational Cycle of Speech, Language and Communication Outcomes and Risks



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