

# Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom

Case Studies from the Venturers Trust  
Primary Schools in Bristol



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# Introduction

## What is SSLiC?

Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) is a knowledge exchange programme<sup>1</sup> that ultimately aims to improve communication and learning outcomes for all children. It seeks to achieve this aim by providing a forum for knowledge exchange between practitioners and researchers. There is a wealth of research in the area of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), although there are still gaps in our understanding of how to apply this in practice in schools and the best ways to support school practitioners to embed communication in their school's policy and practice. If we, as practitioners and researchers, wish to see greater improvements in outcomes for all children starting in school and beyond, it is critical that we come together, over a sustained period of time, to investigate how the evidence base related to communication and oral language that does exist might be applied to a particular setting and then how this collective knowledge might be used to inform the wider community of 'what works' in schools for children.

To support this process the SSLiC programme has identified five evidence-informed domains around which schools can focus professional development and learning:

- Language Leadership
- Staff Professional Development and Learning
- Communication Supporting Classrooms
- Identifying and Supporting Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Working with Others.

This report describes the activities, outcomes and learning from 9 early years settings and primary schools in Bristol across the 2022-2023 academic year. Each setting had access to research findings, a school self-assessment audit tool, an evidence-based classroom observation tool and received regular support from a facilitator with research and school practitioner backgrounds. All participants had the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the academic year, the results of which have been published as case studies in this report.

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<sup>1</sup> The SSLiC Programme was developed as part of a series of knowledge exchange programmes at the Centre for Inclusive Education, UCL (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/centres/ucl-centre-inclusive-education>)



## Raising attainment for children with language difficulties

Raising attainment for all children is at the heart of education and research has shown how language difficulties may be correlated with future academic performance<sup>2</sup>. When considering academic attainment, research literature has pointed to children with language difficulties attaining less well in national tests than their typically developing peers (TDP), both at the end of Key Stage 2<sup>3</sup> and end of Key Stage 4<sup>4,5</sup>. Moreover, research into skills which are arguably necessary for classroom learning has shown some of the difficulties children with SCLN may have in acquiring those skills. Children with language difficulties, for example, have been shown to have difficulties with acquiring literacy skills<sup>6</sup>, writing difficulties<sup>7</sup>, difficulties

with numeracy<sup>8</sup>, working memory<sup>9</sup> and executive functioning skills<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, we know that there is a relationship between language difficulties and problems with behaviour, and the difficulties that children with SCLN experience with their social and emotional skills<sup>11,12,13</sup>. This is pertinent as research suggests that attainment is linked to positive social and emotional wellbeing<sup>14</sup>. The relationship between language and attainment is a complex one. SSLiC aims to foster a good language learning environment, and so provide support for literacy, support for learning and ultimately promote positive academic outcomes. Further, creating effective language learning environments can prepare children for the more challenging demands placed on oral language as they proceed through school, and can reduce the number of children experiencing SCLN.

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- 2 Snowling, M. J., Hulme, C., Bailey, A. M., Stothard, S. E., & Lindsay, G. (2011). Better Communication Research Project: language and literacy attainment of pupils during early years and through KS2: does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments?
  - 3 Conti-Ramsden, G., Botting, N., Knox, E., & Simkin, Z. (2002). Different school placements following language unit attendance: Which factors affect language outcome? *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 37(2), 185-195.
  - 4 Dockrell, J., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 27(2), 223-237.
  - 5 Durkin, K., Simkin, Z., Knox, E., & Conti-Ramsden, G. (2009). Specific language impairment and school outcomes. II: Educational context, student satisfaction, and post-compulsory progress. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 44(1), 36-55
  - 6 Stothard, S. E., Snowling, M. J., Bishop, D., Chipchase, B. B., & Kaplan, C. A. (1998). Language-Impaired Preschoolers: A Follow-Up Into Adolescence. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 41(2), 407-418.
  - 7 Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Exploring writing products in students with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders. *Learning and Instruction*, 32, 81-90.
  - 8 Harrison, L. J., McLeod, S., Berthelsen, D., & Walker, S. (2009). Literacy, numeracy, and learning in school-aged children identified as having speech and language impairment in early childhood. *International Journal of Speech and Language Pathology*, 11(5), 392-403.
  - 9 Baddeley, A. (2003). Working memory and language: An overview. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 36(3), 189-208.
  - 10 Henry, L. A., Messer, D. J., & Nash, G. (2012). Executive functioning in children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53(1), 37-45.
  - 11 Bakopoulou, I., & Dockrell, J. E. (2016). The role of social cognition and prosocial behaviour in relation to the socio-emotional functioning of primary aged children with specific language impairment. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 49, 354-370.
  - 12 Yew, S. G. K., & O'Kearney, R. (2013). Emotional and behavioural outcomes later in childhood and adolescence for children with specific language impairments: meta-analyses of controlled prospective studies. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(5), 516-524
  - 13 Conti-Ramsden, G., & Botting, N. (2008). Emotional health in adolescents with and without a history of specific language impairment (SLI). *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 49(5), 516-525
  - 14 Gutman, L. M., & Vorhaus, J. (2012). The impact of pupil behaviour and wellbeing on educational outcomes. Department for Education, London.

# Case Studies

## Bannerman Road Community Academy

**Developing a whole school approach in creating high quality language learning opportunities**

### Research Team and Setting

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## Background

Bannerman Road Community Academy is a primary school located in inner city Bristol. The school has a diverse community of children including 76% of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). Children with EAL are often identified in research as having an increased risk for the development of additional speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)<sup>15</sup>. The school also has 20% of children with identified special educational needs and disability (SEND), with Communication and Interaction reported as the most prevalent area of SEND in the school. Research exploring the abilities of children entering nursery in socially disadvantaged areas found similar prevalence despite other cognitive abilities being within the average range<sup>16</sup>. However, there are also large number of children in areas of social disadvantage who do not experience difficulties in language and communication<sup>17</sup>. Children experiencing language learning needs have been shown to have difficulties acquiring literacy skills<sup>18</sup>, writing skills<sup>19</sup>, numeracy skills<sup>20</sup>, working memory<sup>21</sup> and executive functioning skills<sup>22</sup>.

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- 15 Meschi, E., Mickelwright, J., Vignoles, A., & Lindsay, G. (2012). The transition between categories of special educational needs of pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as they progress through the education system. London: DfE.
  - 16 Locke, A., Ginsborg, J., & Peers, I. (2002). Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 37(1), 3-15.
  - 17 Law, J., Todd, L., Clark, J., Mroz, M. & Carr, J. (2013). Early language delays in the UK. Save the Children, London.
  - 18 Stothard, S. E., Snowling, M. J., Bishop, D., Chipchase, B. B., & Kaplan, C. A. (1998). Language-Impaired Preschoolers: A Follow-Up Into Adolescence. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 41(2), 407-418.
  - 19 Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Exploring writing products in students with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders. *Learning and Instruction*, 32, 81-90.
  - 20 Harrison, L. J., McLeod, S., Berthelsen, D., & Walker, S. (2009). Literacy, numeracy, and learning in school-aged children identified as having speech and language impairment in early childhood. *International Journal of Speech and Language Pathology*, 11(5), 392-403.
  - 21 Baddeley, A. (2003). Working memory and language: An overview. *Journal of Communication Disorders*, 36(3), 189-208
  - 22 Henry, L. A., Messer, D. J., & Nash, G. (2012). Executive functioning in children with specific language impairment. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 53(1), 37-45

Given the large number of children at the school with identified SLCN or having low language levels, a priority area of focus for the SSLiC Project was to promote high quality teaching to develop the language and communication skills of all children through the development of strong language learning environments. Research suggests this can prepare children for the more challenging demands placed on oracy as they proceed through school as well as reducing the numbers of children identified as experiencing significant SLCN<sup>23,24</sup>.

The school completed the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit and identified that there were strengths with regard to identifying and supporting children with SLCN and communication support in the classrooms. Strong language leadership and staff professional development and learning were the key areas on which teaching staff at Bannerman Road wanted to focus for the SSLiC Project. To address the need to improve language leadership in the school, they decided to establish a Communication Team. Evidence shows that strong and clear implementation leadership is a fundamental requirement for successful implementation of new practice to improve teaching in schools<sup>25</sup>.

In order to improve children's language levels in the school, teaching staff wanted to increase opportunities for language learning in the classroom. The term Language Learning Opportunities refers to the structured opportunities within a classroom setting which support language development. They are important to ensure a deliberate and intentional focus on oral language learning<sup>26,27</sup>. The language learning opportunities provided to children in their classroom can be profiled and reviewed using the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)<sup>28</sup>

to monitor and evaluate evidence-based opportunities for language learning in teaching practice<sup>29</sup>. The school planned to implement this change through a clear programme of regular peer support to monitor and evaluate progress in this area. Research shows that a coherent and sustained approach to monitoring the implementation of new practice leads to positive change and high-quality teaching practice<sup>30</sup>. Equally important is a staff-led peer approach to effective continuing professional development and learning that can ensure meaningful and sustainable improvement within a school setting.

## What was done?

### Investing in the implementation of a whole school approach

A Communication Team, consisting of teaching leads from Early Years and Key Stage 1 as well as senior leaders within the school, was established to guide and oversee the SSLiC Project. Evidence shows that leadership teams which include staff from different levels within the school can ensure dedicated, distributed leadership, which enhances the implementation process of educational initiatives<sup>31,32</sup>. The project activities focussed specifically on the Nursery provision, Year Reception and Key Stage 1 classrooms. The Communication Team held regular review meetings to monitor staff activity and progress with regard to increasing and promoting oracy in school. This information could then be shared with the whole staff group, as well as with senior leaders to help inform and address the wider school strategy for improving oracy in school.

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- 23 Dockrell, J.E., Lindsay, G., Roulstone, S., & Law, J. (2014). Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs: An overview of the results of the Better Communication Research Programme. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 49, 43-5729
  - 24 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 31(3), 271-286.
  - 25 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/EEF-Implementation-Guidance-Report-2019.pdf) accessed 8th June 2023
  - 26 Bunce, B. H. (1995). Building a language focused curriculum for the preschool classroom (Vol. 2). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.
  - 27 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classroom Environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44.
  - 28 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/classroom-supporting-tool/>. Accessed 5th June 2023
  - 29 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: [https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct\\_bcrp\\_csc\\_final.pdf](https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct_bcrp_csc_final.pdf). Accessed 5th June 2023
  - 30 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/EEF-Implementation-Guidance-Report-2019.pdf) accessed 8th June 2023
  - 31 Metz, A. et al. (2015). Active implementation frameworks for successful service delivery: Catawba county child wellbeing project. *Research on Social Work Practice* 25(4): p415-422.
  - 32 Hurlburt, M. et al. (2014). Interagency Collaborative Team model for capacity building to scale-up evidence-based practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 39: p160-168.



From the very beginning of the SSLiC Project, there was a recognition by the Senior Leadership Team of the importance of supporting spoken language in the classroom which resulted in allocation of proper investment to support the implementation of the project. Strong leadership is a key factor in school improvement and staff development and evidence shows this can drive a change in ethos in the school, promoting new positive practices<sup>33,34,35</sup>. One of the most impactful support measures the school undertook was the decision by senior leaders to allocate specific funding to facilitate the project activities. This funding was allocated to the newly formed Communication Team specifically to enable them to employ supply teachers to cover class sessions so that teaching staff can be released to engage in peer observations. Research recognises the importance of clear and decisive leadership, which invests in teams to enable them to have the required time and resources to implement meaningful support to bring about effective change<sup>36,37,38</sup>.

#### Creating systems of peer support for professional development

Each member of staff completed observations in their classrooms using the Language Learning Opportunities dimension of the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)<sup>39</sup>. Based on the outcome of the observations, each member of staff focussed on one specific Language Learning Opportunity to develop in their teaching practice. In order to support their learning and development, each member of staff kept a personal log of their practice and experience in using their chosen target. The information from these records were used in peer

mentoring sessions, which enabled teachers to reflect on their learning so far and share their practice. This approach finds strong support in the current literature, which advocates for the importance of peer mentoring and its effectiveness in improving practice through common language and experience<sup>40,41</sup>.

In order to facilitate supported sharing and reflection, teaching staff in Nursery, Reception, Year 1 and Year 2 year groups were allocated to buddy pairs. Buddy pairs met regularly to discuss and reflect on their practice in relation to the Language Learning Opportunities they offer to children during everyday practice. Discussions among and between the buddy pairs were also encouraged around what they would like to work on and how they planned to approach these activities.

Fortnightly meetings with and between buddies enabled staff to have reflective, supportive conversations about their confidence and experiences of putting the targeted Language Learning Opportunities into practice. Staff were able to observe each other's practice using the CSCOT and to give each other feedback on their skills and confidence for using the targeted Language Learning Opportunity. Observations using the CSCOT were repeated after some weeks of practice to enable the Communication Team and all teaching staff to review any progress made.

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- 33 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023
- 34 Moullin, J.C., Ehrhart, M.G., Aarons G (2017). The Role of Leadership in Organizational Implementation and Sustainment in Service Agencies. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 28 (5): 558–567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517718361>
- 35 Aarons, G.A. et al. (2014). Aligning leadership across systems and organizations to develop a strategic climate for evidence-based practice implementation. *Annual Review of Public Health*. 35: p225–274.
- 36 Justice, L. (2004). Creating language-rich preschool classroom environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children* 37(4): 36-44.
- 37 Metz, A. et al. (2015). Active implementation frameworks for successful service delivery: Catawba county child wellbeing project. *Research on Social Work Practice* 25(4): p415–422.
- 38 Hurlburt, M. et al. (2014). Interagency Collaborative Team model for capacity building to scale-up evidence-based practice. *Children and Youth Services Review*. 39: p160
- 39 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: [https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct\\_bcrp\\_csc\\_final.pdf](https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct_bcrp_csc_final.pdf).
- 40 Education Endowment Foundation (2021) [EEF-Effective-Professional-Development-Guidance-Report.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 15th June 2023
- 41 Sims et al. (2021), What are the characteristics of teacher professional development that increase pupil achievement? A systematic review and meta-analysis. <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/evidence-reviews/teacher-professional-development-characteristics> accessed 18th June 2023

## What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

The Bannerman Road SSLiC Project has enabled the school to create a 'spotlight' on oracy and to enable staff to have the time to reflect on their practice both individually and together. Crucial to the success of this project was the early investment from the Senior Leadership Team in funding supply teachers to cover classes in order for regular teaching staff to be able to have the time to fully engage in professional development activities. This kind of investment on creating effective professional development has been highlighted in research and educational policy as an essential element for the successful implementation and sustainability of educational projects<sup>42</sup>.

At the end of the SSLiC Project, the Communication Team conducted semi-structured interviews with staff (individuals and buddies) to explore and evaluate their experiences. Positive experiences were shared among teaching staff through reflections and examples from individual practice. This overview of staff confidence was shared with the wider staff group, as well as with senior leaders within the school, to help inform and address the wider school strategy for improving oracy in school.

Evidence from the semi-structured interviews and peer group discussions has shown that staff have felt comfortable sharing not only their learning, but also their targets with a buddy. This has served to strengthen relationships within the teaching team. Based on the activities and learning shared across the teaching staff during this critical project, staff have worked together to create a learning document with examples from their own teaching practice of using Language Learning Opportunities in their classrooms. This unique document has been shared with all staff taking part in the SSLiC Project as well as wider teaching staff in Key Stage 2.

## Key Learning

Staff at Bannerman Road Community Academy have found that different methods and techniques for improving spoken language in the classroom were effective in their classes. The learning, examples and top tips relating to these have been shared with all staff using verbal and written methods. This learning will be used in the future as a valuable resource to create a tool for the induction of new members of staff. From this information, the Communication Team has been able to determine what the support and development needs are for teaching staff with regard to increasing and supporting spoken language in the classroom and these will be built into the planning of professional development opportunities for the next academic year. Research shows that leadership approaches which combine external evidence together with internally generated data can be powerful in supporting and effecting meaningful positive change in practice in schools<sup>43,44,45,46</sup>.

The school acknowledges that oracy is fundamentally at the heart of Early Years Foundation Stage, and that teaching staff have a unique set of skills and experiences that enable them to support spoken language development. Moreover, research shows that schools can harness these skills and expertise to share learning and promote oral language development across all year groups<sup>47</sup>.

The Bannerman Road SSLiC Project has demonstrated that, while learning communities have been effective in improving teaching practice, these could yet be further enhanced with closely related professional development opportunities for staff to further share good practice and embed the learning and within teaching teams. This type of balanced approach to supporting continuing professional development is well-evidenced as being highly effective<sup>48</sup>. The challenge now will be to sustain this learning and progress going forwards to maximise positive impact for children's outcomes.

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42 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

43 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

44 Sharples, J.M. (2013). Evidence for the Frontline. London: Alliance for Useful Evidence.

45 Blasé, K.A. et al. (2012). Implementation science: Key concepts, themes, and evidence for practitioners in educational psychology. Handbook of Implementation Science for Psychology in Education. New York: Cambridge University Press; p13–66.

46 Lendrum A, and Humphrey, N. (2012). The importance of studying the implementation of interventions in school settings. Oxford Review of Education. 38(5): p635–652.

47 Education Endowment Foundation (2021) [EEF-Effective-Professional-Development-Guidance-Report.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 15th June 2023

48 Education Endowment Foundation (2023). Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years.

## Fairlawn Primary School

**Supporting professional development by providing opportunities for reflective conversations and sharing of practice in the area of language and communication**

### Research Team and Setting

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## Background

Fairlawn Primary School is located in the Montpelier area of Bristol. In the academic year 2022-2023, there were 157 on roll. The school caters for a significant number of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) (close to 40%) and children on pupil premium (close to 38%), both factors associated in research with marked language-learning needs<sup>49</sup>.

Low staffing has led to reduced opportunities for shadowing and peer-observations to underpin professional development within the school. Teaching staff and the school's Senior Leadership Team acknowledged that staff stress levels and workloads were high, adding to increasing pressures. Despite these challenges, staff reported they were keen to work together to create opportunities for shared learning and development and to drive forward the agenda of promoting spoken language through high-quality teaching. Guidance from the Education Endowment Foundation highlights the importance of building shared ownership when implementing new practices to improve the quality of education<sup>50</sup>.

School staff considered Maslow's hierarchy of needs to help them understand the pressures felt by the staff and to devise an achievable and reasonable development approach within the pressured context of the school<sup>51</sup>. Often, time pressures represent a key challenge in educational settings and a barrier to effective professional development<sup>52</sup>. Evidence shows that effective continuing professional development and learning is important for improving outcomes for pupils<sup>53</sup>. Through completion of the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit and discussions with Key Stage 1 teaching staff, it was identified that current teaching practice at Fairlawn Primary School did promote communication supporting classrooms and that this was recognised as a strength. However, staff acknowledged that opportunities for sharing and developing learning related to this were limited, and that language leadership and staff professional development and learning were areas that needed to

49 Law J., Todd L., Clark T., Mroz M., Carr J. (2013). Early Language Delays in the UK.

50 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

51 Maslow, A. H. (1943). *A theory of human motivation*. *Psychological Review*, 50 (4), 370-96.

52 Cordingley, P., Higgins, S., Greany, T., Buckler, N., Coles-Jordan, D., Crisp, B., Saunders, L., Coe, R. (2015). *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*. Teacher Development Trust.

53 Education Endowment Foundation (2021). [Effective Professional Development | EEF \(educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk\)](#) accessed 10th June 2023

be developed to support and maintain the quality of teaching practice. It was, therefore, decided that the Fairlawn SSLiC Project will focus on giving staff space to create a collective sounding board to share ideas and reflect on learning and areas for development.

## What was done?

### Providing opportunities for reflective conversations and sharing of practice

Firstly, a Communication Team was established between the Early Years Teacher and the Oracy Lead. The aim of the Communication Team was to lead the SSLiC Project within Fairlawn Primary School and maintain overview of the activity and progress of school staff with regard to increasing and promoting oracy across the school. Leadership plays a central role in improving education practices in schools<sup>54</sup>, and staff at Fairlawn Primary recognised that implementation of a new project is a complex process that requires leadership at different levels of the school; that is, dedicated but distributed leadership.

The Communication Team identified that the introduction of a new meeting or structure was not feasible within the confines of the busy school timetable. Instead, it was decided that specific time during the weekly staff meeting would be dedicated to enable Early Years staff to share their reflections and learning from their own teaching practice with the aim of increasing spoken language in the classroom. This meant that, nearly every week all members of staff, not just within the Key Stage 1, could have the opportunity to share and reflect with colleagues about strategies they use to support children's spoken language. During each meeting, the ideas shared were collated by a member of the Communication Team and shared in the staff room via an engaging visual display to inspire all staff to try new techniques that have been tried and practised by colleagues to improve the way they interact with children to improve their spoken language.

Due to the time and staffing restrictions in school limiting the availability of staff to be released to observe each other's practice, the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)<sup>55</sup> was used in a different way to its intended purpose. Each Early Years and Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 member of staff used the Language Learning Interactions domain of the CSCOT to rate their own teaching practice. The Communication Team collated these ratings across the staff group and identified patterns of strength and areas for development across the team. These were then shared at subsequent staff meetings to allow staff time and space to reflect on the techniques used and the areas that could be improved.

### Developing school structures and policies to further support ongoing professional development

Based on the work undertaken above, an Oracy Policy was created for the whole school. The Oracy Policy details the school's philosophy of language learning, a factor that has been demonstrated widely in research and educational guidance to strengthen a setting's universal language provision (that is, provision of support for all children)<sup>56</sup>. The Communication Team believe that the Oracy Policy will influence the choices that school staff make in how they create language learning opportunities and interact with the children through their teaching. Research suggests that a shared philosophy of language learning can support Communication Teams to take a principled approach to creating a clear vision for change and improve teaching standards in schools<sup>57</sup>. The underlying principle of Fairlawn School's Oracy Policy is:

*“As adults, we are one of the greatest resources in helping support and develop children's communication. By supporting one another we are supporting our pupils' progress.”*

54 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

55 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/classroom-supporting-tool/>. Accessed 5th June 2023

56 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classroom Environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44.

57 Kotter, J.P. (2012). *Leading Change*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Mass.

Within the school's Oracy Policy is the requirement for a long-term commitment to sustained opportunities for staff development through peer learning and reflection<sup>58</sup>. It specifies that the school will continue to use time in regular staff meetings to share best practice in the area of language and communication, setting clear structures of support and ongoing continuing professional development and learning. As part of their ongoing work, the Communication Team will also continue to gather evidence on staff perspectives on the value and benefit of these professional development activities for ensuring high-quality teaching practice in the school<sup>59,60</sup>.

## What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

The main finding of the Fairlawn SSLiC Project was the development of a structured approach to peer-learning which was embedded in the routine running of the school, enabling greater access to the shared reflective space than had originally been planned. This type of approach is strongly supported by a wealth of research, which advocates for the importance of a move away from traditional models of professional development, which rely on formal course and training events, towards more bespoke, individually focussed, school and practitioner-led approaches to continuing professional development and learning<sup>61,62,63</sup>. Successful approaches include key elements, such as, observational learning and peer-to-peer feedback to bring about positive change to teaching practice and to ensure maximisation of spoken language is embedded into school culture<sup>64,65</sup>.

In an effort to evaluate their approach, the Communication Team conducted semi-structured interviews with staff to explore insights into how staff were feeling about their practice with regard to using more language learning interaction techniques to promote children's spoken language, what they felt was working well and what the challenges were. Overall, staff fed back that they felt this opportunity to share with and learn from each other's practice was very valuable and something they wanted to maintain and continue as part of regular staff meetings. Powerful quotes from staff included: "*sharing our practice is a crucial part of improving how we support communication in our classrooms.*" and "*trying new things and reflecting regularly can, and should, become a habit.*" Dynamic approaches to professional development such as interactive learning, meaningful discussion and reflection are well-evidenced, critical elements of successful implementation of high-quality practice in schools<sup>66,67</sup>.

In addition, the Communication Team have used the forum of a staff meeting to provide specific professional development opportunities in an area requested by teaching staff as needing further support: how to use the communication tool Widgit<sup>68</sup>. Experienced members of staff in the use of Widgit demonstrated potential uses of the tool and how to navigate the software. Staff were then given time to explore and create symbols for a lesson the following day which was later shared with one another in a subsequent staff meeting.

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- 58 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023
- 59 Knight, P., & Trowler, P. (2001). Departmental leadership in higher education. McGraw-Hill Education, UK
- 60 Harland, J., & Kinder, K. (1997). Teachers' continuing professional development: Framing a model of outcomes. *British Journal of In-Service Education*, 23(1), 71-84.
- 61 Ezell, H.K., & Justice, L.M. (2000). Increasing print focus of adult-child shared book reading through observational learning. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 12(3), 299-311. 132
- 62 Knight, P., & Trowler, P. (2001). Departmental leadership in higher education. McGraw-Hill Education, UK
- 63 Harland, J., & Kinder, K. (1997). Teachers' continuing professional development: Framing a model of outcomes. *British Journal of In-Service Education*, 23(1), 71-84.
- 64 Myers, D.M., Simonsen, B., & Sugai, G. (2011). Increasing teachers' use of praise with a response-to-intervention approach. *Education and Treatment of Children*, 34(1), 35-59. 133
- 65 Coddling, R.S., Feinberg, A.B., Dunn, E.K., & pace, G.M. (2005). Effects of immediate performance feedback on implementation of behaviour support plans. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 38(2), 205-219
- 66 Powell, B. et al. (2015). A refined compilation of implementation strategies: results from the Expert Recommendations for Implementing Change (ERIC) project. *Implementation Science*. 2015; 10: p1-14
- 67 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023
- 68 Widgit Online (2023). [Widgit Online](#) accessed 14/06/2023

## Key learning

Through the SSLiC Project, Fairlawn School have transitioned to a dynamic, school-wide system of continuing professional development, with key learning and principles which will continue to be shared among staff and throughout the school including with new members of staff joining the school. This will help to ensure a minimum standard of high-quality teaching guided by an Oracy Policy, which advocates a whole-school philosophy of supporting spoken language in the classroom. This critical whole-school approach will ensure that these principles and learning are embedded into daily teaching practice<sup>69</sup>. Maintaining opportunities for staff to give and receive feedback on their teaching practice and the strategies used to maximise spoken language will underpin the new approach to supporting high quality, sustained, continuing professional development at Fairlawn School<sup>70,71,72,73</sup>.

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69 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

70 Cordingley, P. et al. (2015). *Developing Great Teaching: Lessons from the international reviews into effective professional development*. London: Teacher Development Trust.

71 Dyssegaard C.B. et al. (2017). *A systematic review of what enables or hinders the use of research-based knowledge in primary and lower secondary school*. Copenhagen: Aarhus University, Danish Clearinghouse for Educational Research.

72 Albers, B and Pattuwage, L. (2017). *Implementation in Education: Findings from a Scoping Review*. Melbourne: Evidence for Learning.

73 Kennedy M. (2016). How does professional development improve learning? *Review of Educational Research*. 86(4): p945–980

## The Dolphin School

**Supporting children's spoken language by increasing high-quality language learning interactions in the classroom**

### Research Team and Setting

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Dr Ioanna Bakopoulou, SSLiC Programme Lead,  
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## Background

The Dolphin School is located in the vibrant city centre of Bristol, in an area of social disadvantage. The school has a diverse community of children from different cultures and backgrounds, many of whom have not yet met age related milestones in communication and language when joining the school. Over 42% of children receive free school meals and 46% are in receipt of Pupil Premium. Almost 68% of children at the school have English as an Additional Language (EAL) and nearly 20% are recognised as having special educational needs and disability (SEND). 3.6% of the school population is supported by an Education, Health and Care Plan. Evidence suggests that key factors such as social disadvantage and additional educational needs have critical implications for oral language development<sup>74,75,76</sup>.

The Senior Leadership Team were concerned that, on starting at the school, a significant number of children were typically not using full sentences, asking or answering questions and using limited vocabulary. Language difficulties present a significant concern because of their impact on education<sup>77,78,79</sup>, wellbeing<sup>80,81,82</sup> and later life outcomes<sup>83,84</sup> and is recognised as the most prevalent area of need among primary aged children in the UK<sup>85</sup>.

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- 74 Meschi, E., Mickelwright, J., Vignoles, A., & Lindsay, G. (2012). The transition between categories of special educational needs of pupils with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as they progress through the education system. London: DfE.
- 75 Locke, A., Ginsborg, J., & Peers, I. (2002). Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 37(1), 3-15.
- 76 Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey, P., Gascoigne M., Soloff, N., Radford, J., Band, S., and Fitzgerald, L. (2000) Provision for children's speech and language needs in England and Wales: facilitating communication between education and health services. DfES research report 239
- 77 Bishop, D.V., & Snowling, M. J. (2004). Developmental dyslexia and specific language impairment: same or different? *Psychological Bulletin*, 130(6), 858-886.
- 78 Dockrell, J.E., Ricketts, J., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Exploring writing products in students with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders. *Learning and instruction*, 32, 81-90.
- 79 Stothard, S.E., Snowling, M.J., Bishop, D.V., Chipchase, B.B., & Kaplan, C.A. (1998). Language impaired pre-schoolers: a follow-up into adolescence. *Journal of Speech Language and Hearing Research*, 41(2), 407-418
- 80 Lindsay, G., & Dockrell, J.E. (2000). The behaviour and self-esteem of children with specific speech and language difficulties. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 70(4), 583-601.
- 81 Lindsay, G., & Dockrell, J.E. (2012). The relationship between speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD). Department for Education, DFE-RR247-BCRP6.
- 82 Bakopoulou, I., & Dockrell, J.E. (2016). The role of social cognition and prosocial behaviour in relation to the socio-emotional functioning of primary aged children with specific language impairment. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 49-50, 354-370.
- 83 Young, A. R., Beitchman, J. H., Johnson, C., Douglas, L., Atkinson, L., Escobar, M., et al. (2002). Young adult academic outcomes in a longitudinal sample of early identified language impaired and control children. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 43(5), 635-645.
- 84 All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and language Difficulties. (2017). APPG on Speech and Language Difficulties inquiry report v25 accessed 15th June 2023
- 85 Department for Education (2017). Statistical First Release: Special Educational Needs in England. DfE, London



## What was done?

Increasing high-quality language learning interactions in the classroom

Prior to the SSLiC Project, previous work by the school, led by Senior Leaders and the EYFS Lead, had identified, and addressed improvements to the use of language learning interaction techniques in the school's early years provision. However, the Senior Leadership Team had recognised that these techniques, which are known to enhance children's oral language<sup>88,89,90,91</sup>, were not yet being consistently used or observed within the teaching practice in Key Stage 1, an inconsistency in practice that is also identified in research<sup>92,93</sup>.

Oracy was highlighted as a priority for the school for the academic year 2022/23 and all teachers were given a focus to build on children's language in lessons. The inclusion of better communication and oral language outcomes can serve as a critical part of any School Improvement Plan and a core element of strong language leadership in schools<sup>86,87</sup>. The Dolphin School have identified support for oral language development as one of their three key areas for improvement within their School Improvement Plan. Their clear and coherent aim for school-wide oracy development within the School Improvement Plan is:

*To develop children's oracy, cultivating successful discussion, inspiring speech and effective communication in and beyond lessons so that children are confident speakers and can adapt to different audiences.*

Keen to make use of the supportive framework and practical strategies offered by the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)<sup>94</sup>, the Senior Leadership Team used the tool to observe teaching practice in Key Stage 1, focussing specifically on two Language Learning Interactions to assess teachers' use of pausing and extending language. These are key strategies known to provide high-quality verbal input<sup>95</sup> and support faster language acquisition, but are also used less frequently in daily teaching practice<sup>96</sup>. These observations of each of the Key Stage 1 classes were undertaken as part of wider teaching observations to inform progress against the School Improvement Plan. The Senior Leadership Team provided teachers with feedback on strengths and areas for development within their teaching practice, with a particular focus on the two identified Language Learning Interactions.

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- 86 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classroom Environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44.
- 87 Kotter, JP. (2012). *Leading Change*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press
- 88 Chapman, R. (2000). Children's language learning: An interactionist perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41, 33-54.
- 89 Girolametto, L., & Weitzman, E. (2002). Responsiveness of child care providers in interactions with toddlers and pre-schoolers. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 33, 268-281.
- 90 Hoff, E. (2003). The specificity of environmental influence: Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. *Child Development*, 74, 1368-1378.
- 91 Law, J., Charlton, J., Dockrell, J.E., Gascoigne, M., McKean, C., & Theakston, A. (2017). *Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantage backgrounds*. Institute of Education, London.
- 92 Dockrell, J. E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 31(3), 271-286. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659015572165>
- 93 Law, J., Tulip, J., Stringer, H., Cockerill, M., & Dockrell, J. (2019). Teachers observing classroom communication: An application of the Communicating Classroom Observation Tool for children aged 4-7 years. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 35(3), 203-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659019869792>
- 94 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). *Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool*. Freely available from: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/classroom-supporting-tool/>
- 95 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classroom Environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44.
- 96 Girolametto, L., Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2003). Training day care staff to facilitate children's language. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 12(3), 299-311.



At these meetings, actions were identified, and class teachers were asked to work on these actions in their daily everyday practice. Teachers' progress was reviewed at regular staff meetings, with an opportunity for staff to reflect on areas for development and progress made at using a wider range of language learning interaction techniques.

## What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

Repeat observations undertaken by the Senior Leadership Team of teaching practice in Key Stage 1 showed that teachers were proactively using 'pausing'<sup>97,98</sup> and 'extending'<sup>99,100</sup> more often in their teaching practice when interacting with children. Key to the increased use of Language Learning Interactions in the classroom is the enhanced understanding of teaching staff of the nature of interaction techniques in order for them to be able to consciously and effectively implement them in their practice.

Going forward, the school plan to support teachers' continuing professional development and learning by observing teaching practice and identifying areas of support. This approach will be led and guided by the Senior Leadership Team using evidence-based observation tools, including the CSCOT, to support a process of professional development.

## Key Learning

The key learning of the Dolphin SSLiC Project was a recognition of the importance of raising the profile of using and promoting spoken language in the classroom. The collective understanding of this within all teaching staff is important because it underpins teachers' conscious prioritization of the use of Language Learning Interactions to increase spoken language in the classroom. Staff can do this by drawing on evidence-based tools, such as the CSCOT, which is acknowledged by teachers to be a highly useful and practical tool for fostering early language skills<sup>101</sup>.

In the future, the school plan to build observations of these specific skills into the Learning Walks that are routinely made by Middle and Senior Leaders. This whole-school approach is part of a newly created school ethos of oral language promotion that aims, through sustained leadership, to positively influence teaching practice across the school<sup>102,103,104</sup>.

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- 97 Dockrell, J. E., Stuart, M., & King, D. (2010). Supporting early oral language skills for English language learners in inner city preschool provision. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(4), 497-515.
- 98 Carlo, M. S., August, D., McLaughlin, B., Snow, C. E., Dressler, C., Lippman, D. N., White, C. E. (2004). Closing the gap: Addressing the vocabulary needs of English-language learners in bilingual and mainstream classrooms. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 39, 188-215.
- 99 Cabell, S.Q., Justice, L.M., Piasta, S.B., Cumenton, S.M., Wiggins, A., Turnbull, K.P., & Petscher, Y. (2011). The impact of teacher responsivity education on preschoolers' language and literacy skills. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 20(4), 315-330.
- 100 McCathren, R. B., Yoder, P. J., & Warren, S. F. (1995). The role of directives in early language intervention. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 19, 91-101.
- 101 Law, J., Tulip, J., Stringer, H., Cockerill, M., & Dockrell, J. (2019). Teachers observing classroom communication: An application of the Communicating Supporting Classroom Observation Tool for children aged 4-7 years. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 35(3), 203-220. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659019869792>
- 102 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) *EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf* (d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net) accessed 8th June 2023
- 103 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating Language-Rich Preschool Classroom Environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44.
- 104 Kotter, JP. (2012). *Leading Change*. Boston, Mass: Harvard Business Review Press



## Barton Hill Academy

### Creating systems of peer mentoring as a way of supporting teacher talk in Nursery, EYFS and Key Stage 1 classrooms

#### Research Team and Setting

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Dr Ioanna Bakopoulou, SSLiC Programme Lead, School of Education, University of Bristol



## Background

Barton Hill Academy is located east of central Bristol. The school has a diverse and complex community of 333 children with a very high number of children with English as an Additional language (EAL) (84%). The school also caters for children with a very high level of additional needs, with 74% of children in receipt of pupil premium, and 22% presenting with recognised special educational needs and disability (SEND). Poorer language skills can be associated with family socio-economic background<sup>105,106</sup> and are evidenced in children who do not speak the language of instruction<sup>107</sup>.

Barton Hill Academy have identified oracy as an integral part of their School Improvement Plan which was being developed at the time of the SSLiC Project. As a whole-school priority, this was an area of significant focus for development within the school and had been identified by Ofsted as a particular area of focus for Year Reception in the last Ofsted inspection. The school had identified that they were not currently monitoring the quality of language learning interactions between adults and children, and, although school staff felt language learning interaction techniques were being used in class, there was no evidence in everyday practice to show this. Teaching staff at Barton Hill Academy acknowledged that the use of language learning interactions is a foundational element of high-quality teaching, upon which a strong communication environment and opportunities for language learning can be developed. Research shows that these are critical areas which, if targeted and supported through high quality teaching, can help to prepare children for more advanced language demands in their learning later in their academic careers<sup>108,109</sup>. This was, therefore, the chosen focus for the SSLiC Project in Barton Hill Academy.

105 Ginsborg, J. (2006). The effects of socio-economic status on children's language acquisition and use. In J.Clegg (Eds). *Language and social disadvantage: Theory into practice* (pp. 9-27). Wiley-Blackwell.

106 Hart, B., & Risley, T., R. (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30 million word gap by age 3. *American Educator*, 27(1), 4-9.

107 Hoff, E. (2013). Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low SES and language minority homes: Implications for closing achievement gaps. *Developmental Psychology*, 49(1), 4-14.

108 Dockrell, J.E., Lindsay, G., Roulstone, S., & Law, J. (2014). Supporting children with speech, language and communication needs: An overview of the results of the Better Communication Research Programme. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders*, 49, 43-57.

109 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 31(3), 271-286.

Through the support and framework of the evidence based SSLiC Programme, the school sought to identify existing strengths within the teaching team, as well as areas for improvement and development. As their first step in this process, the school completed the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit, which identified areas of strength in the area of identifying and supporting Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN). Through the audit, the school also identified key areas for development with regard to the domains of Language Leadership and the creation of Communication Supporting Classrooms. This focus on improving spoken language in the classroom was also driven by whole staff training from the Voice 21 project<sup>110</sup> which took place in 2021/22 academic year. Finally, the need to increase support for spoken language in the classrooms was acknowledged in the context of changes to the teaching structures in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and Key Stage 1 provision of the school. These critical changes meant that new staff required support and upskilling with language support and to further develop their use of high-quality language learning interaction techniques. These are a critical element of communication supporting classrooms because they ensure the quality of adult-child interactions and the ways in which language is used in the classroom in order to promote language learning.

## What was done?

It was decided that the SSLiC Project within the school will focus on the Nursery, EYFS and Key Stage 1 teaching groups with a longer-term view to roll the acquired learning, knowledge and effective approaches out to Key Stage 2. A Communication Team was created that included Martha McNicholas (Reception Teacher, Oracy and EAL Lead) and Viora Rexha (Nursery teacher and Early Years Lead) to drive forward this work and oversee the progress, process and development within the school.

The Barton Hill SSLiC Project aimed to work on the following area:

### Creating systems of peer mentoring as a way of supporting professional development

The Communication Team aimed to support the different teaching teams to be confident in the use of evidenced-based language learning interaction techniques in everyday teaching practice. They felt it was important to use the SSLiC Project as a professional development activity for staff, rather than a directive approach of top-down observation of practice and target setting. Substantial research shows that a coherent and collaborative approach to professional development can support effective change<sup>111</sup>, and, so, it was agreed that teaching staff will be consulted in that process. It was also agreed that a mentoring system of support buddies will be created to enable teaching staff to observe one another and engage in reflective conversations about techniques used. Peer-support is a key aspect of effective professional development and is well-evidenced in the literature as an important element of successful approaches to improving the quality of teaching in schools<sup>112</sup>.

The aims of this collaborative staff approach were to maximise buy-in to the project from staff for participation and engagement in the activities and to create new opportunities for peer learning, support and professional development of all staff. Crucially, collaboration between staff aimed to maximise and grow capacity for staff understanding of the role of the adult in supporting language learning.

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110 [Voice 21 | Oracy | United Kingdom](#) accessed 5th June 2023

111 Kotter, J.P. (2012). *Leading Change*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Mass.

112 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

In the Autumn Term, the teaching teams, with the support of the Communication Team, used the Language Learning Interactions dimension of the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)<sup>113</sup> to observe each of the Nursery, Reception and Key Stage 1 classrooms with one of the teachers. The peer-learning element of this activity was further enhanced by the opportunity for teachers to take part in the observation of each other alongside a member of the Communication Team, so that they could learn from each other's practice. Strengths and areas for development were jointly identified through discussion with the Communication Team and the buddy pairs, and then teachers were given opportunities to practise skills learnt and work on their targets. Observations using the CSCOT were repeated in the Spring term. The outcomes of this second observation, were discussed again with the Communication Team and buddy pairs to enable further opportunities for shared learning and reflection. This approach is in line with the concept of professional development as an ongoing process, rather than a one-off event<sup>114</sup>.

## What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

The Barton Hill SSLiC Project identified the need for stronger systems of professional development to ensure teaching staff in Nursery, EYFS and Key Stage 1 understand and use a wider range of high-quality interaction techniques in their everyday practice. Communication supportive classroom environments involve adults who deliberately and consciously use language stimulating strategies when interacting with children<sup>115,116,117,118</sup>.

Through the reflective discussions with the Communication Team and the buddy groups, staff reported that they had increased opportunities for reflection on their practice and this was something they enjoyed and wanted to maintain. Staff were able to role model attitudes and behaviour to increasing their use of Language Learning Interactions with active support and guidance from the Communication Team.

Importantly, teaching staff had new opportunities for peer observations, which supported the development of positive working relationships, shown to be a fundamental element of effective continuing professional development and learning<sup>119</sup>.

## Key learning

The key learning from the Barton Hill SSLiC Project was the need to plan for effective systems of professional development across the school. For practitioners at Barton Hill Academy, this translated into decisions that secured meaningful engagement from staff, and, therefore, tangible impact for the children through enhanced, high-quality teaching with greater use of LLIs in each class. Recently, the UK Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group<sup>120</sup> has supported calls to embed explicit teaching of oral language across the curriculum and has argued that there is a need to prioritise oral language in education, a call also supported in educational research<sup>121</sup>.

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- 113 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: <https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/classroom-supporting-tool/>. Accessed 5th June 2023
- 114 Markussen-Brown, J., Juhl, C. B., Piasta, S. B., Bleses, D., Højen, A., & Justice, L. M. (2017). The effects of language-and literacy-focused professional development on early educators and children: A best-evidence meta-analysis. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 38, 97-115.
- 115 Chapman, R. (2000). Children's language learning: An interactionist perspective. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 41, 33-54.
- 116 Girolametto, L., & Weitzman, E. (2002). Responsiveness of child care providers in interactions with toddlers and pre-schoolers. *Language, Speech and Hearing Services in Schools*, 33, 268-281.
- 117 Hoff, E. (2003). The specificity of environmental influence: Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. *Child Development*, 74, 1368-1378.
- 118 Law, J., Charlton, J., Dockrell, J.E., Gascoigne, M., McKean, C., & Theakston, A. (2017). *Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantage backgrounds*. Institute of Education, London.
- 119 Education Endowment Foundation (2021). *Effective Professional Development | EEF* ([educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk](https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk)) accessed 10th June 2023
- 120 Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group (2021). *Speak for change: Final report and recommendations from the Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group Inquiry*.
- 121 Kaldahl, A.G. (2019). Assessing oracy: Chasing the teachers' unspoken oracy construct across disciplines in the landscape between policy and freedom. *L1-Educational Studies in Language and Literature*, 19, 1-24.

Importantly, the Communication Team identified that the support and engagement from the Senior Leadership Team was critical in order to successfully support teaching staff and to drive the project forward. Research shows that strong and clear leadership is critically important for the successful implementation of change leading to increased quality of teaching in schools through the maximisation of support for oral language use in the classrooms<sup>122</sup>. Proactive collaboration between the Communication Team and the Senior Leadership Team in this process helped to ensure that policies and practices are cascaded through the school and the wider school community<sup>123</sup>.

This key learning from this year's SSLiC Project will be embedded into school teaching practice through further professional development and learning opportunities on the importance of language interactions in the classroom and by reminding staff of the importance of these interactions during continuous provision. The school plan to continue with peer observations and extend this approach to Key Stage 2 staff during the next academic year. The challenge now remains to consolidate and sustain the learning from this year's project in order to successfully scale up its implementation in daily high quality teaching practice across the school.

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122 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) [EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf \(d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net\)](#) accessed 8th June 2023

123 Bakopoulou, I., & Vivash, J. (2020). Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) Handbook for SSLiC Programme.

## Merchant's Academy

### Developing a Communication Team and a mission statement to guide improvements in language provision at a whole school level

#### Research Team and Setting

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## Background

Merchants' Academy Primary School is located in south Bristol. The school has a diverse community of 379 children including 16% of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and 62% of children on receipt of Pupil Premium. 20% of the children in the school have identified special educational needs and disability (SEND). In addition, the school currently experiences particularly high rates of persistent absence (44%). Evidence indicates a strong link between children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and poorer language outcomes in early childhood, impacting significantly on education<sup>124,125</sup>. Research also indicates that teachers have varying levels of confidence and experience when it comes to identifying communication difficulties, particularly with regard to EAL, which may affect accuracy of identifying speech and language needs in this group of children as well as supporting them<sup>126,127</sup>.

Teaching staff were concerned about the particularly high level of pupil absence and the impact of this on opportunities for language development in the classrooms, as evidenced during the Covid-19 pandemic<sup>128</sup>, particularly in the early years<sup>129,130</sup>. In order to address these concerns, they completed the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit, which identified areas of strength in the area of Language Leadership and Staff Professional Development and Learning. However, staff felt that these strengths were not part of a coherent, strategic approach to support language learning for all children. Therefore, it was decided that Language Leadership would be the key focus of their SSLiC Project with the key aim being to establish a core Communication Team that can provide strategic leadership for improvement in the school by championing the importance of communication across the school<sup>131,132</sup>.

124 Law, J., Todd, L., Clark, J., Mroz, M., & Carr, J. (2013). Early language delays in the UK. Save the Children, London

125 Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey, P., Gascoigne M., Soloff, N., Radford, J., Band, S., and Fitzgerald, L. (2000). Provision for children's speech and language needs in England and Wales: facilitating communication between education and health services. DfES research report 23

126 Dockrell, J.E., Howell, P., Leung, D., & Fugard, A.J. (2017). Children with speech, language and communication needs in England: Challenges in practice. *Frontiers in Education*, 2, 35.

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## What was done?

A Communication Team was created including Lisa Bannister (Assistant Vice Principle), Nicky Burbridge (SENDCo) and Charlotte Houseman (Early Years Foundation Stage Lead). School leaders have a central role to play in promoting and improving teaching practice through high-quality implementation approaches<sup>133,134</sup>. Research shows there are several ways that school leaders can drive improvement, including through active support and management of planning, resourcing, delivery, monitoring and refinement of the implementation process<sup>135</sup>. Strong leadership of implementation, such as through a Communication Team, can serve to create an organisational environment that is conducive to change and to bring about the development of a culture of collective learning and development within the staff group<sup>136</sup>. Such cultures create a learning environment in which teaching staff feel safe and confident to try new practices, share ideas and learn from each other with a collaboratively developed sense of enthusiasm, trust and openness to change<sup>137</sup>.

## Creating a philosophy of language learning

The Merchants Academy Communication Team created a philosophy of language learning as a mission statement which they believe will influence the choices of school staff in how they structure the physical environment of the classroom, design language learning opportunities and interact with the children in the classroom on a day-to-day basis<sup>138</sup>. Research shows that a shared philosophy of language learning can support Communication Teams in taking a principled approach to developing and establishing environments which are supportive of communication. They also help to create a clearly defined vision for change, which can be embedded into school policy and shared throughout the school community.

The Merchant's Academy mission statement is:

*At Merchants' Academy Primary, we know that children who experience language difficulties face many barriers: difficulties acquiring literacy skills, numeracy skills, difficulties with working memory and executive functioning skills and poorer performance in national assessments up to KS4. Linked to this, is a higher incidence in social, emotional and mental health issues and therefore issues regarding positive behaviour for learning.*

*Our typical cohort of children with SEND will have SLCN as their primary need. Therefore, ensuring that all our children, but especially those who experience speech, language and communication difficulties, have access to high-quality models, interactions and learning environments is of the utmost importance. Creating effective language-learning environments within school will therefore raise attainment, which will promote positive academic outcomes, which is linked to positive social and emotional wellbeing. We believe this is a matter of social justice for our cohort of children aged 3-18.*

133 Moullin, J.C., Ehrhart, M.G., Aarons G (2017). The Role of Leadership in Organizational Implementation and Sustainment in Service Agencies. *Research on Social Work Practice*. 28 (5), 558–567. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049731517718361>

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136 Ehrhart, M.G. et al. (2015) Validating the Implementation Climate Scale (ICS) in child welfare organizations. *Child Abuse & Neglect*. 53, p17–26.

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138 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating language-rich preschool classroom environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44



*In order to provide the best language-learning opportunities for our children we will:*

- *Work closely with other professionals, including Speech and Language therapists and Bristol University to ensure our staff and children are supported by experts in their field.*
- *Provide a universal training package for all staff to ensure all teaching assistants, teachers and tutors are fully equipped to support children's language development.*
- *Work closely with our parents to support them to better support their children's language development.*
- *Use the latest research to inform interventions, planning and resourcing.*

## **What were the findings and outcomes of the project?**

A Communication Team was created to champion communication within and throughout the school. The support from the Senior Leadership Team gave the Communication Team authenticity and recognition within the school to lead in the promotion of the importance of spoken language and the role of the adult in support language learning. This has provided the school with a core team who can begin to build on improving opportunities for language learning and to develop a culture of communication<sup>139</sup>.

To cement the importance of spoken language across the school, and to provide a secure foundation from which future initiatives could be driven forward, the Communication Team developed a clear mission statement that could be built into school policies and shared with teaching and support staff, as well as with parents and students to effect lasting change in teaching practice<sup>140</sup>.

## **Key learning**

Merchant's Academy have recognised and embraced the importance of oral language in the classrooms as a priority area for investment and development in the school in order to improve education and life chances for their students. They have taken positive action on this by creating a Communication Team committed to championing the importance of spoken language for educational, social, mental health and long term outcomes. This core team will be able to drive forward future innovations and implementation of developments, including continuing professional development and learning opportunities for teaching staff. This step towards a clearly defined language leadership system is recognised by the Education Endowment Foundation as being critical for the success of new practice and policies to improve teaching practice in schools through staff development<sup>141</sup>.

The Communication Team's next steps will be to work towards identifying communication priorities which can be included in the School Improvement Plan using their developed mission statement to guide this work<sup>142</sup>.

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139 Kotter, JP. (2012). *Leading Change*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, Mass

140 Justice, L.M. (2004). Creating language-rich preschool classroom environments. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 36-44

141 Education Endowment Foundation (2019) *EEF Implementation Guidance Report 2019.pdf* (d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net) accessed 8th June 2023

142 Bakopoulou, I., & Vivash, J. (2019). *Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) Handbook for SSLiC Programme*.

# Conclusion

The participants in the SSLiC programme implemented a variety of changes in their schools at pupil, practitioner and school levels. At the pupil level, initiatives included a more tailored and individualised support of identified SLCN. At practitioner and school levels, some of the participants used the SSLiC programme as a springboard in their school to enhance staff understanding of language development, further support professional development and effect systemic setting and school changes in assessing and identifying language needs as well as working collaboratively with external professionals. Ultimately, all participants reported that they used the SSLiC programme to raise the profile of the importance of oral language for children's educational attainment. One of the aims of the SSLiC programme is to continue to support developments in practice after the programme has ended through ongoing review of the self-assessment audit and action plan. All of the schools in the SSLiC programme have continued with their focus on the projects described in this publication and, in doing so, are ensuring that their work contributes to the wider evidence base for supporting pupils with SLCN.



Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) is a knowledge exchange programme that aims to support the development of practice in schools and to expand the evidence base to ultimately improve outcomes for children with speech, language and communication needs.



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