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Perspectives on Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) specialist coaching from focus group.

Pre- and post-coaching focus groups were held five months apart with three coaching episodes for all teachers in between. The focus groups consisted of the teachers and school leaders from two federated primary schools. There were 8 attendees for the first focus group, of which 6 were able to attend the second focus group. Key themes which emerged from the first focus group (in bold) were then followed up in detail at the second (examples of quotes included in italics).

What the model of specialist coaching consists of (e.g. role of advice, instruction, guiding to find answers this model of coaching) and its relationships with the whole-staff Word Aware training delivered prior to coaching (facilitated by the coaches).

Coaching had a clear focus on aspects of SLCN in the discussion of teaching and practice and classroom environments.

"Things like group work, body language, using images with the words, using vocabulary that they could understand. Giving short and simple instructions, repetition."

"..the positioning of children during an adult directed session"

"I just looked more at my group of 'low children' and how differentiated they are, I thought they're all 'the same ability' but they're completely different. I've got 8-10 months, 22-26, Yr 1s, and they're all completely different (EYs ages and stages)."

Coaching supported teachers' reflections about their own practice and allowed for informed conversations about meeting SLCN in the classroom. One teacher (A) felt that she had not learned anything new from the coach, but had gained an insight into her own practice and what was effective.

"It was a bit of both [guidance and instruction], she did try to say, 'and then what happened, look at this carefully', and then she went back through the video. I'd identified before we even went in the areas, so she helped me focus on the areas I wanted to look at, and she did give suggestions about what I could do next."

"I have got this negative view, because the advice that I got was to carry on doing what I was doing, so what use was that? ... I was expecting them to give me an area to work on, but there wasn't an area, so I didn't really see the point of it. My observations were general, both times it was continue doing what I was doing... (Researcher asks: Was that helpful?) It was nice to hear that, she was pointing out things I didn't know I was doing, like body language, and getting the children to repeat, and she was pointing out what was working."

Coaching was not designed to exclusively follow up Word Aware training (not directly instructional coaching), but it helped to

"[The coach] didn't explicitly say, 'and now let's look at word aware but I could make the links, such as verbal gestures, good modelling of language, giving the children an opportunity to speak before I spoke, so all the language was there."

"It's more than 'good practice is having a word wall'; its understanding the rationale of the word wall. I am so glad I read the manual, it is very practical, but the emphasis of word aware is becoming a WA school, it lives and breathes, it's not something you can compartmentalise into as 'this is a word aware lesson' it is there all of the time, in lots of different forms."

The experience of using video of teachers' own classrooms as part of their coaching.

The use of video was universally approved of, despite the fact that some participants had expressed genuine anxiety about it during the first focus group. It supported a process of shared scrutiny between the coach and the teacher of teaching and learning, and enhanced teachers' capacity to zone in on the SLCN of individual children. Using video is now seen as something that teachers would willingly use for themselves.

"I really benefitted from it. I thought it was really good, how you could watch it back, and it wasn't just watching the lesson, it was picking up mistakes that even I would say, so my wording, I'd jump about, I thought how can they understand what I've just said, I need to slow it down, and seeing all those things myself, and [the coach] was like 'what could we do now about this?' and she was really helpful, and yeah I enjoyed the video."

"I was able to watch a child I wasn't working with, and they were, [the coach] picked up that they had a slight stutter, and she noticed this and I hadn't picked this up yet. So it was small things including the ideas of children I didn't hear at the time"

"I enjoyed it. I haven't used it before. I enjoyed it, it was really useful. I think when you are being videoed you always slightly change whether there is a video there or not you are very aware that there is somebody very close to you watching you what you are doing, and [the coach] picked up on that, and asked would you do that normally. I enjoyed looking back at it and that's lots of things you don't remember when you are having conversations with reception children."

(Researcher asked would you use it again?) "yes – and reflecting on it myself or using it with other people in my classroom"

"I enjoyed it as well. I was anxious beforehand because I didn't know what to expect. But yeah I really did enjoy it because we are so busy that I don't think we get a chance to reflect on our own teaching. We reflect more on what the children are learning than on what we are doing, on we can change."

The Executive Headteacher and school leaders in the focus group was also positive about the use of video

"It's been really positive. We've had the jokes about hair and diet, but after the first round when people were anxious, but they found it useful."

"I would love to use video more, because there is something in watching yourself back, because when you are teaching you are wrapped up in that moment. I would like to use it more with colleagues."

Whether coaching had an impact on teachers' workload.

Surprisingly there was no concern expressed about coaching adding to workload, despite this being raised as an issue in the first focus group.

"I don't think it adds to your workload, I think it helps you reflect on what you know and helps you embed it in your practice. So you know all these things, but you've not done it as well as you could have and it's just bringing it back to realise you know what you've got to do."

"I think the key part I took from it is that you just need to be reflective in all you are doing... It was everyday tweaks that made life a little easier, it didn't add to my workload (reduced my workload a little bit). Something as small as re-positioning children within a group, to get them communicating with each other and join in, it did happen. So the advice she gave, although very small did have impact."

"It didn't add to a paper workload, I didn't get my books out and start writing lots or typing stuff up."

The Executive Headteacher was interested in this discussion (workload is a high profile concern in UK schools at present). He asked the teachers if they had prepared differently for the lessons that they were being coached on, and was reassured when teachers said they had not felt the need to put on a 'show lesson.'

"Workload is one of those things that if you see the value of what you are doing it doesn't feel the same as if you don't."

What has been learned through the SLCN coaching and how that has been and will be used individually and in school improvement.

Coaching brought effective teaching and learning for SLCN back to the consciousness for teachers, allowing them to refine practices.

"I didn't realise that I had forgotten to point to the letters in phonics and the children couldn't follow, so we re-did it and now I point to my words a lot and I use the whiteboard more, so she just showed me that I need those images for the range of children in my class as it helps them a lot."

It also gave teachers insights and confidence in new skills for wider professional roles (such as mentoring).

"I do think a positive was that I mentor student teachers, and I didn't realise how to break down everything with my student, so when I had her I just do it automatically, it helped me reflect on my practice."

This was further developed by the Executive Headteacher who considered that gaining confidence in the efficacy of their practice was valuable in supporting ongoing school improvement

"That's a really positive thing to be told, and you often find with good practitioners they undervalue what they do, and often if I ask someone to go and work with another teacher they often say 'I don't know what to tell them' and my answer to that is always 'watch them for a short period of time and you'll know exactly what to tell them, because you'll suddenly start to pick out, well why are they doing that? I wouldn't do that, I'd do this, and it's those things that are now being brought to the top, that are being exposed to you, that you are doing well.'

The school leaders reflected on how this specific SLCN provision related to the wider school agenda.

"95% of our learners have English as an Additional Language – it's about developing universal provision"

"We need to keep coming back to this to look at what have we done, where are we at, are we all at the same place. If you find provision that makes a difference you need to keep doing that. We need to think about building our own internal capacity for coaching. [The coaches'] roles could change within that. Their specific input will also be useful to give us what we want."

"We have got to re-visit this. You realise the enormity of what you've got to do. We've got the momentum, but its juggling it with everything else, we front-ended this, and we need to come back to this and recommit."

"It is one of the most difficult things of school improvement. Which plates do you need to keep spinning? You have change-over of staff, and some just forget. Our job as leaders is how you keep all of that in balance."