

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

Imran Mir, Apex College

ABSTRACT

This reflective analysis will explore the overlooked impact of hidden social communication challenges on learner involvement, academic identity, and inclusive teaching practice within higher education. Drawing from the author's personal history of growing up with these undiagnosed communication barriers – especially when it came to expressing emotions, forming peer connections, and the navigation of adolescent social environments – this paper will look to examine how these early struggles continue to impact learners when it comes to engagement and well-being in university settings.

Though these issues are commonly related to primary or secondary education; such challenges persist into higher education, where students are anticipated to contribute actively in seminars, collaborate in group projects, and work with increasing academic independence, which can be challenging. For such learners with hidden communication barriers, these expectations can result in learners being excluded, leading to anxiety, especially within educational institutions that privilege verbal fluency and extroverted forms of participation.

Relevant literature on social communication disorders, the SEND Code of Practice, Universal Design for Learning (UDL), and the reflection links lived experience with inclusive pedagogical strategies in higher education contexts. I discuss how these insights have informed their current practice as a senior educator and academic leader in the higher education institution while offering approaches such as trauma-informed teaching, diversified assessment methods, and learner-centred curriculum design, to ensure that learners struggling with these are identified and given adequate support.

By linking this personal narrative within evidence-informed frameworks, this article will contribute to ongoing discussions around the importance of inclusive teaching and learning in higher education, and it promotes greater awareness of the “invisible” barriers that can affect student participation, identity, and achievement.

Keywords: inclusive education, social communication difficulties, hidden needs, emotional well-being, reflective practice

Introduction

Classrooms, irrespective of sector (primary, secondary, further education, or higher education), are often seen as spaces of shared growth, intellectual development, and social integration. However, learners, especially those who struggle with hidden social communication barriers, can find these environments challenging, which can affect navigation through academia. My journey began with a sense of invisibility, shaped by an inner struggle to express myself or engage in certain situations with confidence, which caused me major difficulties throughout my teenage years. These experiences began in my early school life, which continued to be an issue that shaped my educational journey well into adulthood and now deeply impacts

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

my practice as a higher education leader. This reflective paper examines my early childhood through my studies to my present standing in higher education. It will highlight how communication difficulties, which go unrecognised or misconstrued, can have a significant impact on learners across various educational sectors and how university educators can create an environment that can accommodate such learners.

I now recognise that my experiences align with research showing that language and communication difficulties may remain unidentified within educational settings (Clegg et al., 2009). These issues are not always clinically diagnosed, nor do they trigger a need for intervention, but they can shape a learner's emotional and academic experience significantly. They exist in the space between 'normative' involvement and diagnosable disorders such as autism spectrum condition (ASC) or social (pragmatic) communication disorder. As Norbury (2014) highlights, these learners can be missed and fall through the cracks of identification processes, and this results in them not receiving either formal support or targeted understanding. A key challenge is that these learners are often difficult to identify, particularly when academic performance and classroom behavior appear unproblematic. This highlights the need for a multi-faceted approach to identification and support, rather than reliance on attainment or behavioral indicators alone. Their struggles are internal, misunderstood, and often dismissed as personality coincidences or behavioral choices, and the lacking development needs are overlooked.

This misrecognition illustrates a broader educational tendency to equate verbal participation with engagement. Because I was academically capable and compliant, my difficulties remained unnoticed. As Dockrell and Lindsay (2001) suggest, strong attainment can mask underlying communication challenges, leaving socially withdrawn learners without support. In retrospect, my experience reflects not individual deficit alone but a mismatch between communicative diversity and participation norms embedded within schooling structures.

What makes hidden communication needs difficult to identify is the gap between the student's internal experience and their outward behaviour. Research suggests that speech, language and communication needs are more likely to be recognised when they are accompanied by behavioural disruption or reduced academic attainment (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001; Clegg et al., 2009). Students who misbehave, underachieve, or display overt distress may therefore draw greater attention from pastoral and special educational needs staff. In contrast, those who remain compliant and continue to perform academically may be less likely to trigger formal concern, even when underlying social communication difficulties persist (Norbury, 2014).

Educational policy has made significant progress in recognising diversity in communication needs. The Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) promotes a broader conceptualisation of need that includes emotional and social dimensions. However, implementation of this policy remains inconsistent. Large class sizes, under-resourced pastoral systems, and a curriculum that continues to focus on verbal performance all lead to the invisibility of these learners (Snowling et al., 2019). In practice, pastoral systems are often under-resourced due to reduced staffing capacity and limited funding, which restricts the time and support available for proactive identification and follow-up. This results in an education system that celebrates and champions verbal confidence while unintentionally penalising those who struggle to express themselves in the dominant modes.

This reflective analysis, as a form of academic inquiry, will look to address these complexities. It allows practitioners to cross-examine their own experiences, reframe assumptions, and propose changes that are supported by lived and scholarly knowledge (Brookfield, 1995; Bolton & Delderfield, 2018). This paper takes this approach; it draws on personal narrative and explores how social communication difficulties shaped my educational journey and how those experiences have influenced my pedagogical values and my current

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

practice as a senior educator and doctoral candidate. The purpose is to highlight the lived realities of students who may be achieving success academically but are struggling emotionally and socially.

This experience highlights the importance for educators to integrate Universal Design for Learning to aid students (Rose & Meyer, 2002) and trauma-informed pedagogies (Hammond, 2015), which recognise that learning is not just cognitive but relational and emotional. By reflecting on the particular barriers I faced growing up, I aim to advocate and contribute to a broader discourse about inclusion; one that is not about labels but diagnoses to consider the internal struggles that learners are facing, which impact academic studies and social life. Universal Design for Learning provides an overarching framework for this paper because it supports multiple ways of engagement, expression, and participation and reduces reliance on formal identification as a prerequisite for support.

This paper is both a retrospective and a call to action to support such learners. It invites educators, policymakers, and academic creators to reflect on how participation is defined, how we identify needs, and how we may better aid and serve those students whose voices remain unheard in the classroom, not by choice, but by circumstance. It will also provide valuable insights for those seeking to create a more inclusive learning environment. It will explore empathy and flexible academic environments, particularly within widening participation in digital education contexts.

Growing in silence—The unspoken curriculum of isolation

Theme 1: Participation, silence, and misrecognition

In education, participation is often built around verbal expression, including answering questions, group work, and presentations. In my case, these were not vehicles of growth but barriers. I became more of an observer than an active participant, and my silence was not disengagement but a strategy for navigating environments that privileged verbal confidence. This reflects what Adams (2002) defines as pragmatic communication, involving the ability to use verbal and non-verbal language appropriately in social contexts, including turn-taking, interpreting social cues, and adapting communication to different audiences. These skills are often assumed to develop naturally within educational settings rather than being explicitly taught. In my own experience, these expectations did not align with reality. My early struggles in expressing emotions and initiating dialogue were not due to disengagement, but difficulty navigating social interaction, which impacted my participation and confidence.

Research suggests that pragmatic communication differences are not always easily recognised, particularly when academic performance appears secure (Norbury, 2014; Clegg et al., 2009). In this sense, my experience reflects a broader structural challenge in how communicative competence is conceptualised and supported within education.

I now recognise that my experiences align with research showing that language and communication difficulties may remain unidentified within educational settings (Clegg et al., 2009). Such needs may not meet the threshold for formal diagnosis. Norbury (2014) notes that subtle social communication differences are often difficult to identify. As a result, these students may be misunderstood as shy, unmotivated, or socially aloof. The consequences of such misrecognition can extend beyond immediate classroom participation, potentially limiting progression opportunities and the ability to fully realise academic potential. This reflects a mismatch between communicative diversity and dominant classroom participation norms (Alexander, 2008; Norbury, 2014). In many educational settings, extroversion is subtly rewarded,

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

positioning more vocal students as engaged while quieter learners risk becoming invisible. This suggests that participation is often narrowly defined through verbal performance rather than genuine engagement.

I often knew the answer to a question but remained silent due to fear of being wrong or misunderstood. During a group presentation, although I contributed to the written work, I avoided speaking publicly and another student received recognition for presenting. At the time, I interpreted this as personal inadequacy. This further illustrates how participation is frequently measured through verbal contribution rather than intellectual input. As a result, students who are less verbally confident may be misinterpreted as disengaged, despite active cognitive involvement (Alexander, 2008; Norbury, 2014).

These experiences went largely unnoticed. My academic performance was satisfactory and my behaviour compliant, meaning I was not perceived as a concern. This aligns with research suggesting that strong attainment can mask underlying communication difficulties (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001; Clegg et al., 2009). This suggests that systems relying on behavioural or attainment indicators may fail to identify students experiencing less visible forms of difficulty.

Theme 2: Emotional safety and social consequences

In my own experience, I avoided social settings due to fear of judgement and misunderstanding, often withdrawing from interaction despite a desire to engage. This reflects how reduced emotional safety can limit participation, where withdrawal becomes a protective response rather than disengagement. From this perspective, it becomes important to consider trauma-informed approaches to learning. Hammond (2015) argues that many barriers to learning are rooted in unspoken emotional histories. Trauma, whether acute or chronic, can affect a learner's ability to engage, concentrate, and build relationships (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2016). While I do not frame my early communication experiences strictly as trauma, the persistent sense of social inadequacy and invisibility had lasting emotional effects. Trauma-informed pedagogy therefore emphasises the importance of creating safe, supportive environments where learners feel recognised and valued (Carello & Butler, 2015). This is associated with improved participation, engagement, and academic outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2016). This aligns with research suggesting that compromised emotional safety reinforces negative self-perception and reduces willingness to participate (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008; Norbury, 2014).

The emotional toll of this oversight is significant. Adolescents with a history of language difficulties are more likely to experience anxiety and depression, often due to social consequences such as exclusion and feelings of incompetence (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008). This highlights that communication difficulties extend beyond academic performance into emotional well-being and identity formation, particularly in environments where participation is socially visible and evaluated.

Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder (SCD) is recognised as a condition affecting the use of verbal and non-verbal communication in social contexts (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). However, many learners with similar difficulties do not receive a formal diagnosis and instead struggle silently within mainstream classrooms, particularly when their academic performance appears secure.

Recent research suggests that learners with communication difficulties have been disproportionately affected by the emotional and mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, experiencing increased anxiety, withdrawal, and feelings of invisibility within educational settings (Allen et al., 2023; Milanovic et al., 2023). This highlights how communication difficulties are not only structural but also deeply emotional, reinforcing barriers to participation and engagement.

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

This also suggests that participation is not solely determined by ability, but by perceived risk within social environments. In my case, strong exam results and good attendance contributed to the invisibility of my difficulties. On paper, I appeared to be thriving and was not identified for additional support, yet internally I experienced significant challenges in social interaction, particularly in unstructured and collaborative tasks.

This illustrates how structural expectations within education can obscure underlying communication difficulties. This reflects how academic attainment can function as a masking mechanism. Dockrell and Lindsay (2001) argue that high levels of academic performance can obscure underlying communication difficulties, leading educators to equate achievement with overall well-being. In this sense, my academic profile acted as protective camouflage, concealing the social and communicative challenges affecting my participation.

The cultural dynamics of educational environments can further reinforce this invisibility. Educational systems often privilege extroversion, verbal fluency, and confident public speaking. Alexander (2008) critiques classroom practices that assess engagement through the frequency and confidence of verbal responses, positioning students with communication differences at a disadvantage.

Emerging research suggests that inclusive, digitally mediated learning environments can help mitigate participation inequities by offering alternative modes of engagement (Bray et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of expanding participation beyond traditional verbal interaction to create more inclusive learning environments.

Repeated misinterpretation by peers contributed to diminished confidence, where perceived disinterest masked underlying communication difficulty. This illustrates how social communication challenges are often misunderstood within educational settings, reinforcing cycles of misrecognition and exclusion (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008; Norbury, 2014). It also highlights how external perceptions can shape internal identity, leading learners to internalise deficit-based interpretations of their behaviour (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2008).

These patterns extended into my early professional life, where I struggled to contribute in informal interactions despite having the necessary knowledge. This demonstrates how early participation norms can shape professional identity and long-term confidence. It suggests that educational experiences do not remain confined to the classroom but can have lasting implications for how individuals position themselves in professional and social contexts.

Overall, this suggests that communication difficulties should be understood as both emotional and structural, requiring a shift away from individual deficit models towards more inclusive understandings of participation.

Theme 3: From reflection to inclusive practice in higher education

It was not until my mid-twenties that I began to reflect critically on my early experiences. Through my role as an educator, I encountered students who reminded me of my younger self: bright and capable, yet withdrawn and reluctant to speak aloud. This recognition marked a turning point, prompting me to rethink my approach to teaching and to develop more inclusive pedagogical practices that appeal to emotional and communicative diversity. This transformation aligns with Brookfield's (1995) argument that educators draw upon lived experience as a source of pedagogical understanding and critical reflection.

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

This experience shaped my decision to pursue teaching, with the aim of supporting learners who face similar challenges. In my classrooms, I promote awareness that not all quiet learners are disengaged, and I adapt my teaching through alternative participation methods such as written responses and inclusive discussion strategies. This reflects a shift away from deficit interpretations of silence towards a more inclusive understanding of participation. It suggests that quietness can be a response to communicative and emotional barriers rather than disengagement.

One learner stands out in my memory. She struggled with verbal participation and presenting in class, and was initially perceived as underperforming. Through journaling, low-stakes assessments, and one-to-one conversations, she disclosed that she had selective mutism. Together with colleagues, we designed an alternative pathway that allowed her to express herself in writing and gradually build confidence. Over time, she improved both academically and in self-belief. This experience reinforced how easily participation can be misread when it is measured primarily through verbal contribution. The learner's difficulty was not cognitive but communicative, yet initial interpretations positioned her as underperforming. Research suggests that when engagement is narrowly defined, students whose strengths lie outside verbal fluency may be overlooked (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001; Rose & Meyer, 2002). By introducing alternative modes of expression, her capability became visible.

Further complicating matters is the under-prioritisation of social communication difficulties within broader Special Educational Needs (SEN) policy. While the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) advocates a holistic understanding of need, implementation remains uneven. Language and communication needs are often overlooked in favour of more visible literacy or behavioural concerns (Law et al., 2017; Dockrell et al., 2006). This contributes to the continued invisibility of learners whose difficulties do not disrupt classroom norms.

Educator training is critical in addressing these challenges. Lindsay et al. (2008) highlight that many teachers report limited preparation in identifying and supporting learners with social communication difficulties. Socioeconomic factors further shape access to support, with children from disadvantaged backgrounds often experiencing reduced exposure to language-rich environments (Hartas, 2011). This reinforces the need for equitable and informed approaches to inclusive practice.

As higher education increasingly incorporates digital platforms and emerging technologies, inclusive frameworks must ensure that innovation does not inadvertently reinforce existing communication and participation barriers (Picton & Clark, 2024). Longitudinal research further emphasises the importance of recognising communication difficulties early. Snowling et al. (2019) further demonstrates that without sustained support, these learners remain at risk of long-term marginalisation across educational and professional contexts. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines informed pedagogy, inclusive policy, and a commitment to recognising less visible forms of learner need.

In my current role as a senior academic leader, I design and promote learning environments that prioritise alternative forms of participation, including written discussion forums, visual presentations, and one-to-one mentoring. This demonstrates how lived experience informs inclusive pedagogical practice. By diversifying participation methods, I challenge traditional classroom norms that privilege verbal fluency and extroverted forms of engagement. This aligns with inclusive frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning (Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Such experiences have led me to develop more inclusive curriculum and assessment practices, encouraging diverse modes of expression such as visual media, audio recordings, asynchronous discussion boards, and scaffolded peer collaboration. I have also advocated for structured mentoring and flexible assessment

arrangements to support learners who are quiet, anxious, or socially withdrawn. This implies that inclusive practice requires educators to move beyond narrow, speech-based definitions of participation and to design learning environments that recognise communicative diversity (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Rose & Meyer, 2002).

Over time, in academic leadership roles, I have embedded these principles at a programme level through staff training, mentoring schemes, and inclusive curriculum design. This has contributed to improved learner outcomes and engagement by addressing not only academic performance but also student experience. This highlights that inclusive practice must be supported not only at the classroom level but also structurally within institutions. Leadership plays a critical role in embedding inclusive values into teaching and learning practices. These experiences have reinforced the importance of recognising that students who appear withdrawn are not necessarily disengaged but may be responding to unrecognised barriers to participation.

Overall, this section demonstrates that understanding emotional inclusion is as important as academic differentiation. Educators must move beyond surface-level interpretations of participation and develop more responsive approaches that prioritise emotional and communicative inclusion alongside academic development. Social communication difficulties remain under-recognised within inclusive education, despite their significant impact on participation, identity, and long-term outcomes. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-faceted approach that combines informed pedagogy, inclusive policy, and a commitment to recognising less visible forms of learner need.

Proposed strategies for inclusive practice

Further, building on the themes which have been identified in this study, especially the relationships between participation, emotional safety, and misrecognition, the following strategies are proposed in order to support learners with hidden communication difficulties.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an inclusive framework developed by Rose and Meyer (2002), which promotes offering learners multiple forms of representation, expression, and engagement. By allowing learners to demonstrate their understanding through writing, visual media, performance, or discussion, UDL minimises bias towards verbal fluency. It understands that communication is complex and that learners can benefit from flexibility in how they can access content and express their knowledge. In my own practice, I apply UDL principles to scaffold classroom discussions, incorporate visual support, and ensure that I provide various ways of assessment. These adjustments support learners with social communication difficulties and have been shown to enhance engagement and accessibility within inclusive learning environments (Bray et al., 2024; Zhang et al., 2024).

Trauma-informed practice (TIP) provides a complementary framework that emphasises the importance of emotional safety, trust, and predictability within learning environments (Hammond, 2015). It encourages educators to interpret behaviour as communication and to respond with curiosity and empathy rather than judgement or punishment. This approach recognises that learners may disengage or remain silent as a response to anxiety or prior negative experiences rather than a lack of ability. In practice, trauma-informed strategies include establishing consistent routines, offering regular check-ins, and avoiding high-pressure participation methods such as cold calling. Research highlights that trauma-informed approaches can significantly improve student engagement, well-being, and participation (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2016),

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

with more recent studies also indicating positive impacts on student emotional well-being and engagement, particularly in post-pandemic educational contexts (Allen et al., 2023; Milanovic et al., 2023).

The findings from this study highlight the need for more inclusive and responsive approaches to participation in educational settings. At an institutional level, this requires greater recognition to hidden communication needs and the implementation of structured support systems.

At an institutional level, greater recognition of hidden communication needs is required. This includes structured mentoring, flexible assessment practices, and increased staff awareness of social communication differences. By embedding these strategies within both classroom practice and institutional policy, educators can better support learners whose difficulties may otherwise remain invisible, ensuring more equitable participation and engagement. These strategies demonstrate how inclusive practice requires both pedagogical flexibility and institutional commitment to recognising diverse forms of communication and participation.

Discussion and implications for practice

The relationship between the lived experience and educational theory clearly shows a consistent gap in how educational institutions identify and support learners with social communication problems. There is literature present that acknowledges the presence of “hidden needs,” such as those that arise from pragmatic language challenges (Clegg et al., 2009; Norbury, 2014), but there continues to remain a limited amount of knowledge that is put into practice across mainstream educational environments. Drawing on my own personal experiences and the literature reviewed, various key suggestions arise for teaching practice, institutional policy, and educator development.

1. Reframe what participation means in the classroom

The need to redefine what participation looks like in a classroom setting is imperative. The traditional classroom methods are often in favour of extroverted behaviours, which support verbal fluency, quick responses, and learners who are confident in public speaking. These expectations can side-line students whose communication barriers are not always visible but are nevertheless real and impactful on the students’ academic journey. Recognising that engagement can take place in various forms, such as written reflections, creative projects, and one-on-one dialogue. These different forms of assessment can play a big role in shifting the focus from performativity to better understanding.

As outlined in the proposed strategies, frameworks such as UDL provide practical pathways for inclusive participation (Rose & Meyer, 2002). This offers students various pathways to express their learning. In my current practice, for example, I give students the option of written reflections, visual presentations, or recorded voice notes when they are responding to discussion prompts. This not only reduces anxiety but most importantly ensures inclusion by validating different communicative strengths. Mercer and Littleton (2007) agree and advocate for dialogic teaching methods that will foster deeper cognitive engagement beyond surface-level participation.

2. Embed emotional safety in pedagogical approaches

As my own experience demonstrates, emotional safety is imperative to learning effectively. When students feel that they are misunderstood or not visible, they are less likely to take part not out of disobedience, but

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

as a self-protective response to fear of failure. As my earlier experiences illustrate, when students feel misunderstood or invisible, participation may decrease as a protective response rather than disengagement.

This highlights the importance of embedding trauma-informed principles within classroom practice. In applied terms, this requires creating predictable learning environments which offer regular check-ins and avoid high-pressure participation methods such as cold calling. Such approaches can have a positive impact on how students experience the classroom and thus support more inclusive participation.

3. Enhance educator awareness and training

The need for training and continuous CPD is imperative to ensure systematic professional development that enhances educators' knowledge and capacity to identify and respond to subtle social communication challenges that are affecting Primary, secondary, further, and higher education. As Lindsay et al. (2008) argue, teachers often feel not prepared in this area to support students with these needs, particularly in secondary settings where the relationship between student and teacher may be less personal due to the number of students in a class. A similar issue can occur in higher education, where student numbers can be large in lecture rooms, limiting connection between educator and student.

Professional development programs for educators should therefore include:

- Further training on Social (Pragmatic) Communication Disorder (SCD)
- Recognition of gendered dimensions of social communication difficulties (e.g., the tendency for boys to present with more visible behaviours and girls to internalise struggles)
- Tools for alternative assessment methods and participation strategies
- Guidance on how to refer students for additional support without stigmatisation

In my own work as an educator and now leader, I now integrate modules on inclusive communication and hidden needs into CPD sessions, which allow educators to develop their knowledge. Using role-play scenarios and student-led case studies, which have proven to be effective when it comes to fostering empathy and perspective-taking among staff. Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) support this by advocating for CPD for educators, as this will allow them to better recognise and accommodate for learner diversity.

4. Challenge normative standards of communication

Another important implication is the need to challenge the normative communication culture, which is embedded in the education system across sectors. Similar to Alexander's (2008) critique of recitation scripts, current practices often measure intelligence or engagement through how verbally assertive students are. This is a cultural bias that puts neurodiverse learners and those from linguistic minority backgrounds at a disadvantage.

When it comes to inclusive communication strategies, educators need to move beyond tokenistic alterations and rethink how communication and feedback is given to students, and how peer collaboration is structured in an educational setting. For example, pairing students based on complementary rather than similar communication styles or creating asynchronous discussion boards in blended learning environments. This can level the playing field for those students who process or retain information in a

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

different manner. It will also allow better experiences for those students who struggle with social anxiety. Gee (2005) emphasises that language practices are inherently social and cultural, which stresses the importance of adapting pedagogies.

5. Provide clearer institutional guidance for supporting students with less visible communication needs

The SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) provides a framework for recognising and supporting children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities. However, its application to social communication disorder (SCD) and less visible communication difficulties remain inconsistent. Educational institutions should therefore provide staff with clearer guidance on applying these policies to students whose communication needs may not be accompanied by behavioural difficulties or declining academic performance. This guidance should outline appropriate identification processes, referral pathways, reasonable adjustments and targeted interventions. It should also emphasise that satisfactory attainment and compliant classroom behaviour do not necessarily indicate that a student requires no additional support.

6. Embed structured identification and monitoring processes into routine classroom practice

Educational institutions should embed proportionate processes for identifying and monitoring speech, language and communication needs within routine classroom practice (Dockrell et al., 2006; Lindsay et al., 2008). These processes may include staff observations, supportive conversations with learners and the structured recording of concerns. They can help educators recognise patterns such as withdrawal, missed social cues or reduced peer interaction.

These processes should not be used to diagnose or classify students. Instead, they should initiate supportive conversations, inform appropriate referrals and scaffold suitable interventions. This approach can enable support to be provided even when a learner's needs are difficult to identify formally. Student voice should also remain central to the process, as learners can provide direct insight into their individual experiences, challenges and support preferences.

7. Provide mentoring and peer-support initiatives

Structured mentoring can provide guidance in navigating social interactions, responding to feedback and building confidence during key educational transitions. As an educational leader, I advocate for peer-mentoring schemes, particularly for learners transitioning into college or university settings.

Mentoring programmes should therefore include:

- Appropriately trained professionals or peer mentors who understand communication barriers
- Careful matching based on compatibility and personal comfort, rather than academic strengths alone
- Regular reviews and opportunities for feedback to support learners' wellbeing and inclusion

Such schemes can benefit learners with communication barriers while also contributing to a more empathetic and inclusive educational culture. Rhodes (2005) suggests that strong and sustained mentoring relationships can support learners' academic, social and psychosocial development.

8. Embed inclusive communication practices within educator development

Higher education teacher training programs could ensure that educators have the knowledge to create opportunities to instill inclusive practices early in educators' careers. These findings have relevance to educational environments. This includes:

- Reflective writing on their own personal educational experiences
- Analysis of any bias in classroom engagement strategies
- Placement reflections focused on inclusion and participation

As someone who now mentors teacher trainees, I make sure to integrate these reflective elements. I also encourage trainees to observe not just academic performance but also affective engagement which learners are contributing, who is retreating, and what might be causing those patterns. Larrivee (2000) claims that critically reflective teaching is imperative for ensuring and cultivating inclusive and socially responsive educators who are catering to the individual needs of learners.

Conclusion

The journey from silent struggle to self-awareness is not merely a personal one, but it also reflects a broader issue of systemic oversight in education. My experiences of navigating academic life with undiagnosed social communication difficulties clearly highlight the emotional, relational, and academic consequences of “invisible” needs. These can often be misinterpreted or unrecognised, which highlights the need for more inclusive approaches to pedagogy, institutional policy, and educator awareness to ensure better learning experiences for such learners.

This article has highlighted gaps in how educational institutions define participation and support communicative diversity. By drawing on frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning and trauma-informed practice, it becomes clear that meaningful inclusion requires both shifts in practice and institutional commitment.

Educators must move beyond narrow assumptions about verbal fluency and recognise the diverse ways in which students like to engage and express understanding. By embedding emotional safety, flexible participation, and inclusive support systems, barriers to participation can be reduced and ensure better learning experiences.

Ultimately, this article calls for educational systems to listen more deeply, respond more empathetically, and create learning environments where all learners feel seen, heard, and understood.

Biography

Imran Mir is a Programme Lead and Campus Head with research interests in inclusive pedagogy, digital integration in private education, and practitioner-led leadership. He is an EdD candidate at the University of Glasgow and a Senior Fellow of Advance HE (SFHEA). Email: Imranmir10@live.co.uk

References

- Adams, C. (2002). Practitioner review: The assessment of language pragmatics. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 43(8), 973–987. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-7610.00226>
- Alexander, R. (2008). *Essays on pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Allen, R., Kannangara, C., & Carson, J. (2023). Long-term mental health impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students in the UK: A longitudinal analysis over 12 months. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 71(6), 585–608. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00071005.2023.2215857>
- American Psychiatric Association (APA). (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596>
- Bolton, G., & Delderfield, R. (2018). *Reflective practice: Writing and professional development* (5th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Bray, A., Devitt, A., Banks, J., Sanchez Fuentes, S., Sandoval, M., Riviou, K., Byrne, D., Flood, M., Reale, J., & Terrenzio, S. (2024). What next for Universal Design for Learning? A systematic literature review of technology in UDL implementations at second level. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 55(1), 113–138. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.13328>
- Brookfield, S. D. (1995). *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. Jossey-Bass.
- Brunzell, T., Waters, L., & Stokes, H. (2016). Trauma-informed positive education: Using positive psychology to strengthen vulnerable students. *International Journal of Child, Youth and Family Studies*, 7(2), 218–239. <https://doi.org/10.18357/ijcyfs72201615719>
- Carello, J., & Butler, L. D. (2015). Practicing What We Teach: Trauma-informed educational practice. *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 35(3), 262–278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2015.1030059>
- Clegg, J., Stackhouse, J., Finch, K., Murphy, C., & Nicholls, S. (2009). Language abilities of secondary-age pupils at risk of school exclusion: A preliminary report. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*, 25(1), 123–139. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265659008098664>
- 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*, 49(5), 516–525. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2007.01858.x>
- Department for Education (DfE). (2015). *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25>
- Dockrell, J. E., & Lindsay, G. (2001). Children with specific speech and language difficulties—the teachers’ perspective. *Oxford Review of Education*, 27(3), 369–394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03054980120067410>
- Dockrell, J. E., Lindsay, G., Letchford, B., & Mackie, C. (2006). Educational provision for children with specific speech and language difficulties: Perspectives of speech and language therapy service managers. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders*, 41(4), 423–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13682820500442073>
- Florian, L., & Black-Hawkins, K. (2011). Exploring inclusive pedagogy. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(5), 813–828. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.501096>
- Gee, J. P. (2005). *An introduction to discourse analysis: Theory and method* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Hammond, Z. (2015). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin Press.
- Hartas, D. (2011). Families’ social backgrounds matter: Socio-economic factors, home learning and young children’s language, literacy and social outcomes. *British Educational Research Journal*, 37(6), 893–914. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01411926.2010.506945>
- Larrivee, B. (2000). Transforming teaching practice: Becoming the critically reflective teacher. *Reflective Practice*, 1(3), 293–307. <https://doi.org/10.1080/713693162>
- Law, J., Charlton, J., & Asmussen, K. (2017). *Language as a child wellbeing indicator*. Early Intervention Foundation. <https://eprints.ncl.ac.uk/242266>

From silence to leadership: A reflective analysis of social communication barriers and inclusive practice in higher education

- Lindsay, G., Desforges, M., Dockrell, J., Law, J., Peacey, N., & Beecham, J. (2008). *Effective and efficient use of resources in services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs* (Research Report DCSF-RW053). Department for Children, Schools and Families.
- Mercer, N., & Littleton, K. (2007). *Dialogue and the development of children's thinking: A sociocultural approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203946657>
- Milanovic, K., Blainey, K., Hannay, T., & Wood, C. (2023). *The longer-term impact of COVID-19 on pupil attainment and wellbeing*. Hodder Education.
<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/The-longer-term-impact-of-COVID-19-on-pupil-attainment-and-well-being.pdf>
- Norbury, C. F. (2014). Practitioner review: Social (pragmatic) communication disorder conceptualization, evidence and clinical implications. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 55(3), 204–216. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12154>
- Picton, I., & Clark, C. (2024). *Children, young people and teachers' use of generative AI to support literacy in 2024*. National Literacy Trust.
<https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-young-people-and-teachers-use-of-generative-ai-to-support-literacy-in-2024/>
- Rhodes, J. E. (2005). A model of youth mentoring. In D. L. DuBois & M. J. Karcher (Eds.), *Handbook of youth mentoring* (pp. 30–43). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412976664.n3>
- Rose, D. H., & Meyer, A. (2002). *Teaching every student in the digital age: Universal Design for Learning*. ASCD.
- Snowling, M. J., Nash, H. M., Gooch, D., Hayiou-Thomas, M. E., & Hulme, C. (2019). Developmental outcomes for children at high risk of dyslexia and children with developmental language disorder. *Child Development*, 90(5), e548–e564. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13216>
- Zhang, L., Carter, R. A., Greene, J. A., & Bernacki, M. L. (2024). Unraveling challenges with the implementation of Universal Design for Learning: A systematic literature review. *Educational Psychology Review*, 36(1), 35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-024-09860-7>