Putting communication in your development and improvement plans

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Here's a thought...how much of a pupil's daily experience involves speech, language or communication skills?

Perhaps it's easier to think about what *doesn't* rely on them?

Here's another thought... how much time do we explicitly spend on nurturing, supporting and extending these skills?

Part of the Communication Commitment is about thinking about how central communication is to your pupils' experience at your school and how you can embed it more clearly in what you do.

One way to do this is to have a clear focus on communication in your planning for development and improvement in your school.

Of course, it would be great to have a strong and explicit profile for communication in every school's development plan. However, we completely understand the scale and variety of priorities for different schools, so this paper looks at how a commitment to communication can fit in with other areas that may already be a key priority for your school development.

In the current Ofsted Inspection Framework for schools, there are clear judgements relating to supporting pupils' communication skills, as well as effectively narrowing gaps.

Communication and attainment

Because language and communication skills are both the foundation and fundamental building blocks for learning, the links between communication and attainment are clear.

There's evidence which shows that even the way teachers talk with pupils can influence learning, memory, understanding and the motivation to learn.

The quality of spoken dialogue in classrooms can significantly improve children's educational attainment, from increasing SAT scores in maths and science to improving reading comprehension, writing and reasoning skills.

From a special educational needs perspective, the data is stark.

In 2012, 59% of all pupils gained five or more A*-C grades at GCSE or equivalent. For pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) this figure was 13%. Many of these pupils will have age-appropriate non-verbal skills. The attainment gap for pupils with SLCN is not narrowing, it's widening.

In many schools, particularly those in areas of social disadvantage, there are many pupils, often as many as half, who have delayed speech, language and communication skills. This means that they aren't equipped

with the language that they need to access the curriculum effectively, which has consequent impacts on attainment.

If attainment is a key priority for your school, consider how increasing your focus on language and communication can support this priority.

You may wish to look at the benefits of:

- Identifying pupils who may be struggling with communication
- Embedding a greater focus on communication in lesson planning and delivery
- Finding interventions which help pupils' communication skills to support more effective learning
- Tracking and monitoring children with identified SLCN

Communication as part of literacy

Many schools have had a strong focus on literacy development; while speaking and listening are part of literacy, it may be the case that reading, writing and spelling have perhaps enjoyed a stronger emphasis that spoken language skills in some schools.

Speech and language skills have a vital role in wider literacy development – many phonics skills are essentially based on speech; accessing text is dependent on understanding words and the way sentences and narratives are structured and writing is reliant on strong oral language skills too.

For secondary schools, the 2013 Ofsted report *Improving literacy in secondary schools: a shared responsibility* highlights that 'Secondary schools that demonstrate effective literacy practice work to ensure good speaking, listening and communication skills are a focus of teaching across the whole school, in all lessons'.

If literacy is a key priority for your school, consider how a strong focus on spoken language could improve pupils' speaking and listening as well as supporting their written language skills.

Communication and behaviour

There is a growing awareness of both how common communication needs are for pupils with behaviour difficulties and how often these communication needs are undetected.

Studies suggest that 55-100% of pupils with behaviour, social and emotional difficulties have communication difficulties.

There have been several studies that found that where children had been identified as having speech, language and communication needs early on, but didn't then receive appropriate support, they were more likely to develop behavioural difficulties than their peers.

If behaviour is a key priority for your school, it may be useful to develop a policy and process to review the speech, language and communication skills of pupils who are of concern and provide support and interventions focusing on language skills as appropriate.

Linking communication to your school development plan

Where can communication fit into your school development planning?

Evidence shows that communication is really important in terms of learning, attainment, literacy and behaviour, social and emotional development, so have a look at your current school development or improvement plan and see if there are existing areas on your plan where a focus on communication would offer some additional support.

There are also some key references in the Ofsted Inspection Framework to communication which may be useful as a focus of your development planning too. Judgements will be made both in terms of the quality of teaching and pupil achievement. Schools need to show not only how effectively they are using communication in their teaching but also how pupils are developing their communication skills and applying them across the curriculum and how well the school is narrowing the gap between different groups of pupils.

Here are some ideas on how you could link communication and the Ofsted Inspection Framework to support school development:

1. Achievement of pupils at the school

- Set out how you will focus on measuring and improving your pupils' communication skills
- Why not break down some of the speaking and listening skills you want your pupils to develop and specifically target those. There are some great resources to help you with this available as part of *No Pens Day Wednesday* - a day focusing completely on speaking and listening.
- How about introducing space for a specific objective around communication on your lesson plans?
- *Universally Speaking* has age-related expectations on a whole range of speech, language and communication skills – including some of these in your planning can really help you see if pupils are on track or not and if there needs to be a more specific focus on particular skills for that group or individual pupils.
- Can you introduce targeted approaches for vulnerable groups, focusing on communication to specifically support narrowing the attainment gap?
- There is evidence that speech, language and communication needs are under-identified. You could introduce an approach for effective identification of pupils who are struggling as part of your development plan. This will really help you plan provision and provide a useful context for your data.

2. Quality of teaching in the school

Focusing on communication skills can also have benefits in terms of quality of teaching.

One school that was inspected around the time of *No Pens Day Wednesday* reported that the quality of their teaching was rated more highly on *No Pens Day Wednesday*!

Many of the individual actions in the Communication Commitment will really contribute to improving the quality of teaching communication skills. Here are a few ideas:

- Include clear ways to assess and measure the quality of teaching of communication skills in your school
- Identify professional development activities and approaches to support staff to develop their skills in supporting communication
- Try a 'learning walk' with a focus on speaking and listening to identify your school's excellent practice and where there are areas for improvement
- Use *What Works* – which is an interactive database which shows evidenced interventions focusing on communication or SLCN – to help you choose the right interventions for your pupils in your school.
- Identify ways to share great practice across your school.

3. Other areas of Ofsted inspection

There may also be links with communication for your school in terms of other areas of the Ofsted inspection around pupils' behaviour and quality of leadership and management, so you may wish to have a look at these areas too. There are some ideas around behaviour earlier in this factsheet and ideas for leadership under the 'What Other Support is Available' section in priority area one of the Action Plan.

Whatever you decide, including communication as part of your school development planning will move this vital area forward for your pupils and your school.

Why not share other ideas with us through the 'Share Your Stories' function so you can highlight your good practice to other schools?

We would love to hear your ideas and to share them with others!