Title:

Talking it through: using specialist coaching to enhance teachers' knowledge from speech and language sciences

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Abstract:

Teachers' knowledge for effective pedagogies can be enhanced by drawing on a range of specific expertise held by those working in other disciplines or professions. In this article, we explore this potential through a focus on enhancing research-informed communication rich pedagogies in primary and early years' settings. The specific example is that of speech and language therapists using video-based coaching with teachers. Our research provides case study evidence and demonstrates that this professional development approach brings speech and language therapy research and expertise into the practice domain of teachers. This is a dynamic, reciprocal and co-constructive relationship between the participants. The focus on this paper is on how it can enable teachers to extend their understanding and develop a more nuanced understanding of specialist evidence of speech, language and communication for, and in, practice.

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Reigning in the knowledge

Many teachers are competent and flexible problem solvers, but they may feel frustration or anxiety that they don't know more of the expert knowledge that other groups of professionals working with children have. They will read in the news that schools need to do more about child mental health; watch a documentary exploring the science or lived experience of autism, or feel wrong-footed by a parent who is trying to help them understand how their adopted child's patterns of attachment might be impacting on their relationships and learning at school. Initial teacher education is frequently short, and externally provided CPD is often an expensive option, and both can leave the teacher with the feeling that they still have a lot of leg work to do to make it impact in their own unique context. Reading more widely can help, but on top of the time it takes there are issues of access and accessibility of specialist journals. There is also the dilemma some teachers face when what they do know seems to put them at odds with teaching, learning, assessment or behaviour practices in their school.

Focusing on speech, language and communication

In this article, we discuss a specialist coaching approach to overcome a particularly pertinent issue for teachers, that of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The National Curriculum assumes children start school with necessary speech, language and communication skills, ready to learn and develop quickly using reading and writing as the vehicle for demonstrating measurable competence. However, as Law et al (2017) confirm, living in a socially disadvantaged area significantly increases a child's risk of speech, language and communication needs occurring. Law et al (2017) demonstrate that 5–8% of all children in England and Wales are likely to have language difficulties; that there is a strong social gradient, with children from socially disadvantaged families being more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a language problem; that disparities in child language capabilities are recognisable in the second year of life and are clearly having an impact by the

time children enter school, and that language skills play a key role in children's school attainment and employment opportunities. Language skills are widely accepted as the foundation skills for learning and it is recognised that most children with SLCN have some difficulty learning to read and write (Snowling & Hulme, 2012).

Speech and language therapists and teachers address children's SLC needs in different ways and each profession has its own cultures, learning experiences and methods for evaluating and researching new ways of working. McKean et al. (2017) evidence the value and challenges of co-practice at service-governance, institutional and professional levels. Teachers need considerable training to identify SLCN accurately and early on in a child's educational life, but this is not easily achieved. Ainscow et al, (2012) found in a Manchester-based study that teachers were missing around half of children's SLCN and Gascoigne and Gross (2017) reported that teachers who worked in areas of high disadvantage were often 'norm-shifting' where they considered children who were at age related expectations to be above average. These dimensions create genuine challenges as SEND reforms call for schools to develop a robust offer to children at universal, targeted and specialist levels.

Researching new inter-professional practices

Our collaborative action research was undertaken across both primary and early years' settings in Derby where high concentrations of children with speech, language and communication needs attend schools in socially deprived wards, and many of these schools also serve populations of children whose first language is not English (Lofthouse et al., 2016). We used a Theory of Change Methodology as an evaluative tool. In this case a 'Mental Model' was created which privileged the knowledge and experience of teachers and school leaders, who were facilitated through research interviews to express their own ideas about how the specialist coaching might work (Laing & Todd, 2015). Their views were systematically recorded and a cumulative flow diagram was constructed which highlighted the current situation, the expected steps to change and the desired outcomes for children and staff. The method established a working hypothesis which was that specialist training and coaching could mobilise the knowledge and skill sets of both teachers and speech and language therapists to better enable teachers to critically reflect on their practice.

This model was then used to review the experiences and validate evidence of change through follow up interviews, allowing the stakeholders' Theory of Change to be scrutinised and elaborated.

In this new partnership the speech and language therapists first led short group training sessions for teachers and teaching assistants in the settings. The training covered theoretical models from education and speech and language therapy research; including ages and stages of speech and language development appropriate to the age range of children that the teacher worked with. Practical approaches were highlighted, including those related to research informed 'Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool' which was designed to profile the oral language environment of the classroom (Dockrell et al., 2010). During the training participants are also introduced to basic coaching theory.

The participants then moved onto the specialist coaching stage. The speech and language therapists took short video clips of dialogue-based teaching in the teachers' own classrooms. As soon after the lesson as possible the teacher watched the clip, followed by the therapist. Each made notes reflecting on relevant aspects such as:

- the child/group of children;
- their perceptions of the child's age and stage of development;
- the provision in the physical learning environment;
- the pre-planned language learning opportunities created and the oracy and language learning interactions deployed to support the children's vocabulary development;
- turn taking and social communication skills;
- attention and listening skills;
- understanding of language;
- use of grammar and sentence structure and narrative skills.

Clips from the video were chosen by the teacher or the speech and language therapist and the therapist then framed the conversation utilising coaching dimensions (Lofthouse et al., 2010). These coaching dimensions were first developed through a national teacher coaching research project and provide a framework for developing productive coaching dialogue. The dimensions are:

- the subject matter (theme and focus of discussion), in this case aspects from the list above;

- who initiates the elements of the coaching conversation (allowing a focus on shared ownership);

- the stimulus created by the video clips, recall or artefacts (such as lesson plans, children's work);

- the tone of voice, with the speech and language therapists aiming to adopt selecting a neutral and curious tone to engage the teacher in discussion rather than indicate a judgement;

- the scale of focus, such as critical moments, teaching episodes, the lesson as a whole, pedagogic themes and school or societal issues;

- the timeframe (past lessons, planning, the lesson in focus or future teaching).

In total, each teacher engaged in a series of three video-based coaching sessions with a speech and language therapist, creating cycles of critical thinking and reflection on live practice, enacted in a non-judgemental creative learning space.

The role of the coaching conversations

By video recording the coaching conversations we identified their characteristics, and these were further explored through interviews. The teachers brought with them their knowledge and practical skills regarding pedagogy, classroom management skills and education theory; the speech and language therapist brought their knowledge of language and communication difficulties, child development milestones and latest theory about universal strategies which promote language and communication skills. The use of video encouraged the teachers to develop their own personal responsibility and accountability and encouraged them to improve, refine and adapt through a process of scaffolding, reflection, analysis and problem solving.

While this research has so far only been small scale, those teachers involved reported changes to the way that they interact with children, such as;

> *'I realised I needed to stop answering for children and also to give more thinking time. I questioned the concept of 'pace'. The coaching raised my*

awareness of the significance of the elements of the communication training in the classroom.'

They also reported that they felt they had developed their reflective practice skills and taken action to widen their repertoire of communication rich pedagogies;

> *'I was able to think about my practice and reflect on my interactions and realised I was a bit directive with the children, and a lot of my activities are where I am talking, and there is not much conversation coming from the children…. I realised that I needed to give the children more time to talk and start conversations.'*

The focus on what is already working in the context was critical;

> *'…it highlighted to me the things that really do work in the classroom, such as repetition. I also found it really useful to look at where things can break down with speaking and listening.'*

The training and associated coaching helped teachers to understand concepts and terminology better. Teachers typically conflate 'speech, language and communication' into the handy education acronym (SLC) without understanding the component parts. Change starts to happen when teachers start to understand that 'speech' refers to the sounds we use for talking, and other factors such as fluency, volume, intonation; 'language' relates to what is needing for understanding and talking, including vocabulary, sentence structure, narrative and reasoning skills; while 'communication' includes non-verbal communication and conversational skills and rules. This allows for more nuanced observations of children, more accurate recognition of their actual needs related to age and stage of development, and a greater awareness of evidence based pedagogical techniques that can be used to support any of the areas of need through enhanced interactions in the classroom.

> *'I found it really useful to talk about children with varying needs and that highlighted to me some children who have speaking and listening problems. Something else that was drawn to my attention as a fairly new teacher was the level of questioning.... I became aware that I needed to identify the level that children were working at for speaking and listening, so that I could pitch my questions more appropriately to meet their needs.'*

Teachers reported that they were more alert to emerging difficulties and able to respond early with bespoke solutions. They felt more able to accurately judge the child's developmental age and stage and report on the changes and progress in the children's communication skills, an increasingly important skill given the limited resource for individualised speech and language support. Interviews with school leaders as part of the Theory of Change approach confirmed that real change was evident in their schools, and there was a developing capacity of teachers to support each other in this area of work (Laing & Todd, 2015).

The bigger picture

There is no doubt that the range and amount of specialist knowledge that exists in other professions and science and social science disciplines is vast and growing, and has potential to improve outcomes for children and build teachers' efficacy. Our research has been quite specific but gives evidence of specialist coaching as a way to address 'gaps' in learning outcomes which start from an early age. Changes to teachers' practices in areas such as oracy (Mercer et al., 2017) would bear more fruit if SLCN for our youngest children are more successfully met.

Our research provides an example of cross-sector collaboration (Sharples et al. 2017) and demonstrates how speech and language therapists can offer teachers substantive knowledge and skills which can positively impact on their pedagogy and support of learners. Specialist coaching can develop teachers' critical thinking and reflection on their lived experience of teaching real children in their own classrooms. It gives them a wider knowledge base on which to draw, to hypothesise about possible solutions to teaching dilemmas, and to provide feedback loops based on shared expertise and co-construction with new opportunities for informed action in the classroom.

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