

TELL ME ABOUT IT

Students with speech, language and communication issues can struggle hugely at secondary school, but there are ways we can help, says **Mary Hartshorne**...

The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) published its final reports in December 2012. The four thematic and ten technical reports represented the most comprehensive research programme on children's speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) ever undertaken in England. BCRP was initiated as a result of recommendations in John Bercow MP's DfE and Department of Health (DH) sponsored Review of Services for Children and Young People with Speech, Language and Communication Needs in 2008.

We already know that SLCN is the most prevalent type of special needs in schools, but one of the most startling findings was that the number of children and young people at primary and secondary school identified with SLCN as their primary need at School Action Plus or with Statements has risen 72% between 2006 and 2011. However this still represents an under-identification of SLCN. For example, school staff identify around 1.5% of children with SLCN, yet we know from national and international prevalence studies this should be closer to 7-9%. BCRP also found that this rate of identification decreases during Key Stage 2 and into Key Stage 3; many fewer pupils are identified with SLCN in secondary schools. This is particularly concerning as we know that 10% of all young people will have some form of long term and persistent SLCN. In adolescence, with increasing demands made on communication skills, young people with SLCN are most likely to have difficulty with understanding and using the more technical and abstract vocabulary required in secondary lessons, and with the more formal style of teaching. They may also struggle socially – with taking part in extended conversations, and using appropriate social interaction.

Figures in BCRP represent children identified with Statements and at School Action Plus. However, in socially deprived areas of the country many more pupils have poor language skills, which impact on their ability to learn. BCRP affirmed this link between language difficulties and

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disadvantage, finding that children eligible for free school meals (an indicator of social deprivation) are more than twice as likely to have SLCN. Social disadvantage has its impact very early in schooling, but without support this difference can persist right into secondary. One study showed that up to 75% of secondary pupils, in an area of social disadvantage, had limited language. Secondary aged pupils with limited language may have a poor vocabulary, and may find it difficult to put their thoughts into words for explanations or to change their style of talking to suit the situation.

So the right support is crucial. BCRP gives us a useful three-tiered model of support for children and young people's speech, language and communication. It recognises that 'All children need effective opportunities to develop their language skills in mainstream settings' and that support includes both 'effective classroom management and teaching followed by targeted or specialist support of oral language skills when required'. BCRP gives evidence for the need for universal, quality first teaching as the 'first phase' in a strategic approach to supporting pupils' language. The report states that if this is in place, then there can be more cost effective allocation of specialist resources at targeted and specialist levels.

MORE INFORMATION

For more information on how to support young people's communication go to ican.org.uk/secondaryfactsheet
For more information on Secondary Talk visit ican.org.uk/secondarytalk



WAVE 3

Additional highly presented personalised intervention

WAVE 2

Additional interventions to enable children to work at age-related expectations or above

WAVE 1

Inclusive quality first teaching for all

However, BCRP provided some interesting insight into existing support in schools. The team tracked pupils with SLCN in both primary and secondary schools and found that only half of teachers observed used specific strategies to support children's language and literacy needs. Worryingly, these pupils can receive up to three times less support than children with other types of need, despite having similar levels of language ability. Even more concerning is the fact that they also receive less speech and language therapy. The disparity is more pronounced in secondary schools where support from a speech and language therapist is rare and available in only 10% of mainstream schools.

So why does this matter? We know that for young people with SLCN, secondary school can be a struggle. Good oral communication is an essential skill for the 21st century. It's not just about social interaction; oral communication underpins educational success – if you can't explain it, you'll struggle to write it down. Talking through new ideas and information helps us to process, understand and learn.

Secondary school becomes more challenging for all young people partly because of the amount of information delivered in teaching and the sheer number of new words that need to be learnt. Teaching style changes and pupils need to be focused and listen for longer periods of time. And social interactions become more complex.

A compelling body of evidence now highlights a connection between oral development, cognitive development and educational attainment. Poor communication skills limit students' access to exam passes, which are the essential currency to gain access to further education and employment.

In today's service-driven economy, employers need a workforce with good face-to-face communication skills. In a recent survey of employers, 'communication skills' were top of the list of employability skills needed for young people entering their first job. 98% of people surveyed felt they should be taught in school. Nearly 50% of employers surveyed said they cannot get recruits with the communication and team



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working skills they need. Without good speech, language and communication young people's life choices are limited.

Young people need supported opportunities to develop their abilities in order to access the curriculum and achieve. Research consistently shows that when these needs are overlooked, difficulties with language can turn into behavioural problems, disengagement and even exclusion. One study showed that 66% of young people at risk of exclusion in a mainstream secondary school had previously unidentified language difficulties. On top of this, 65% of young people in Young Offenders' institutions have communication difficulties, which are often undetected.

BCRP gives us further insight into these links between SLCN and Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD). Researchers found that the main areas of difficulty associated with SLCN are problems both in developing peer relationships and in prosocial behaviour. Students with SLCN are also at greater risk of developing emotional difficulties, and perceived themselves to have a worse quality of life – in particular difficulties with social acceptance and being bullied.

BCRP talks about pupils needing appropriate language learning environments to develop their language and communication skills. I CAN's Secondary Talk provides the three tiered approach advocated by BCRP, and gives a wealth of practical easy-to-use activities and strategies to build into lessons. Park Hall Academy has used Secondary Talk across the whole school. "I think the real success of this program has been that it's been embedded in other things that we've done," comments Dr. Toby Close, Vice-Principal, "so the literacy coordinator has been central to some of those sessions, our behaviour team has been central to some of those sessions. It's not "we're just doing speech, language and communication today folks" it is the whole school priority for developing the Academy. I think that's why it's been so successful because it's not just been a new initiative – it's been built in to the work that we've already got in place."

Secondary Talk uses simple strategies such as adults slowing down their pace of talking, questioning carefully or leaving 'pause time' after giving instructions, to help make lessons easier to access. Staff at Park Hall Academy report that they have seen an improvement in pupils' ability to seek clarification and feedback, and the language they use to do so, thus improving interactions between them and their peers and teachers.

Secondary Talk is flexible, allowing schools to select an appropriate focus so that it becomes relevant to priorities within their school. Dr. Close continues, "Secondary Talk is grounded in research so we knew it would work and why it's important to develop speech, language and communication. The programme came with meaningful units of work that staff could take and adapt to their own needs. After two years of starting the project, although there isn't a direct causal relationship, the number of pupils achieving 5 A*-C grades in English and Maths increased by 10%. In terms of student behaviour, it is more difficult to measure progress but low-level disruption has reduced and student interaction with peers and asking for help has improved."

With Ofsted now judging how successfully schools support students' communication skills, there is an increasing awareness that they are a key indicator of good learning, good achievement and good behaviour. Schools that have already focused on embedding communication with Secondary Talk have recognised the need to continue this work.

"We've started on an amazing journey that will continue to reap rewards for a long time to come," concludes Dr Close. "By focusing on the speech, language and communication needs of all our students we are striving to do all we can to enable our youngsters to fulfil their potential. This way of working has become embedded in the organisation and I think that's been widely acknowledged in results, by Ofsted, by staff buy in – but most importantly by looking at the impact on the students in the classroom."