**Emelia as an Empathetic Leader: Introducing Makaton as a tool to promote inclusion and child development**

**Project Aim**:

**Objectives**

* To raise awareness of the benefits of Makaton with nursery stakeholders (practitioners and families)
* To promote an inclusive environment by training practitioners to use Makaton with all children across the setting

**Context**

As an aspiring Educational Psychologist, promoting inclusivity is pivotal to Emelia’s practice. Joining the early years sector in June 2020, Emelia gained first-hand experience of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns on child development. Over the 2020-21 academic year, more children joined the setting and a pattern of growing communication and language, and personal, social and emotional needs emerged, particularly amongst the youngest children aged 0-2 years. Emelia recognised the need for an inclusive approach to provide opportunities for all children, practitioners and families to communicate using Makaton, therefore reducing communication barriers.

The Early Years Initial Teacher Training course requires students to attend placement at a contrasting early years setting. Following a placement in a Hampshire maintained nursery school, Emelia was both impressed and inspired by their use of Makaton. Having researched the benefits of using signing with children, such as improved personal, social and emotional development (PSED) and literacy skills, Emelia wanted to explore the use of Makaton in a private nursery for children aged 0-5 years.

**Rationale**

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a decline in communication and language abilities and PSED has been observed in children (Ofsted, 2020; Bowyer-Crane et al., 2020; Weinstein, 2021). Growing concerns regarding language abilities and PSED of Reception aged children have been recorded amongst teachers (Weinstein, 2021). Communication barriers can negatively impact the psychological wellbeing of children (Cohen et al., 2013; Doove et al., 2021), as children feel isolated and misunderstood.

Makaton is a form of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) which combines symbols, signs and speech to support communication and language skills (Grove & Walker, 1990; White et al., 2021). Studies have shown that reducing communication barriers for children through key word signing can reduce feelings of frustration and improve self-regulation (Vallotton & Ayoub, 2010; Zientek, 2013; Davies et al., 2021). Positive effects of Makaton have been observed in a variety of populations, including children with English as an additional language (EAL), babies and adults with neurological differences (Walker, 1987, Mistry & Barnes, 2013; Zientek, 2013). Whilst there are no conclusive findings related to whether Makaton improves speech production, no negative effects of Makaton on child development have been reported (Schlosser & Wendt, 2008; Walters et al., 2021). Emelia felt that providing children with multiple ways of communicating would enhance well-being and consequently propensity to learn.

Emelia’s vision was for Makaton to be used with all children and staff, rather than limiting use to those with identified communication needs. Emelia felt that only using Makaton with children who had identified communication needs could be isolating if their peers and adults around them did not have the skills to use signing. Furthermore, using Makaton with all children offered potential benefits to the whole community. Emelia wanted to ensure that all members attending the setting had the opportunity for meaningful interactions with each other.

**Implementation and Effectiveness**

When implementing the action plan, Emelia adopted an empathetic leadership style. Emelia listened to, and understood, the needs of others and was conscious of their thoughts and feelings. Empathetic leaders build trusting relationships to inspire and motivate teams (Gill et al., 2018; Deliu, 2019). Learning new skills can be daunting and by being aware of practitioners’ potential feelings and attitudes, Emelia was able to offer support, both academically and emotionally, throughout the process of learning Makaton. Emelia devised a systematic action plan which included the involvement of all stakeholders.

Firstly, Emelia completed a two-day Makaton course with a registered Makaton trainer to develop her own knowledge and skills. Initially, Emelia felt overwhelmed by the prospect of learning a high number of signs within two days. However, Emelia was surprised by how quickly she retained the signs. Emelia found the greatest challenge was remembering to use speech and key signs simultaneously. Emelia felt hopeful that practitioners would also pick signs up with ease.

Ensuring that all practitioners and families were aware of the potential benefits of using Makaton in nursery was the next phase of the action plan. Misconceptions exist with regards to which populations signing is suitable for and negative attitudes towards the use of signing with children can limit the opportunities for children to access Makaton (Sheehy & Duffy, 2009; Sheehy & Budiyanto, 2014). It was important that the information Emelia shared with practitioners and families challenged these misconceptions; as a leader it was Emelia’s duty to influence individuals to achieve a collective good: promoting an inclusive environment (Burns, 1978; Northouse, 2016; Chen et al., 2019). The effectiveness of this approach was evidenced by enthusiasm from practitioners and families, for example, volunteering ideas for use of Makaton in the preschool room.

Delivering in-house Makaton training for practitioners was one of the most pertinent stages of the action plan. Emelia used a combination of visual, written and auditory sign instructions, providing small group and individual support. Emelia’s training approach aligned with the principles of servant leadership theory (Spears & Lawrence, 2002). This theory posits empathy, healing, and awareness as core components of leadership (Spears & Lawrence, 2002; Gentry et al., 2007). Emelia understood that some practitioners were nervous about learning new signs and some expressed concerns over signing inaccurately. In response, Emelia ensured learning expectations were achievable by initially teaching practitioners five signs that would be used most frequently throughout the day e.g. toilet, story, and snack. Emelia related to practitioners by sharing her own experience of learning Makaton, reassuring practitioners that feeling nervous was to be expected.

Practitioners responded quickly to the training; Emelia observed practitioners frequently using Makaton in practice. Since teaching practitioners basic Makaton signs, Emelia observed practitioners using additional signs which were not covered during the initial teaching phase. One practitioner went out of their way to find relevant, official resources to incorporate Makaton into a learning experience around ‘the lifecycle of a butterfly’. Emelia also noted that other practitioners began to sign key words within nursery rhymes. Some practitioners felt confident to draw on pre-existing knowledge of Makaton as they felt supported by the team. Additionally, two members of staff enrolled onto a Makaton course themselves, adding to the likelihood of Makaton use being embedded across the setting.

Part of the action plan involved Emelia creating resources for the setting e.g. key chains with symbols, visual timetables, now and next boards. Reflecting on this experience, Emelia would increase the involvement of practitioners in the process of creating resources in future projects. This could empower and improve collaboration for practitioners and aid inclusion and participation in the practice change process. Nonetheless, the resources proved to be an effective tool for use with children. In particular, the use of key chains proved to be highly beneficial in supporting attention autism bucket time.

Once practitioners had developed the skills to use Makaton, it was time to introduce Makaton to the children. Makaton is frequently described as fun and easy for children to learn (Sheehy & Duffy, 2009; Vinales, 2013). Consistent with this statement, Emelia found that children learned signs at an impressive rate. To understand this finding, it is important to refer to neuroplasticity; the brain’s ability to change through strengthening neural connections as a result of experience (Cramer et al., 2011; Weyandt et al., 2020). Within the first five years of life the brain develops at its fastest rate, making it a vital time for neuroplasticity (Novak, 2019). Moreover, introducing Makaton through salient learning experiences, such as play and singing times, is more likely to maximise brain plasticity (Novak, 2019). This may have contributed to the success of children learning signs.

From the start, Emelia regularly shared Makaton resources with families using the setting’s online portal. A ‘Makaton sign of the week’ post was uploaded weekly which kept families up to date with signs their children were using in the setting and allowed parents to be involved in their child’s learning at home. Over several weeks, Emelia began to observe positive effects of children learning Makaton with progress in two prime areas of learning, communication and language and PSED, being noted (Department for Education, 2021). Emelia identified two particularly salient impacts: increased engagement at singing time including one child with EAL participating in singing time through sign and a parent excitedly reporting that their child had accurately signed ‘pig’ whilst visiting the farm with family.

**Conclusion**

The early years initial teacher training course allowed Emelia to explore leadership theory and develop her understanding of leadership styles. From this, Emelia was able to apply her personal attributes to adopt an empathetic leadership style. Applying principles of servant leadership theory allowed Emelia to motivate practitioners to learn and apply Makaton to practice. Through incorporating Makaton into key learning experiences children were able to learn in a meaningful way. Following training, practitioners sought opportunities to incorporate Makaton into activities with the children, for example, the life cycle of a butterfly. Despite being in its infancy some positive effects of Makaton were observed in children, such as increased participation. Makaton has become an important aspect of Emelia’s pedagogical practice and continues to support her in working with children and young people at various stages of development.

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