A Generation Adrift

The case for speech, language and communication to take a central role in schools’ policy and practice
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Communication is at the core of what we do in business, education and socially. Never before in our history have we been able to communicate as quickly and widely as we can today. There’s no doubt we know good communication when we see it; individuals who can articulate their thoughts and ideas, can use their language to explain new concepts or describe their experiences. They can really listen and understand other perspectives and can hold an audience, regardless of who and how many.

At the foundation of all communication is language – words, which are made up of sounds, constructed and combined into sentences with meaning and used to interact with those around us. This is the same whether we are talking, listening, writing, reading, texting, e-mailing or sharing information on Twitter or Facebook. In essence, communication is being able to listen and talk to each other in order to connect; to structure our thoughts and transform them into a medium that allows them to be shared. The foundation of all communication is human language and although it’s easily taken for granted, it’s the most complex skill we will ever learn.

Bearing in mind the importance of communication in today’s society, surely we want our young people to develop the strongest language and communication skills they are capable of?

The sad reality is this isn’t happening. According to employers, even our graduates lack the communication skills needed for the workplace and at the other end of the scale too many children are struggling to develop basic language and communication as they progress through their educational journey. These children have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Currently they aren’t being identified early or well enough and aren’t being supported to develop their communication skills – impacting on progress and prospects.

The long term impact of SLCN is well documented; impact on attainment, progression and wider social, behavioural and emotional outcomes. We know for example, children with SLCN are at higher risk of exclusion from school and that 60-90% of young people in the youth justice system have SLCN, many of which aren’t identified before offending.

Language is complex; multifaceted and multilayered and children can be very good at hiding their language difficulties, showing other ‘symptoms’ that are more tangible, recognisable or easier to understand – poor literacy, poor behaviour, low self esteem and few friendships.

Supporting language and knowing when children are struggling is not hugely difficult; often it’s a ‘tweak’ to good practice, meshed with basic knowledge of language development. It’s the questions we ask ourselves about why children are struggling combined with the reflective practice common to all good practitioners. We need to understand the language we can expect at different ages and stages and we need to know how we can adapt our own language to ensure children and young people are understanding what’s being said, to show them how to use their language for learning and to ensure we are identifying and supporting all those children who are struggling.

This paper aims to bring together the evidence around why we must focus on speech, language and communication skills, which are important in their own right and as a vehicle for learning, social interaction, inclusion and independence, for all children and young people and particularly for those who have SLCN. It also highlights the fact that these skills can be supported and aims to provide a call to action to achieve this with practical, evidenced solutions.
In many schools, the majority of children (around 90%) come into school with well developed language and communication skills. Before starting school, they have experienced good quality and quantity of talk from the adults around them. They’ve had opportunities for lots of practice to talk, listen and understand, to hone their language and communication skills.

These children usually have clear speech, a good vocabulary, age appropriate grammar and narrative skills. They can have conversations and are able to listen well and understand what’s said to them by both peers and teachers. They can interact both to socialise and to facilitate and develop their own learning and can communicate what they know and don’t know. They can use their language to think and can express their ideas clearly, confidently and courteously.

In some UK classrooms, teachers capitalise on these skills. They use good quality and quantity of talk in a way that models more sophisticated language for learning and scaffolds children’s language (building on children’s language from their starting point). They weave talking and listening opportunities into the fabric of their lessons, they ask ‘why’ and shift their language to accommodate the most and least able children in the class.

In these classrooms, children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) can access learning at their level, the language used by the teacher acts as a route to learning, rather than a barrier. Teachers who take this approach know the language level at which their pupils are functioning and take responsibility for ensuring they understand what they are taught.

These teachers have clear expectations of what they want children to learn. They teach children how to listen, attend and focus on key information; they consistently highlight and revisit key vocabulary and ensure children understand; they create a learning environment where seeking clarification is valued and celebrated. They give clear structures for spoken language contributions; they model what it looks like to think and to reason in order to learn; to use language for solving problems; to interact in groups; they make thought processes explicit to the children and show how conclusions can be reached. They are aware of their pupils’ levels of language and adapt their own language accordingly.

All children and young people would benefit from talk being an integral element occupying a prime position in teaching and learning across subjects and throughout the curriculum. A focus on talk in the classroom can significantly enhance the way all children respond to schooling, in all subjects. Talk is the vehicle for all learning and the gateway to literacy skills – if children can’t say a sentence or explain a concept, they will struggle to understand or express it through reading or writing.

We also know much about what supports children who are struggling and the barriers that prevent them getting that support. The recent landmark Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) was able to highlight interventions and approaches that are effective for children and young people with SLCN. Adults in educational settings play a key role in supporting spoken language and the development of a classroom learning environment which fosters language for thinking and learning. Strong and knowledgeable school leaders can make a real difference to children as they progress through school.

A focus on talk in the classroom can significantly enhance the way all children respond to schooling, in all subjects.
The context

‘It is a skill which has to be taught, honed and nurtured. Yet... children’s ability to communicate, to speak and understand [is] taken for granted’
Bercow Report, 2008

There have been some positive changes since John Bercow MP carried out his review in 2008 which found a fundamental lack of understanding of communication, alongside a national inequity of provision and support for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

Communication has a growing presence in national policy, particularly in education policy:

- Language and communication is now one of the three core strands of the early years foundation stage.

- Recommendations made by the Nutbrown Review of early years education, highlighted the importance of a qualified workforce in the early years who understand how to develop young children’s language skills.

- Both the Allen Review of Early Intervention and the Field’s Review of the Foundation Years made clear that language and communication development at age 3 was one of the major National Life Chances Indicators for children.

- Communication has a strong position in the new Ofsted inspection framework, both in relation to teaching and learning and with a focus on those children who don’t attain well.

- The Primary National Curriculum Expert Panel concluded that spoken language should be a strong feature of any new National Curriculum and dedicated a chapter of their report to it.

- The secondary curriculum now includes elements of communication within specific subject areas, as well as English.

- There is a focus on language in the Department of Health Healthy Child Programme and 2 year check.

However, there continues to be a way to go to ensure policy reflects other necessary changes:

- Systematic initial and continued professional development for teachers to support knowledge and skills of speech, language and communication and SLCN.

- Continued need for a graduated response to support all children’s speech, language and communication.

- Accurate profiling and careful monitoring of progression for children with SLCN in schools.

- Integrated service provision of speech and language therapy services.

- Real joined up policy for children with SLCN / Special Educational Needs as outlined in the forthcoming Children and Families Bill.

Through Hello, the national year of communication (2011), there has been a shift in awareness of communication. The national campaign, with support from more than 200 local co-ordinators, supported parents, teachers and other professionals to gain a greater understanding of the issue. The Hello evaluation demonstrated positive changes in the understanding of the issue, though there remains a long way to go.

There remains a need to translate the positive changes seen in national policy to equal shifts in local practice as currently there is a very large gap between the two. Both research and anecdotal feedback from grass roots professionals stress the huge challenges that remain in ensuring children with SLCN are identified and supported through local service provision.

Communication has a strong position in the new Ofsted inspection framework.
There are shockingly large numbers of children in the UK struggling to acquire language. Many of these children aren’t being accurately identified or supported. Identification is key across all phases of education. These children can be difficult to identify and may have complex needs, so an ongoing focus is absolutely imperative. The impact of SLCN cuts across the whole of their development; learning, attainment, behaviour, self esteem, inclusion, independence and long term life prospects.

We know from national figures that by the time they reach five years of age, (the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage) more than a third of children are not working securely in communication, language and literacy. In deprived areas, this number rises to more than four in ten.\(^{15}\)

We know that 50%\(^ {16}\) of children in areas of social disadvantage start school with poor language, with language that isn’t adequate for the next stage of learning, for thinking, reasoning and communicating effectively with adults and peers. For example, children from low income families lag behind by nearly one year in vocabulary at school entry, with gaps in language much larger than gaps in other cognitive skills.\(^ {17}\) These children are at a disadvantage from the start and without the right support don’t catch up with their peers.\(^ {18}\) A recent CBI report highlighted that children who are failing to achieve adequate standards in primary education come disproportionately from disadvantaged backgrounds.\(^ {19}\) Children need language to learn.

So, what’s the problem?

‘Communication disorders will be a major public health concern for the 21st century because, untreated, they adversely affect the economic well-being of a communication-age society.’ Ruber, 2000\(^ {14}\)
7% of all children have a specific language impairment. 1% of all children have severe and complex SLCN.

There’s a significant group of children who have a rich communication experience, with lots of support from parents, though despite this will have a specific language impairment. 7% of all children have a specific language impairment; it’s the most prevalent childhood disability, but a condition that is much misunderstood. These children also start school without the language they need in order to learn and are disadvantaged from the start. Children within this group have differing needs, dependent on the nature and severity of their difficulties. They need specialist support in order to learn and communicate to the very best of their ability.

At least 3% of all children have SLCN linked with other impairments, including those with hearing impairment, autistic spectrum disorders, specific learning difficulties, such as dyslexia and general learning needs. In fact, the majority of children with SEN have some degree of SLCN. They too need support in order to learn and to communicate to the very best of their ability.

So, the problem is the scale of the issue, both in quantity of children and the impact of SLCN; most children with SEN have SLCN, some children have specific language impairments and around half of the children in areas of social disadvantage can have SLCN. Language difficulties impact across all areas of development and on longer term prospects. Children need language to learn, socialise, to manage their behaviour and develop emotionally.
Falling behind matters

Language has critical importance for learning and wider development, however, many children are starting school already behind, with evidence to suggest that without the right support, they don’t catch up. Falling behind really does matter; it can affect self-esteem, behaviour and engagement with education.

Good spoken language skills are strong predictors of later academic success. Children with poor language and literacy development at 5 years are at substantial risk of low achievement at 7 years and beyond. Good spoken language predicates reading and writing, with literacy gaps often widening as children progress through school.

Research tells us that early vocabulary and concept development is especially critical for children from low and moderate income homes, with vocabulary at age 5 a strong predictor of the qualifications achieved at school leaving age and beyond. Major recent research shows language impairment as a risk factor for low achievement, with language difficulties important factors for predicting attainment on Key Stage 1 and 2 English and Maths national curriculum tests. Research has also shown older pupils experiencing greater levels of need than those identified at younger ages. At the end of Key Stage 4, the ‘attainment gap’ between children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and their peers is marked. Just 15% of young people with SLCN achieve 5 GCSE A*-C or equivalent compared to 57% of all young people. As the most prevalent childhood disability, this adds up to a lot of children.

However, language plays more than just an underpinning role for the acquisition of literacy and academic attainment. It’s also important for the wider outcomes we want for our young people. Talk and social interaction play a key role in all children’s social development. Language is the vehicle for organising, problem-solving, managing and evaluating experiences, influencing and informing; all crucial skills for the classroom and beyond.

Language ability can also impact massively on behavioural and emotional development; even in early development, language levels directly impact on self-regulation skills of children and therefore on their behaviour. We know many children with SLCN have significant behavioural difficulties, some of which mask underlying impairments in language. Others are withdrawn, which means they’re less likely to start conversations, are more likely to play alone and research suggests they’re less liked by others in their class. These social, emotional and behavioural components can impact massively on children and young people, meaning poorer long term social outcomes.

The good news is that we know many approaches that work in supporting children with SLCN, mitigating against the long term impact of not understanding or being understood. We know from evidenced approaches and interventions what can make a difference. However, there remains some way to go in translating this knowledge into every day practice.
Missed

Although numbers of children and young people identified in schools with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) as their primary need has increased by around 70% over the last 6 years, there remain true challenges. Despite internationally accepted prevalence figures of 7%, only 3% of the school population is ever identified as having SLCN. Children are being missed.

Identification of SLCN still challenges professionals, with continued variability in age and process of identification continuing throughout the school years. Research found parent concern alone or even in combination with professional screening insufficiently reliable as an indicator of need. Exacerbating this issue is the fact that the terminology used to describe, diagnose or categorise children is often used inconsistently across disciplines and services and there remains a lack of clarity about what’s meant by SLCN.

Despite committed and experienced staff, current policy and practice isn’t enabling consistent identification of all children with SLCN, far from it. In The Communication Trust’s Talk of the Town programme, an average of around 40% of children were not being identified; most difficult to spot were older students, students who had difficulties with vocabulary (45% not identified), those who struggled with formulating sentences (52% not identified) and children with difficulties understanding (29% not identified). 48% in Key Stage 3 were not identified. This, despite a highly committed staff team.

Misinterpreted

Children and young people with SLCN often have academic, emotional and behavioural difficulties that pose a challenge to the professionals working with them. SLCN can be difficult to spot and the nature of the difficulties can change over time, often becoming more complex.

Ofsted have also reported examples of children’s SLCN being misinterpreted; some children and young people ‘were allocated support for their behaviour when, in fact, they had specific communication needs.’

Case study

James was referred to speech and language therapy when he was 10 years old. The school believed he was either dyslexic or had learning difficulties. He was a quiet, hard working member of the class; he could read fluently and accurately, but couldn’t understand what he had read. His language assessment showed his understanding of vocabulary and grammar to be on the first percentile; his understanding of language was extremely poor. James was extremely bright and had become adept at hiding his significant language impairment.
The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) research indicates strongly that national curriculum data and/or establishing a pupil’s primary need provides insufficient information to plan services and differentiate the curriculum. The research highlights the fundamental importance of profiling and monitoring children’s needs, rather than providing support by diagnosis or category, which can result in challenges of identification and issues regarding meeting the changing nature of children and young people’s needs.48 49

‘The best people, they understand the nature of my condition - I’d say that was the most important thing.’
What’s going wrong?

‘...there is grossly inadequate recognition across society of the importance of communication development, let alone the active steps needed to facilitate it.’
Bercow Report, 2008

High quality classroom talk is a key factor in improving pupil engagement and outcomes. We know that just the way in which teachers talk to children and young people can influence learning, memory, understanding and the motivation to learn. Research has shown that the quality of spoken dialogue in primary classrooms can significantly improve children’s educational attainment, from increasing SAT scores in Maths and Science, to improving reading comprehension, writing and reasoning skills. Despite this strong raft of evidence, high quality classroom talk is not the norm. A criticism in the recent Crossroads report is that talk is rarely planned and developed explicitly in classrooms. Language continues to have a low profile in our schools and education policy. Why is this?

Language isn’t immediately tangible. It’s the least taught and trained for, yet is the most used skill. Although a truly cross curricular vehicle for learning, spoken language currently sits predominantly in the Literacy curriculum, though is given less focus than the written word, both within the curriculum and with the training and development of teachers and other professionals. A recent report by the Centre for Social Justice recommended a key performance indicator should be introduced for communication competency in primary schools.

Terminology

The term speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) is defined and used in different ways by different people; i.e. schools’ plasc data use SLCN to refer to children with primary speech, language and communication needs – those with specific language impairment. Conversely, The Bercow Review uses SLCN as an umbrella term to include all and any children with SLCN, including children with other impairments or learning needs. In practice, specialist and generalist practitioners use the terms in different ways.

There can be miscommunication and inconsistency of services as a result; currently services tend to be diagnosis led, which raises challenges when diagnostic labels are misunderstood and inconsistently used.

In current policy, varied terms are used that relate to speech, language and communication skills; for example, articulacy, oracy and communication skills. Whilst they may be essentially referring to the same skills, these different terms are open to a wide range of interpretation, which could lead to inconsistency and confusion and dilute the potential for transforming the way that pupils’ communication skills are developed in schools.
Workforce development

Children with SLCN need support at all levels, in the classroom as well as by specialists. Children are very clear about what works for them – other people’s behaviour and understanding is paramount. However, there’s a need for workforce development, both in initial training and as continual professional development (CPD) as children with SLCN can and do fall through the gaps in professional knowledge and in the system.

There remain huge challenges for teachers and other practitioners in effectively identifying and supporting children and young people with SLCN. Particular challenges for teachers are in changing classroom practice, with research showing the need for systematic professional development. Teachers themselves express a lack of confidence in knowing how to support children and young people with SLCN.

Often, lessons are dominated by teacher talk which rarely improves spoken language or enhances learning. Four decades ago, the Bullock Report calculated that pupils had on average a 20 second window to each contribute verbally in a 45-minute lesson. Recent research suggests things have not greatly improved. One survey of secondary schools in an inner city identified adults talking for up to 90% of the time and more recent research put the average length of a pupil’s contribution to class discussion at just four words. Research has indicated that variations in the quality and quantity of the language that children experience in their homes and educational environments strongly influence individual differences in the rate of children’s language growth and later language outcomes.

In a recent report, Ofsted found new teachers didn’t have a solid knowledge of language development and struggled to adapt their own language for those children with poor language skills. The need for high quality training during initial teacher education in these areas was highlighted as important in order to support teachers to do this.

Case study

The Communication Trust has developed Let’s Talk About It, an information booklet available to all initial teacher trainees, available from www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources. The Trust has worked with a group of universities to embed speech and language information into initial teacher training and is currently working on a project with a university and a primary school within a co-operative learning trust, using a targeted intervention programme to embed changes in practice of initial teacher trainees.

Services and support

Children and young people with SLCN not only fall through the gaps in professional expertise but also in how support is paid for and delivered. Prevention and early identification need as much consideration as specialist services for those children and young people with identified SLCN. Health and education need to work together to design and commission needs-led local services considering universal as well as targeted and specialist approaches. However, there remain challenges in joint planning locally for children and young people with SLCN due to increasing evidence of significant cuts to front line speech and language therapy services and to the specialist advisory teaching services.
We know that communication is paramount for our children, we know that there is much room for improvement, but we also know what we need and have examples of excellence in practice.

School leadership

Time and time again, evidence shows the impact having ‘top level’ support has for any programme running in schools, in particular the backing of the headteacher and senior leadership team. The importance of leadership in spearheading language policy across a school is shown in recent Ofsted reports. The reports have identified the role of the headteacher and the establishment of a whole school approach as key principles for success.

Effective practice in speaking and listening has regularly been highlighted as a key feature of outstanding schools in a number of national reports: ‘A common feature of the most successful schools in the survey was the attention they gave to developing speaking and listening.’

Workforce development

The Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review acknowledges the need for professional development in order to ensure effective implementation of oracy in the classroom with teachers themselves acknowledging the same for children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Research also points to the need for more training in order for teachers to support language, given the wide range of SLCN issues that they typically face in mainstream schools. In addition, there needs to be careful consideration of the professional development of teaching assistants who are four times more likely to support speech and language therapists in delivering interventions than to teachers.

There are a number of initiatives available to schools that support teaching staff to develop their pupil’s speech, language and communication skills and better identify and support pupils with SLCN; staff can identify their professional strengths and needs and be signposted to appropriate continued professional development.

What’s needed?

‘Schools which ‘turn the dial’ on language and communication are able to turn the dial on a number of key school improvement priorities, from raising attainment to narrowing the gap and improving behaviour’.
Jean Gross, Communication Champion, 2011

Peacehaven Community School is a specialist science, maths and training school for pupils aged 11-16. The senior management team has prioritised speech, language and communication in the School Improvement Plan. They won the Shine A Light award for Secondary School of the Year in 2012.

The Trust’s Speech, Language and Communication Framework (SLCF) is a tool designed for the children’s workforce. Teachers and other practitioners can complete an audit of their knowledge and skills. They’re then given a profile of their strengths and areas they may want to develop, with practical solutions. Many of The Trust’s Consortium members offer short and accredited courses and consultation services to support schools.

More than 10,000 people have used the SLCF, almost 8,000 of which were universal staff. For more information please go to www.talkingpoint.org.uk/slcf

Ensuring high quality language teaching and learning should reduce the numbers of children and young people who require specialist language support. Where individual children fail to respond to systematic and regular exposure to evidence based oral language interactions, additional assessments of individual children may be needed and interventions, if appropriate, embedded within the educational context to meet the child’s needs.
Conversations between adults and children that are characterised by high quality language learning interactions should be the core of the classroom.
Language in the curriculum

Experts have long argued that language is so fundamental to learning that it deserves a higher profile across the whole curriculum rather than being ‘marooned’ in the English curriculum, as the ‘poor relation’ to written language. The Expert Panel for the National Curriculum Review devotes a whole chapter to the issue of ‘Oral Language and its Development within the National Curriculum’ noting the connection between oral development, cognitive development and educational attainment.82

Speaking and listening can often be seen as less formal and therefore a less important element of children’s learning. However research suggests the opposite, reading difficulties can be compounded if children are taught written language before their spoken language skills are developed enough to access this teaching.83

Classroom environment

Effective talk in the classroom has reported positive effects on subject learning, attainment, understanding, students’ control over their own learning, emotional development, confidence and self-esteem.64 Social interaction and class-based activities such as working to achieve joint goals, explaining thinking, discussing different points of view and forging consensus, promote both learning and understanding.85 Conversations between adults and children characterised by high quality language learning interactions should be the core of the classroom. A classroom may have an exemplary physical environment and a deliberate provision of daily language activities; however, without adult-child interactions of sufficiently high quality and sensitivity, these efforts are unlikely to result in the desired child outcomes. A number of studies suggest these language learning interactions occur less frequently than is needed. 86 87

The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) have developed a tool to support communication in the classroom.88 Activities to scaffold language development need to be provided in a regular and deliberate manner. These should include the language learning interactions that have been shown to develop oral language, including grammatical skills, vocabulary and narrative. For example, vocabulary instructions integrated into classroom routines89 and building working vocabularies and conceptual development through social interactions.90 All school staff should fully understand, appreciate and develop quality use of a full range of language learning interaction techniques.91

Effective talk needs to be properly planned and designed by teachers, with students supported and facilitated and the teachers modeling how to interact in group discussions.92 93 However the BCRP research has shown changing classroom pedagogy to support speech, language and communication is challenging for teachers.94

Case study

The Trust’s Talk of the Town programme aims to embed language in the curriculum for all children, through building on current practice. The project was piloted in a school federation in Wythenshawe where whole class strategies have been embedded to support teachers.

This included daily activities to promote talk, including ‘talk boxes’ in every primary classroom and the development of communication notice boards for the secondary school. In addition, a range of interventions were used to support those children who were falling behind. For more information please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/talkofthetown

There are a range of tools available to support schools to identify strengths and areas for progress. Different approaches to supporting changes in policy and practice are available, through systematic approaches, workforce development and a graduated approach through interventions and support.

Many of The Trust’s Consortium members offer ways to audit current practice and to build communication into the whole school environment. For more information about what services and resources members provide for schools please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/consortiumcatalogue
Recent research concludes that teachers would benefit from more knowledge of children’s speech, language and communication development, as well as training in how to assess and measure these skills in young children appropriately.

Early intervention/prevention

Knowledge of typical development and the component elements of language is crucial. Recent research concludes that teachers would benefit from more knowledge of children’s speech, language and communication development, as well as training in how to assess and measure these skills in young children appropriately. The BCRP has identified a number of factors to consider in supporting early identification. The Communication Trust has also produced a number of resources to support early identification for use in schools, which have been evidenced as being effective in reducing under-identification.

Universal, targeted and specialist

A graduated response is seen as being important to support children with SLCN; one which encompasses universal quality teaching, catch-up programmes of support for children with delayed language, and more specialist support for those with more severe difficulties. For the best outcomes, this model would sit within a communication friendly environment and with the elements of leadership, workforce and parents embedded throughout. We have examples of models used to implement this approach and through BCRP evidence of what interventions are most effective for children with SLCN across all levels of this graduated model.

The importance of interventions

There is a growing number of evidenced interventions available to support children’s speech, language and communication. Interventions at all levels are absolutely essential to support children who can catch up to do so and those with longer term difficulties to communicate to the very best of their ability. The BCRP highlights the importance of a personalised approach to teaching and learning, reflecting an understanding of a pupil’s language learning and literacy needs, social and communication difficulties and academic progression.
Evidenced interventions are available in the What Works website to support a whole range of SLCN. For example, phonological awareness skills essential for reading, programmes demonstrating significant language improvement in those children who are delayed and programmes to support language in those children with the most complex needs. For more information please go to www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/whatworks
Profiling

The BCRP strongly recommended profiling and monitoring children’s needs, in order to support effective identification and support. The Trust has tested ways of profiling children’s needs through simple tools and techniques within schools, which have enabled identification of children and the ability to signpost different approaches of support, dependent on the child’s profile.

Progression tools have been developed to support identification and profiling of children’s language and communication. Used in The Trust’s Talk of the Town programme, alongside Universally Speaking booklets and training for staff, they contributed to identification of children with SLCN and enabled staff to ensure appropriate approaches and monitoring of progress.

Talk of the Town 2012

Levels of under identification

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<th>Nursery</th>
<th>Primary</th>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Talk of the Town</td>
<td>50% under identified</td>
<td>31% under identified</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post-Talk of the Town</td>
<td>Fell to 15%</td>
<td>Fell to between 5% and 10%</td>
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Specialist support services

Speech and language therapists (SLTs) have a crucial role to play in supporting children and young people with SLCN. Collaborative working between education and health is advocated as best practice for children with SLCN. The recent BCRP recommends SLT support for children with SLCN to be in schools.

Parents

The evidence base regarding the role of parents in supporting and developing early language, thinking and emotional skills is well documented.

Parents of children with SLCN face additional challenges as often their child’s needs aren’t completely understood by the professionals around them. Parents often reported challenges in knowing where to go for information, both at the point of their first concerns and then throughout their child’s development.

Parents have a crucial role to play in supporting their child with SLCN. They know their child best and understand how they communicate and their areas of interest, often key to facilitating positive outcomes. Research has also shown that parents play a prominent role in supporting SLTs to deliver interventions to their children and can act as advocates for their children in school.

Parents of children with SLCN report wanting key people surrounding their child to become more knowledgeable, tolerant and supportive of their needs. Parents valued outcomes related to attainment, though this in itself this was not enough. More importantly they recognised the need for increasing independence and inclusion of their children and the vital role that communication skills play in the achievement of these outcomes.

Children and young people

Children and young people value communication skills in their own right and for the opportunities good communication brings. Children and young people with SLCN reported that what made the biggest difference to them was when people understood the nature of their condition. They wanted teachers to understand pupils and what helps them.

More recently, the BCRP gathered extensive views from children with SLCN. They found they were particularly vulnerable to social acceptance and with emotional well-being. Children and young people valued the help they received to support their language needs but felt the targets highlighted for them at school weren’t reflective of their areas of interest. In response to a question about what aspects of other people’s behaviour that they would like to see change, interrupting, shouting and teasing were the most frequently mentioned. Children and young people were very clear about the importance of other peoples’ understanding and behaviour towards them and the difference it makes.

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One example of such practice is another Shine a Light award winner; Preston Manor School. Their speech and language base teamed up with the English Department to deliver a curriculum project to a target group of Year 7 pupils. Their goal was to create an opportunity to develop a more inclusive approach to delivering the curriculum while promoting effective speaking and listening skills. Pupils were given a lesson exploring what it means to have a voice. They created speech bubbles, which were displayed on the board, for example, one pupil said ‘My voice is my identity and that’s proof of my existence.’

Watercliffe Meadow School in Sheffield, a Shine a Light award winner, has a strategic vision which emphasises ‘getting things right from the start’. Engaging parents and carers is a high priority with over 75% of new parents attending workshops including guidance about early language development and the importance of developing language skills through play. At the workshop the parents work alongside their child on practical activities to support their learning. Then they take home a piece of learning to do together which feeds into the next session.

Jack, 17, spent years avoiding situations where he would have to speak to people because his stammer made communication difficult. He suffered from low self-esteem and was bullied as a result of his difficulty with speaking. In 2009, he attended a residential course, which enabled him to learn skills for controlling his stammer and communicating effectively. Jack now mentors other young people who have similar difficulties; he makes a big difference to them as they see him as someone who really understands their experiences and communication needs.
Making it happen

We believe that communication skills should be at the heart of schools policy in order that every child can achieve their potential academically, socially, emotionally and in their future career.

If we want all our young people to be able to communicate to the best of their ability, there needs to be a continued shift in policy and practice to support the way we are using and developing communication in the classroom. This also includes how we are currently identifying and supporting children who are struggling with these skills.

The Communication Trust works to ensure that every child and young person is enabled to communicate to the very best of their ability. We recognise the centrality of schools in delivering this vision and are committed to working with Government, local areas and schools themselves in order to achieve this.

National policy

We will work with Government and national agencies to ensure that policy reflects the specific needs of children and young people with SLCN and supports the communication needs of all young people. We work collaboratively with our partners to offer expert, evidenced solutions. Our website contains updates on our latest policy work and our newsletter gives updates on the latest developments.

Local policy and practice

We will ensure that speech, language and communication and SLCN are issues that those who develop local policy and service frameworks understand and address in their policies and services. Within the changing landscape, we will provide practical tools to support local authorities, health commissioners and others to ensure that children and young people with SLCN receive the best local services possible.

In order to achieve this we’re asking schools to take our Communication Commitment.
The Communication Commitment

We will provide individual schools, federations and academy chains with a user-friendly route to the Communication Commitment, to enable them to develop a whole school approach to communication.

This approach will take schools through a number of steps, assessing their needs in relation to communication and SLCN, helping them to prioritise what they should address to ensure the best possible teaching and learning, and then signposting them to suitable and effective resources and approaches from the Trust and our Consortium.

This will focus on five areas:
1. School leadership
2. Staff development
3. Communication friendly schools
4. Identifying evidence-based interventions to support children and young people with SLCN
5. Engagement with parents, families and employers

Making these necessary changes in practice will enable schools to make a commitment to address communication and will support them on their journey to create a generation of great communicators.

To find out about this resource as soon as it is launched, please email enquiries@thecommunicationtrust.org.uk
References


13 ibid


18 Gregory, S. (2012) Investing in their future: how do we ensure our children get the good quality early years provision they need if they and the country are to succeed in the future? Ofsted Early Years Annual Lecture.


20 Specific language impairment (SLI) is a developmental disorder where language difficulties are out of line with a child’s other abilities and with no obvious cause or impairment.


32 ibid


39 Strand and Lindsay (2012)


41 Better Communication Research Programme.


Recent research concludes that teachers would benefit from more knowledge of children’s speech, language and communication development, as well as training in how to assess and measure these skills in young children appropriately.
The Communication Trust is a coalition of nearly 50 voluntary and community organisations with expertise in speech, language and communication. We harness our collective expertise to support the children’s workforce and commissioners to support all children and young people’s communication skills, particularly those with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

We do this by raising awareness, providing information and workforce development opportunities, influencing policy, promoting best practice among the children’s workforce and commissioning work from our members.

The Trust was founded in 2007 by children’s charities Afasic and I CAN together with BT and the Council for Disabled Children.

www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk

This paper was written by Wendy Lee, Professional Director at The Communication Trust
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