

Case Study

Setting Name	Tower Hill Primary School
Lead name and email address	Nicola Ward – n.ward@towerhill.hants.sch.uk Christine Cartlidge – c.cartlidge@towerhill.hants.sch.uk
Audit Focus Area	Communication
Title of Research Project	Developing a communication friendly environment for all pupils
Action Research Question	How can we create a sense of belonging through the use of communication tools?
Brief description of your action research project	As a school, we have been exploring different ways to create a more inclusive environment for all pupils. This project aims to explore the implementation and development of targeted programmes/opportunities to develop communication through non-verbal and visual stimuli to build on language and communication strategies within the school environment. To further develop the communication for all pupils in school, we intend to: • Carry out a whole school Oracy audit and implement the findings • Participate in a whole school INSET day based around a 'Communication Friendly Classroom' • Introduce and embed Widgit across the school to ensure a consistent approach for all • Train identified staff with Makaton Level 2 (following on from Makaton Level 1 last academic year) • Launch and embed Makaton Ambassadors across the school • Embed the use of Makaton across the school with all stakeholders through Ambassadors, parental workshops, assemblies etc • Ensure appropriate CPD is available to all staff (both external and internal)
Share one aspect of the project in more detail	
Person/situation background	All children and staff at Tower Hill Primary School
What happened?	The first thing that we did was to carry out an Oracy Audit in the Autumn Term across the school to find out what we were doing well and where we could improve our practice. From this audit, we were able to develop actions that could be implemented across the Spring and Summer Terms. This has been reviewed regularly by DHT and SENCO and relevant information/training has been delivered. (see attached Oracy audit)

Training was identified for staff including:

- Drama and Oracy training delivered by HIAS.
- Makaton Level 2 training.
- PDMs on the use and implementation of Widgit.
- Communication Friendly Classroom.

All class teachers have participated in drama and oracy training with HIAS where they received a wealth of ideas and strategies that could be implemented within their teaching. These ranged from the use of sentence stems for structuring talk, to the different groupings to support talk, the use of scaffolds, story whoosh and 10 second objects as well as many others.

As a staff we have also focused on the difference between Learning to Talk and Learning through Talk. We are aware that children need to develop the skills to participate in talk and also to then be able to use these skills to negotiate, problem solve, debate etc. We have begun to look at Talk Guidelines as a way of teaching children the 'rules' for talk. This is something that we are beginning to promote with children and intend to introduce more formally.

Our Reading Leader has also continued to deliver staff training on the Reader's Theatre approach to whole class reading to develop oral reading fluency.

A Staff Makaton Champion was chosen (Year 2 CT) who has appointed Makaton Ambassadors from across the school. Regular meetings are held where new signs are taught. These are then disseminated to the rest of the school (both staff and children) by the Ambassadors.

Makaton has become a regular part of singing assembly and all children are learning how to sign songs.

Opportunities to share information with all stakeholders have been maximised through the use of parent workshops, sharing information via the school website and promoting the use of Widgit and Makaton on the school newsletter.

All staff have had training in the use of Widgit and the importance of this consistent approach for children. We carried out an audit at the beginning of the academic year to see how Widgit was being used and repeated it in Summer 1 to see the impact of the training. This year, we have focused on familiarising staff with Widgit and working towards all classrooms being consistent with the use of symbols. This will be fully embedded for September. Widgit is also being used across the curriculum to support children with their learning.

All staff participated in training on 'The Communication Friendly Classroom' delivered by STAs in the Spring Term. We discussed that all Behaviour is Communication. We looked at the language that we use with children eg: instead of saying 'good or bad behaviour' we should perhaps be saying 'helpful or not helpful behaviour.' We discussed the use of sentence stems eg: 'I notice...' and 'I wonder...' and the importance of being consistent as adults when using these.

	In the Summer Term, the SENCo carried out a learning walk with a focus on Makaton and Widgit to see how this practise had been embedded into classroom routines and teaching.
What has changed/developed?	• Staff awareness and understanding of how to improve the school environment to make it more communication friendly has increased which is evident through planning, lesson delivery and interactions. • Classrooms are more consistently using Widgit for all agreed labels eg: draw labels, visual timetables, now and next boards. • Makaton is now being used by the vast majority of the school community with all children signing during assemblies to say Good Morning and children and staff feeling more confident when using Makaton for simple every day signs. • More oracy opportunities are being built into lessons to develop talk.
What impact has this had on the individual/the setting?	This consistent and focused approach has begun to have a significant impact on the school community: • Staff confidence has increased with the use of Widgit and Makaton and how to use these across the curriculum and the school day. • The increasingly consistent use of Widgit and Makaton has improved accessibility and inclusion across the school, enabling more pupils to understand routines, express themselves clearly and engage with their learning. • Teaching staff now demonstrate greater consistency and confidence in explicitly teaching talk which is more structured with a defined purpose. • Talk Guidelines have impacted on developing children's understanding of how to talk which is resulting in improved communication. • Reading fluency is improving due to the consistent approach of Readers Theatre in teaching reading fluency strategies. • Makaton is now recognised & included as one of the languages used in school. • Parents have commented that children are using Makaton more organically to interact with their children who use this as their main form of communication. • Summer Term observations showed Makaton being used in class to support with writing and retelling stories. • The addition of Widgit visuals is supporting independence in learning for children by reducing cognitive load. Recent Learning Walk observed how children were able to complete writing a sequence of sentences following the Widgit symbols provided in their books. Overall, this has contributed to improved pupil engagement, greater inclusion and a whole-school approach to developing communication as a fundamental skill for learning and well-being.

What has been learned for the whole setting community?	• Staff now have a clearer and more consistent understanding of learning to talk versus learning through talk which is leading to more deliberate teaching of talk skills particularly in the Early Years. Children are becoming more confident in participating in structured talk opportunities. • With the implementation of Widgit and Makaton across the whole school, children benefit from reduced cognitive load and a more predictable and accessible school environment. Practice is now moving from awareness to embedding with full consistency planned for September. • Implementation of Makaton & Widgit is promoting more independence for all children but is particularly evident in children with additional needs. • Adult responses are now becoming more consistent and supportive, helping children to feel understood and supported with reduced escalation and misunderstanding. • With the development of reading theatre techniques, children are increasingly confident when reading aloud and teachers feel confident to support and develop reading fluency. • Parents and Carers are better informed about strategies, particularly Makaton through the information shared on the HT Newsletters and the school website.
What is essential for other settings to know from this case study?	This is a long process and cannot be embedded overnight. Although we have made great progress towards our aim of Developing a Communication Friendly Environment for All, we know that we still need to work on embedding the different strategies and initiatives for them to become fully part of everyday practise. It is vital that all stakeholders are on board and involved. Everybody needs to understand why we are doing something and be fully committed so that these things do not become a 'bolt on' and later forgotten. Revisiting in PDMs/LSA meetings etc is vital. Make sure the children are fully involved – they are the best at driving something. Our Makaton Ambassadors are a driving force and will insist on meetings when teachers forget or become busy. Consistency is key. We feel that we are still quite near the beginning of our journey. We have some wonderful strategies and ideas and need to ensure that as we move forward into the new academic year and have new staff that we revisit these to ensure everybody knows the importance and the impact that they can have.