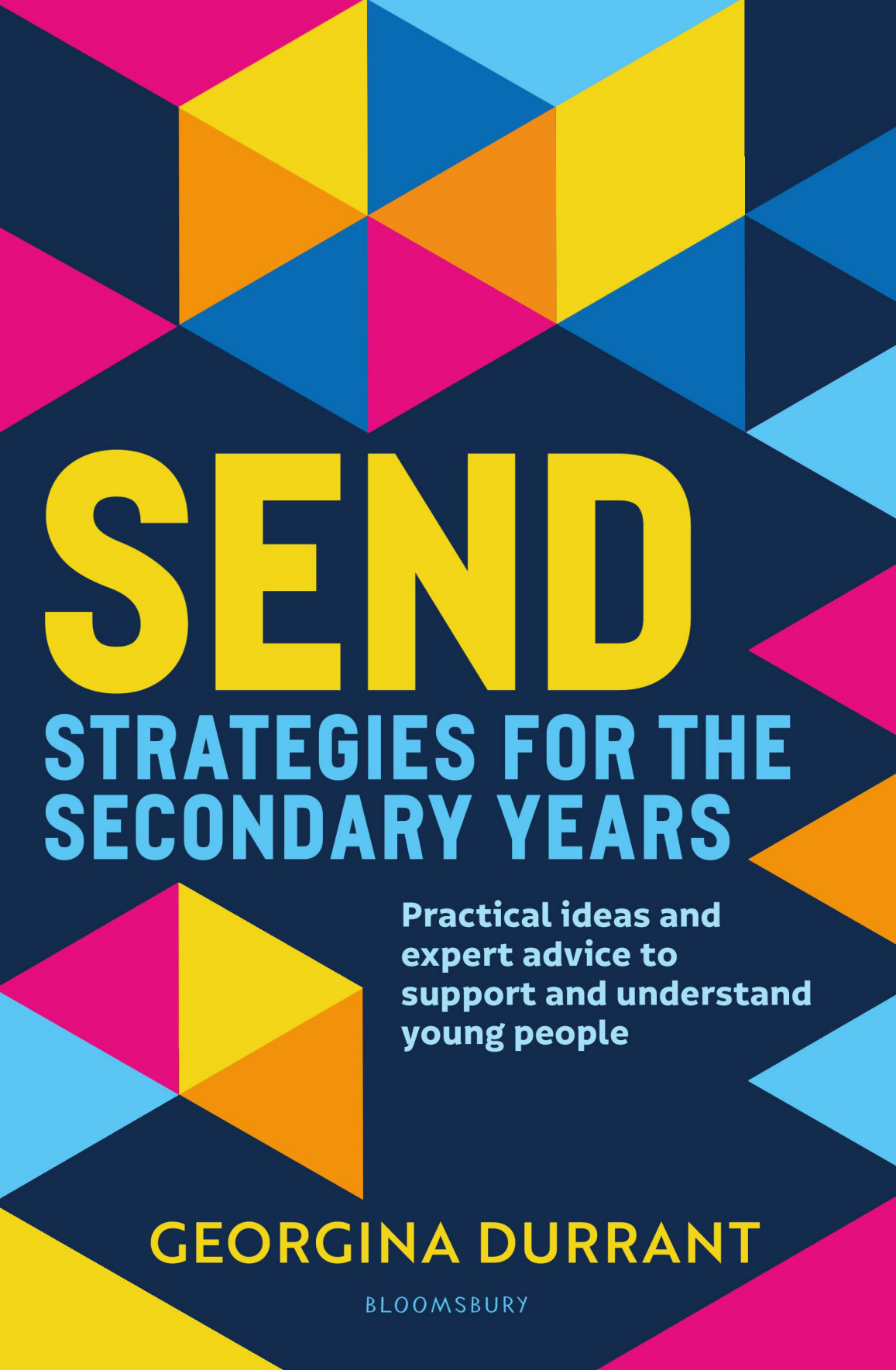

SEND
STRATEGIES FOR THE SECONDARY YEARS
Practical ideas and expert advice to support and understand young people
GEORGINA DURRANT
BLOOMSBURY

SEND

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SEND

STRATEGIES FOR THE SECONDARY YEARS

Practical ideas and expert advice to support and understand young people

GEORGINA DURRANT

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CHAPTER 1

SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

CASE STUDY



MADISON, AGED 17, WRITES ABOUT HER EXPERIENCES WITH SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS AS AN AUTISTIC STUDENT. SHE SHARES THE STRATEGIES THAT WERE USEFUL AND THOSE THAT WERE NOT SO HELPFUL WHILE AT SECONDARY SCHOOL.

Many people have speech, language and communication needs for many reasons. I am autistic and this is where my communication needs come from. Sometimes I can struggle to communicate how I am thinking and feeling. This does not mean I am stupid but just that sometimes it takes me longer to process what you are asking me and formulate the answer in my head

before I speak out loud. Occasionally, I may not be able to speak to you at all, but again, this doesn't mean I am not intelligent, not listening or ignoring you. Just that I am wondering if, when I do speak, I am going to say the right thing, be heard or gaslighted into thinking I am the problem, as usually happens.

I often find it really difficult to communicate with people I don't know or when they expect me to communicate in a neurotypical way and don't try to understand the way I think and speak. It is difficult for me to understand what you are saying, especially when I cannot pick up clues from your gestures and tone of voice.

I have an excellent vocabulary but often struggle to find the right words or put them together coherently in a way that you might understand when being asked to do it verbally and at speed. I also worry and get anxious about my eye contact, tone of voice and the rules of social communication and how I am coming across to you when we are communicating. I may not know if or when to say something in a conversation and this may come across as rude but I am just anxious and thinking hard about what to say and when to say it.

Things that do *not* help me:

- putting me on the spot and expecting a quick answer
- not listening to how *I* feel and thinking my point of view is not valid because I have communication needs
- getting cross with me if I cannot interpret your facial expressions and body language
- slowing down your speech so much because you think I am stupid
- trying to change me to fit with the neurotypical way of communicating.

Things that *do* help me:

- giving me time to think and process
- validating how I am thinking and feeling
- letting me say things my own way then checking you have understood correctly if you are not sure
- explaining yourself clearly and giving as much detail as you can as I may take things literally – it also helps here if you give

me lists or bullet points to work from in case I forget what you have said

- helping and supporting me to put my thoughts into sentences if I am struggling
- saying my name if you are speaking directly to me so I know you are talking to me
- letting me go somewhere quiet at lunchtime and break times so my brain can have a rest
- not expecting me to look at you when I am speaking as this makes it even more difficult for me to talk
- letting me write things down instead of speaking, which may be easier for me.

OVERVIEW OF NEEDS

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) should always be on your radar. But I appreciate that, as teachers or parents/carers of secondary school-aged children, they may not be.

As a former secondary science teacher (and secondary SENDCo), I've been there. I've flicked through my class lists, looked at the SEN register and presumed, based on the information in front of me, that I didn't have many students with SLCN in my classes. I also, perhaps naively (unless they had a diagnosed SLCN), presumed that by the time most children reach Year 7 and step into a secondary classroom, their speech, language and communication skills would be pretty much fully developed. In fact, I would have looked at this chapter and thought it wasn't that relevant to me. I was wrong.

Wrong because we know from research that ten per cent of students are affected by long-term and persistent speech, language and communication needs (Public Health England, 2020). And apologies for stating the obvious here, but just to emphasise my point, that's three students in every class of 30. If on a Monday, for example, you teach five periods of different classes of 30 students, you're teaching at least 15 students that day with SLCN. They may not be on your SEN register and they may not have been identified by anyone as having a SLCN. They could be hidden in clear view. Research shows us that 40 per cent of young people with SLCN are unidentified (The Communication

Trust, 2015). And if they've reached secondary school without their needs being noticed, they have likely developed (consciously or subconsciously) some incredible coping strategies that make it even trickier for us to identify them. But, identify and support them we must.

Putting in place strategies for SLCN in secondary school isn't just beneficial to those with SLCN but can be helpful for all students. This is because speech, language and communication skill development doesn't stop at primary school; students continue to develop these skills throughout secondary school too.

Speech, language and communication skills are fundamental, not just for academic success (they underpin literacy skill development for starters), but difficulties with these skills can impact on a student's behaviour, their friendships and overall wellbeing.

But before we look at how common speech, language and communication needs are and how you can identify students and support them, let's first unpick what we mean by speech, language and communication. Often, these terms are incorrectly used interchangeably, but they are discreet terms that have different meanings. This is important to note when we are identifying and supporting a student with a difficulty in one of these areas. The support for a student with a difficulty with their speech, for example, may look very different to the support given to a student who has a language skills difficulty.

USEFUL DEFINITION



SPEECH

Speech is the physical way we use sounds to form words. It encompasses articulation, which is how clearly we form distinct speech sounds. It also includes voice, fluency, and our ability to vary the volume, pitch and intonation of speech to support its meaning.

USEFUL DEFINITION



LANGUAGE

Language means a shared system or method of communication that has set rules. It can be spoken languages such as English, Spanish or Mandarin. Or non-spoken languages such as

British Sign Language (BSL). Language skills are divided into two categories: expressive language and receptive language. Expressive language is the 'output' of language: it's when we are communicating with others (through words, signs, symbols or written text); whereas receptive language is understanding what is being communicated to us.

USEFUL DEFINITION



COMMUNICATION

Communication is all about the interaction between people and the sharing of information. We can communicate in a whole range of ways, not just speaking. Students may communicate through writing, technology (phones and social media), assistive technology and sign language. Teenagers stereotypically use a lot of non-verbal communication, with body language, gestures and facial expressions. But we as teachers and/or parents/carers also use this form of communication – a disappointed look, a raised eyebrow or maybe even a huge smile (depending on our day!).

While speech, language and communication all have different meanings, it's imperative to remember that speech, language and communication *skills* are linked. A student who has difficulties with speech, may also have challenges with their language skills, for example.

WHAT ARE SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS (SLCN)?

As explained previously, all students, regardless of whether they have SEND or not, will be continuing to develop their speech, language and communication skills throughout their secondary school years. They may be broadening their vocabulary, for example, learning to adapt their communication based on their audience, developing their skills in explaining and persuading, or learning to articulate when speaking in front of the class/school.

But for some students these skills may be more difficult to develop due to a SLCN. This could be a specific SLCN (diagnosed or undiagnosed) or a SLCN related to another SEND, such as autism.

SLCN cover a whole range of different needs. Some types of SLCN can be transient; others are lifelong. The majority may be identified in primary but there will also be some students whose SLCN only becomes clear in secondary school – sometimes due to the increased language demands of secondary school years.

There will also be some students whose SLCN appear to resolve during primary school, only to 'return' during secondary. This 'illusory recovery' is also more likely to be due to the increased language demands in secondary school making their SLCN more identifiable.

SLCN don't just include students who are finding speech difficult; it also includes (but is not limited to) students who find understanding (receptive) language more challenging and students who have difficulties with social communication skills. As some SLCNs can be transient, there will also be students in your classes who have had a SLCN but may not be impacted as much by it now. It might however, have had a lasting impact on other areas such as their literacy skills or even their self-esteem.

WHAT DOES SLCN INCLUDE?

- **Situational mutism** – This is an anxiety-based mental health disorder that causes students to be unable to speak in certain situations when they can speak happily and fluently in other situations. It can be thought of as a 'speech phobia'. You may find a student is able to speak at home but not in school. Or perhaps they are able to speak with some teachers but not others, etc. Situational Mutism (SM) is often referred to as 'Selective Mutism', but because the phrase 'selective' wrongly implies that the person has control over when they are able to speak/not speak, many people like myself prefer to use the term 'situational mutism'. It is thought that SM affects around one in 140 children and young people (NHS, 2023b). Without early intervention, SM can persist into the secondary school years and adulthood.

- **Stammer** – A stammer is when someone finds it difficult to speak in a smooth and fluent way. Stammering is also called stuttering or dysfluency. According to STAMMA, the British Stammering Association, eight per cent of children will start to stammer at some point and one per cent of adults stammer (n.d.).

- **Speech sound disorder and delays** – Speech sound disorders and delays involve difficulties with articulation (making the correct speech sounds) or phonology (using the sounds correctly). While these can be significantly improved with early identification and

Speech and Language Therapy (SaLT), speech sound disorders and delays can persist into adolescence. The difference between disorder and delay is that, unlike a speech disorder where a young person's progression of speech is on a different trajectory, a child or young person with a speech delay is on the same trajectory in terms of progression of their speech sounds but they are just taking longer than their peers.

- **Verbal dyspraxia** – This is a speech disorder. A student will usually know what they want to say but may be unable to physically make and coordinate the movements needed by their mouth to make the correct sounds.

- **Language disorders** – Language disorders are an umbrella term for a range of lifelong difficulties that impact language. They can be linked to other special educational needs and disabilities such as autism, or conditions such as brain injury.

- **Developmental language disorder** – One type of language disorder is called Developmental Language Disorder (DLD), previously known as Specific Language Impairment (SLI). DLD affects 7.58 per cent of students (Norbury *et al.*, 2016) therefore in a class of 30 there will be at least two students with DLD. However, many children and young people with DLD are 'missed' and not identified as having DLD. This is despite DLD being much more common than autism. The criteria for DLD diagnosis is that a student has language difficulties that impact everyday life, that these language difficulties are unlikely to/haven't been resolved by the age of five and their difficulties aren't associated with a known biomedical condition (e.g. a brain injury or genetic disorder). DLD also impacts other areas of school, for example, 50 to 90 per cent of children with DLD have reading difficulties (Stothard *et al.*, 1998). DLD can co-occur with dyslexia, speech sound disorder and ADHD.

- **Language delay** – A language delay is when a student's language progresses on the same trajectory as their peers, but slower. Unlike language disorders, in many cases with the correct support, language delay isn't lifelong.

- **Voice problems** – These refer to any problems that impact a student's voice. This could be voice loss, problems with the quality of voice or a hoarse voice, for example.

- **Social communication difficulties** – Social communication is simply how we use verbal and non-verbal communication socially. We use these skills to form, develop and maintain relationships. Young people who have difficulties with social

communication skills may have difficulties with either verbal and non-verbal communication (or both). Young people may find it difficult to know when it's their turn in a conversation or activity. They may find it difficult to 'read' facial expressions and may find concepts and unwritten rules such as 'personal space' challenging to understand. Students can also experience difficulties with pragmatics – varying the way they speak or communicate in different circumstances. For example, speaking in a different way, with different use of language to teachers and parents/carers, compared to their peers. They may struggle to know how to change aspects of speech such as the volume, tone of voice or pitch in different situations. At primary school this may have been less apparent or not caused as many problems, but when students reach secondary school there are often more significant differences in the way students communicate to their peers compared to teachers. Students may also find non-literal language and idioms difficult, such as 'it's raining cats and dogs'. Changes to their routine, break times and other unstructured/less structured situations may also be more challenging.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Overlap with other types of SEND

As with other areas of need, speech, language and communication needs often (although not always) overlap with other types of SEND. It's worth remembering that, although a student's primary need on the SEN register could be SLCN, they may co-occur with other SEND (and vice versa). And perhaps even more important to remember is that if they don't have SLCN as their primary area of need but have one of these SEND listed below, they may also have SLCN. These include, although are not limited to:

- **Autism** – Autistic students' speech, language and communication needs vary and are unique to the autistic individual. Some autistic students may have difficulties with receptive (understanding) language and/or expressive (using) language. A key diagnostic criterion for an autism diagnosis is difficulties in social communication and social interaction.
- **Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) difficulties** – Not only does there appear to be an overlap with SEMH and SLCN, but many children who we may have identified as having SEMH needs may, in fact, have unmet SLCN. Studies show that eight in ten children with 'emotional and behaviour disorders' have unidentified language difficulties (Hollo *et al.*, 2014). Therefore,

I would urge you to screen students with SEMH for hidden, unidentified SLCN. I would also recommend looking at the student's primary area of need that was identified in primary school and check if it was SLCN but has now been changed to SEMH!

- **Dyslexia** – Many children with SLCN also have dyslexia. Fifty-one per cent of students with DLD, for example, are also dyslexic (Adlof & Hogan, 2018).
- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** – ADHD can sometimes impact on a whole range of language skills. Students may have difficulties with expressive (using) language, receptive (understanding) language and pragmatic language (using language socially).
- **Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD)** – DCD, sometimes known as dyspraxia, can make the planning and coordination of movements more difficult. As a result, it can make using the correct words and producing the correct speech sounds difficult.

Hearing loss or deafness

- Hearing loss or deafness can affect a student's speech, language and communication, resulting in speech, language and communication difficulties and/or delays. In the UK, there are more than 50,000 deaf children (most taught in mainstream schools). Nine per cent of these children use British Sign Language (BSL) to communicate (Oracy Education Commission, 2024).

English as an Additional Language (EAL)

- EAL is not a SLCN, or a cause of SLCN – quite the opposite. In fact, there are massive cognitive advantages to speaking more than one language. There will, of course, be students who have English as an additional language and also a SLCN, as ten per cent of *all* students are affected by long-term and persistent speech, language and communication needs. If you are unsure if a student with EAL may have SLCN, speak to their family to find out if they are having difficulties with their home language in addition to their English.

WHY ARE SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS IMPORTANT?

Speech, language and communication skills are important for all children and young people. But there are unique challenges for students with SLCN when they reach secondary school, one of which

being the increased vocabulary demands put upon students. Oxford Education Language Group (2020) found that children and young people in Year 7 are exposed to three to four times as many new words per day as those in Year 6.

Students also have to navigate a busier environment, more complex social language, more demanding subject specific vocabulary, new vocabulary that has different meanings in different lessons and input from several different teachers in one day (instead of one/two at primary). They also need to use their language skills to negotiate, persuade, justify and solve problems.

While at primary school, the impacts of SLCN are huge and include behaviour, literacy barriers and difficulties forming and maintaining friendships, at secondary school we are also looking at impacts on GCSEs, job prospects, mental health issues, social isolation and even vulnerability to criminality. I cannot stress enough the importance of supporting students' SLCN.

Effects of unsupported SLCN include:

- **Social impact** – Friendships and relationships are important for students' wellbeing, especially so in secondary school. Difficulties with speech, language and communication skills can make it harder for some students to form, develop and maintain friendships. This can be due to difficulties expressing their thoughts, difficulties understanding others speaking (receptive language difficulties) or challenges with social communication skills. Research has shown that students with DLD, for example, were more likely to be isolated and had significantly smaller friendship groups than students without DLD (Chen *et al.*, 2020). Friendships are arguably important for all students' mental health and wellbeing, but it has been shown that better relationships with peers can offer protection against mental health difficulties for teenagers with DLD (Forrest *et al.*, 2018).

- **Mental health** – Having speech, language and communication needs can negatively impact students' self-esteem and mental health, perhaps even more so in secondary, where students are likely to be much more aware and self-conscious of their SLCN. Students with SLCN, particularly with language difficulties, have been shown to have higher levels of anxiety than their peers (Botting *et al.*, 2016).

- **Academic success** – SLCN can affect a student's academic success. Studies have found that children who were identified as having persistent speech difficulties aged eight, had poor

educational attainment at ages 10–11 and 13–14 years in the core subjects (English, maths and science) (Wren *et al.*, 2021). Also, 20 per cent of students with SLCN gain grade 4 or above in English and maths at GCSE, compared with 64 per cent of all students (Public Health England, 2020). The reasons behind the impact of SLCN on academic success will be multifaceted and individual to each unique learner. However, we know that SLCN can have a significant impact on literacy skills (50–90 per cent of students with persistent SLCN will go on to have literacy difficulties) (Stothard, 1998) and good literacy skills are fundamental to accessing the curriculum (Dockrell *et al.*, 2007). Good vocabulary knowledge, for example, is linked to higher exam success at GCSE (Croll, 1995). Ofsted has also said that: 'Where inspectors saw links between oral language, reading and writing in lessons with secondary school students, standards at GCSE English language were higher' (Ofsted, 2011).

- **Employment** – The ramifications of unsupported SLCN on academic success don't just stop in the secondary classroom, but can lead to potential unemployment. Speech and Language UK (2023) estimated that 'Children who struggle to talk and understand words are twice as likely to be unemployed'.

- **Behaviour** – It must be incredibly frustrating being a student with SLCN in the classroom. Perhaps even more so if it hasn't been identified. Imagine not being able to express your thoughts clearly, finding instructions difficult to follow or being worried about other's responses to the sound/fluency of your speech. This frustration can understandably impact a student's behaviour. In fact, 81 per cent of children with 'emotional and behaviour disorders have significant unidentified communication needs' (RCSLT, 2019). In terms of students whose SLCN *have* been identified, studies have shown that they have an 'elevated risk of social, emotional and behavioural difficulties in adolescence' (Snowling *et al.*, 2006). In addition to this, two-thirds of students who are classed as 'at risk' of exclusion from school have been shown to have language difficulties (Clegg *et al.*, 2009).

- **Behaviour outside of school** – Difficulties with behaviour, as we know, do not just impact on school life, but outside of school, too. According to The Centre for Social Justice, if unsupported, over 50 per cent of children with communication needs may become involved in criminal activity (2014). And research on language skills of a sample of juvenile offenders, showed 66–90 per cent of them had below-average language skills (Bryan *et al.*, 2007).

WHAT YOU MIGHT NOTICE

As you'll be aware, as teachers, SENDCos or parents/carers we are not qualified to diagnose students with a SLCN, therefore the list below should not be used as a checklist to make assumptions about a student. However, while we can't diagnose, we *are* the first point of call and the ones who will be part of a referral to a speech and language therapist if needed, so it's useful to have an idea of what students who have a SLCN might potentially find difficult. Please remember that all students are unique and as such will not present in the same way.

SPEECH

Students may:

- have a stammer
- have a lisp
- have difficulties pronouncing certain sounds or certain words (particularly those with more than one syllable)
- omit particular sounds in words
- not talk at all, or very much, or limit who they speak to
- only use certain words (ones that they are confident they can produce clearly)
- find group work difficult
- have a small friendship group of trusted friends.

EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

Students may:

- talk very little and limit where and when they speak, and who they speak to (they may prefer to speak to a teaching assistant (TA) instead of the teacher, for example, and they may appear to struggle with group/paired work when they are not grouped with their friends)
- start explaining something or retelling an event and then give up
- struggle to resolve conflicts with their peers verbally
- use words in the incorrect context
- find it difficult to put words into a sentence and/or speak in shorter sentences than their peers. As a general guide, The Communication Trust (2015) explains that the average length of spoken words by age 11 is seven to 11+ words and seven to 12+ words aged 13/14.

VOCABULARY

Students may:

- have a limited vocabulary
- have difficulty in remembering, understanding and using new subject-specific vocabulary (this can be particularly difficult for Key Stage 4 students who will be expected to use and give definitions of subject-specific words)
- find it difficult to understand how some words have different meanings in different subjects/contexts.

RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE

Students may:

- need help understanding and following verbal instructions (a student may appear to be misbehaving and purposefully doing the opposite to what you have asked, when in fact they have misunderstood the verbal instruction)
- also notice that they just follow the last part of an instruction that they heard (according to the Communications Trust (2013), by Year 7, most students should be able to follow complex instructions given verbally and by Key Stage 4, should be able to follow complex instructions even if they aren't in the right order).

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Students may:

- have difficulties forming, developing and maintaining friendships – they may have arguments with their peers due to social misunderstandings and may have a small group of trusted friends
- find it difficult to understand other people's viewpoints – this can lead to confusion, arguments with peers and difficulties with some lessons that require students to write about or discuss different views
- misunderstand gestures, body language and personal space – this may result in difficulties and arguments with their peers
- take things literally
- difficulties with using inference skills
- not (always) understand/be able to use sarcasm and double meanings – you would expect most children starting Year 7 without a SLCN to be able to start to understand sarcasm, especially if we emphasised it, e.g. when something expected happens, saying

'well *that* was a surprise', and by Key Stage 4 they should be quite adept at spotting sarcasm

- need help to follow 'unwritten' social rules, such as adapting the choice of language for the situation/audience. This can impact both relationships with teachers (getting into trouble for not speaking politely enough to a member of staff) and peers (not keeping up with slang, or speaking too formally with peers).

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

Behaviour

It is worth noting that difficulties with speech, language and communication aren't as easy to identify at secondary school and may be identified as 'problems with behaviour' instead of SLCN. Ofsted reported that sometimes children's SLCN is being misinterpreted; some students 'were allocated support for their behaviour when, in fact, they had specific communication needs' (Ofsted, 2010). In my experience, students at secondary school with SLCN develop a range of (self-made) coping strategies to hide/mask and deal with their needs. Some of these strategies are helpful and others are not. This may be a result in being self-conscious of their SLCN and trying to keep their needs quiet from their peers. As a result, students with speech, language and communication difficulties may tick very few of the boxes above but instead, students may:

- have brilliant visual strengths
- whisper instructions to themselves after they've been given them, as a strategy to help themselves remember and process the instruction easier
- appear disengaged
- take longer than their peers to start the work or follow a class instruction
- quietly concentrate on their written work (to blend in)
- rely on a friend during lesson times, copy others or watch the response of others first before reacting – for example, if you ask the class to line up by the door, they might watch what their peers do first before doing it themselves
- use made-up words in place of real ones they don't know, for example, 'word book' instead of 'dictionary'
- misbehave, make jokes or distract (to redirect the focus from their difficulties) – they may ask for equipment, for example, or ask you a question to take away the focus from them answering a question