

Communication Self Concept in Secondary Schools

An Exploratory Analysis

Submitted by Dr. Simon B Connor to the University of Exeter
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1. General Introduction

Recent government policy has identified Speech, Language and Communications (SLCN) as key and essential to each child's potential to achieve in school. The Bercow Report (Bercow 2008) was commissioned in order to review support for SLCN in the UK. Following a systematic review, Bercow highlighted (amongst other issues) a level of inconsistency associated with SLCN support in UK secondary schools¹. Despite general agreement that input is required in order to improve "communication" in secondary schools, a productive discussion in number of subsequent publications is limited (see Lindsay 2008 and discussion in literature review section in Appendix K), seemingly due lack of clarity regarding the precise definition of the term and the types of issues that interventions need to address. Furthermore, school based communication interventions to date have only focused on teacher-child communication, therefore, the current research aims to specify and investigate the concept of "communication" in a school setting on two different levels: within individual (self) and perceptions of others (leading to a more systemic perspective). First, on a personal level, a pupil's own self concept of communicational abilities is assessed (paper 1). Second, on an organisational level, the way in which pupils and teachers as well as senior managerial staff view the quality of communication in the school (paper 2).

This research assumes a view of communication which stretches beyond traditional models of language processing e.g. referring to syntax, phonology, morphology and pragmatics and interprets the term more widely to refer to any barrier (cognitive or otherwise) which disrupts the understanding or processing of language. The research presented in this thesis refers to one area in particular (communication self-concept) which falls inside this definition but would not be considered on most language audits and assessments (and is therefore unlikely

¹ Please see literature review in Appendix K for further discussion

to be considered in secondary schools). The term “Communication Self Concept” (CSC) refers to a person’s own views of their communicative ability and in this instance was borne initially out of more general work around “academic self-concept” by Marsh (1990) (see section 2.2 for discussion). Academic self-concept has been subdivided into a range of subject specific constructs which have been found to be highly predictive of academic attainment (Valentine et al 2004). Given the principal role of communication across a range of different disciplines it was considered that communication self-concept may have the potential to be highly predictive of academic attainment in school (see section 2.2 for discussion). Paper one therefore was split into two parts, the first part aimed to create a measure of communication self-concept and in the second to look at the extent to which it is able to uniquely predict academic attainment in English (see section 2.4.2 for discussion). Paper one concludes that the Communication Self Concept Questionnaire (CSCQ) is able to significantly predict academic attainment in English and is distinct from other predictors, such as English self-concept and Communication competence.

Paper two continues to build on the theme of communication within secondary schools by exploring the views of children in two schools about communication in order to gain a wider perspective on potential barriers to communicating, which may also impact on their levels of communication self-concept. In addition to this, the paper also explores communication from an organisational perspective via interviews with senior management and staff. The aim of conducting interviews with staff was to gain an impression of the general issues surrounding communication from an institutional and inter-staff level. A range of themes were identified on a staff and child level. Themes related centrally to poor mutual (staff to staff, child to staff) awareness of each other’s respective roles and responsibilities at school. Sources of this issue appear to partly relate to time pressure and inconsistent staffing, both of which also contributed independently to poor communication in school. More crucially however, staff

generally discussed feeling unable to communicate with their peers (i.e. other members of staff) for similar reasons to the children which was indicative of poor communication self-concept as defined in the previous study.

Whilst the work in this thesis is exploratory in nature, it establishes the potentially important role of communication self-concept alongside more traditional communication related constructs (discussed in section 2.2 and appendix K). Furthermore, the thesis highlights the need for communication intervention to encompass an entire institution and questions the value of school based communication interventions which only focus on teacher-child communication.

Questions regarding the extent to which communication self-concept on an organisational / staffing level impacts on child communication self-concept are discussed with respect to Social Cognitive Theory and Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura 1982;1989).

2.0 Paper 1, The Relationship between Communication Self Concept and Academic Attainment

2.1 Overview of Paper One

This paper adopts a multi-faceted view of self-concept which is based around the Marsh/Shavelson model of self-concept. The Marsh / Shavelson model of Self Concept (Marsh 1990) divides self-concept into a number of sub areas, one of which is termed “academic” self-concept. Academic self-concept is then further subdivided into self-concepts relating to a large number of specific, separable academic disciplines (e.g. English self-concept, Maths self-concept Geography self-concept and so on). A large number of studies have linked academic self-concept and its subcomponents, with academic performance in school (see Marsh 1992). Despite this, no studies have explored the possibility of a more general skills based category of self-concept² which may also have the potential to predict both academic attainment and subject specific academic self-concept constructs.

The current study proposes an additional category of self-concept relating to communication, referred to in this study as “Communication Self Concept (CSC)”. As communication generally is regarded as an essential tool for academic success in a range of areas, it is considered that CSC may therefore relate more directly to academic attainment particularly in discursive subjects such as English self concept in comparison to the subject specific self-concepts proposed by Marsh (1993).

The first part of the study presents data relating to a measure of communication self-concept (CSCQ) which was constructed for the purposes of this study, initially examining the factor structure of the inventory in order to determine internal reliability and then examining

² For example this may include more specific areas such as motor skills or communicative ability (which is the focus of the current work)