

# The Voice to the Silenced

The Passion in the Action -  
Research Project



# Introduction

What is it that makes a voice so valuable?

Communication.

What is it that can stop a child from using their voice after feeling silenced and restricted?

Ask.

What if there was no response?

Research.

# Introduction continued...

There is no need to explain how important communication is in the education system, let alone the classroom.

I believe that creating a safe space to learn is essential for a learning environment. Creating a safe space that is socially and academically inclusive of all students is essential. Thus my goal as an educator is to ensure that all of my students are supported and motivated to keep ways of communication open.

# Action Research Goal

My goal is to help our student become comfortable within the classroom so that anxiety in communication in any form is lowered and confidence in interaction is increased.

# Research Question

How can we adequately support a student with selective mutism and create a communicative relationship between teacher, student, and peers?

# Selective Mutism

An anxiety disorder where a person can not speak in specific social situations, or to specific people.

Typically diagnose between 3-8 years of age.



# Selective Mutism

Students have a FEAR of speaking. Some research has shown that those with selective mutism may have an inhibited threshold for excitement in their amygdala, sending potential danger signal to the brain and body.

This may also lead to sensory processing delays and language development issues which may make the student feel more anxious in social situations.

# Selective Mutism

Those who come from bilingual families with multiple languages may also be limited in communication by nature. An additional stress of speaking another language can also be a factor in selective mutism.

Research shows that the cause can be from abuse or trauma. Those who are mute by this reason tend to be mute in all situations home and school.

# Pre-Research Thoughts

- Deeper research is needed to develop reasoning for lack of communication and selective behaviour. Different approaches will be required to develop systems of communication to further progress the learning, assessment and effective learning for the students.
- At a young age it is difficult to assess and develop an understanding of a student's ability without verbal response.
- Teaching basic reading skills, which also primes for writing and comprehension, is crucial in this stage of development. To cope with these unique situations learning interventions must be created.

# Placement Details

- Grade 1/ 2 split classroom
- 24 students
- 2 finalized IEPs, 5 in the processing stage/collecting data
- Teaching all general subjects except French and health.
- The classroom consisted of 2 students who were selectively mute; however, for my research I focused on one student.

*Names have been replaced to ensure privacy and confidentiality.*

# Phase One

Professional inquiry.

- Discussed topic with Speech Pathologist and Learning Support Teachers.

Data Collection. This began with asking the following questions:

- When do that talk? When do they feel comfortable participating in class?
- Who do they feel comfortable talking to?
- How do they communicate?
- How can we motivate speech?
- Where can we provide alternative form of communication?
- Why does the student feel this way?

# Phase Two

Implementation of new strategies.

- Bravery Ladder
- Communication Kazoo
- Classroom Reinforcement chart
- USB initiative

# Data Log (in sum)

## Bravery Ladder:

Student is introduced to a bravery ladder. Each level consists of a level of bravery. Ranging from non-verbal communications, to turning your voice on, whispers etc. When the student successfully completes a new goal they are given a sticker and able to move up the bravery ladder.





## Kazoo:

Student is given a kazoo as a form of communication. Light blow means “yes”, And a pull of the Kazoo and shake of the head means “no”. Placing their lips on the Kazoo indicates that they have a thought or something to say. If peers hear student speak, they can provide said student with a sticker on the bravery ladder and a move 3 spots on the rewards chart.

# Data Log continued...

After a few weeks the Kazoo's magic faded.

It became a bit of a chore. Students were tempted to play with it, and it was also easily misplaced throughout the classroom.

However, the classroom reinforcement chart remained a strong reinforcer!

Student was able to move their name each time they attempted to verbally communicate within the classroom.

Parent offered to send a email with a voice clip of student reading.

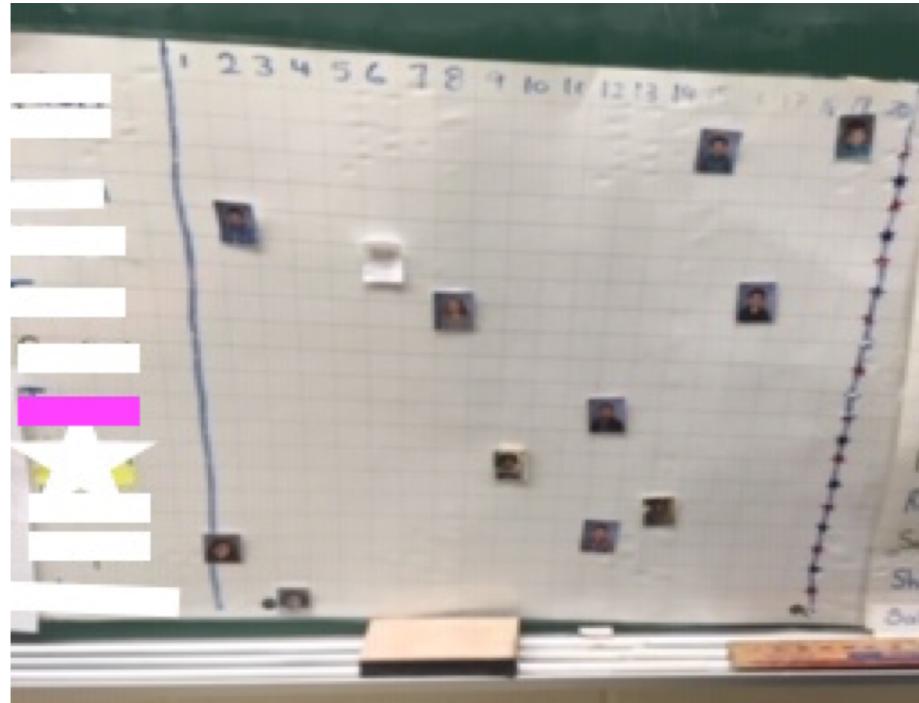
- WARNING: Parental Influence.

Student participation increased and student became more confident. Student continued to interact with peers and build friendships.

Very interesting to observe non-verbal communication between two students who were selectively mute.

- Physical play
- Silly faces
- Pointing and smiles
- Fantastic Miming!

LIGHT BULB MOMENT!



# Light Bulb Moment!

Guided Reading Troubles

PM testing

Provided alternatives

Reassessment

Appropriate grouping

Perfect example of adequate support, and equitable learning strategy.



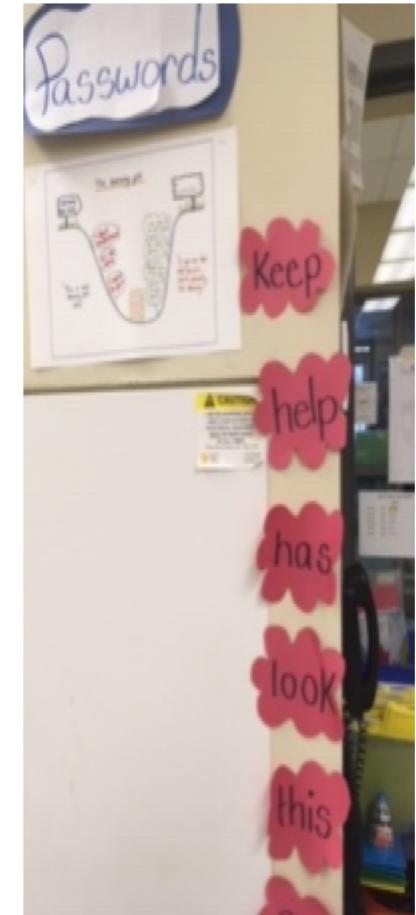
# Data log continued...

Student began to mouth words!

Student mouthed “Passwords” - sight word posted in the classroom. Student must read the passwords before leaving the room for recess after the language block.

Student now mouths during class discussion/circle time  
(Math and Writing lessons)

Student refused to use a whiteboard to communication.

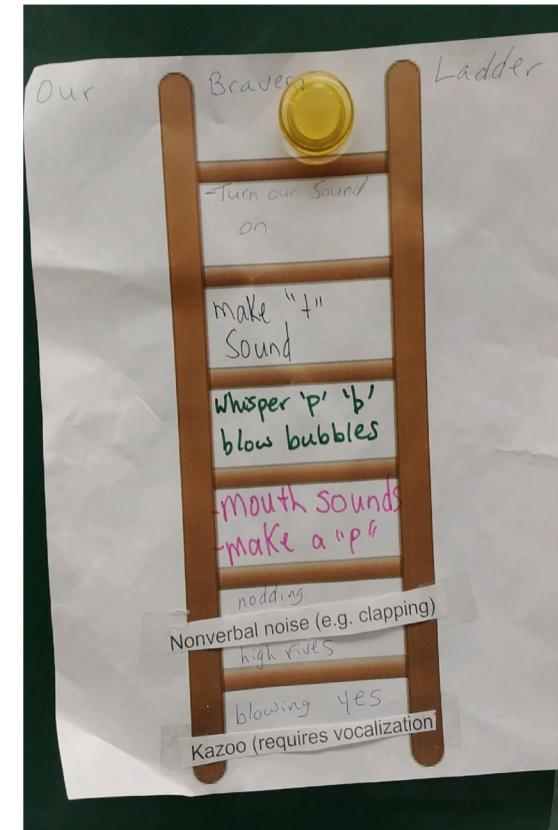


Student has playdate with peer, and whispered one word to peer!

Student says “buh” sound. Beginning to **turn on your voice!**

Student receives bubbles with every move on the ladder.

Student is now using hand signals, mouthing, pointing and using fingers to answer math questions during circle/learning time!



# Results

Student has progressed with a steady pace. Student now communicates with mouthing and hand gestures. This is a major increase in interaction and confidence in communication. The bravery ladder is still a motivator, but has slightly faded off students desk and is now on the board.

Student's parents are confident in the student's abilities to verbally communicate in the near future.

# Next Steps...

Revist USB method.

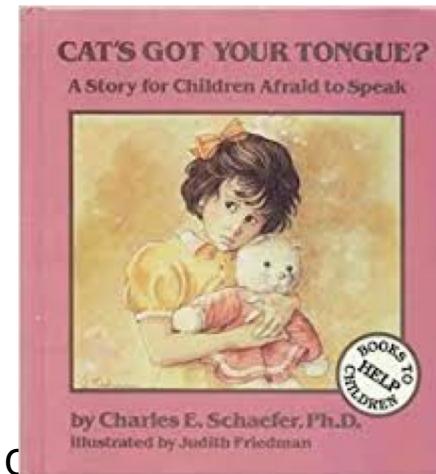
- Have the student give the USB, so the student will be in charge of "giving their voice" rather than having the parents give the student's voice.
- USB= My Voice, and I am allowing you to hear it.

Continue positive reinforcement!



# Applications in the classroom

- Allow for student to communicate through different avenues.
  - Students can write statements on a whiteboard or a piece of paper.
- Read-Alouds!
  - Cat's Got Your Tongue?: A Story for Children Afraid to Speak,
    - by Charles Schaefer, Judith Friedman
- Create self-esteem boosters!
- Develop an IEP that will ensure adequate assessment.
  - Avoids worsening anxieties, that may lead to depression
  - Improves self-esteem and confidence
  - Limits academic underachievement



# Future Research Questions

How can we accommodate for assessment? How do we assess for oral, reading comprehension and presentation skills in a primary sitting?

How soon is it to assess for diagnosis?

Selective mutism is typically caused by anxiety and with hopes in increasing self confidence, should we be so quick to label a student?

# If you suspect a child has selective mutism, what should you do?

Teachers should remove any expectations on the student, and explaining that you are aware they are having a difficult time and that you are here to help.

- The next step would be to talk with the parents to create open communication on their child's abilities.
- Encourage parents to speak with their family physician or pediatrician and/or seek out a psychiatrist or a therapist who has experience with Selective Mutism to create a individual treatment plan.



# Further Intervention

- Social Communication Anxiety Therapy
- Behavioral Therapy
- Play Therapy, Psychotherapy, and other psychological approaches:  
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy:
- Medication (personally least favourite)
- School and family involvement and acceptance (the easiest to obtain)



# Additional Resources

Smart Center -Selective Mutism, Anxiety, & Related Disorders Treatment Center

<https://selectivemutismcenter.org/whatisselectivemutism/>

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association

<https://www.asha.org/public/speech/disorders/selective-mutism>

CHEO - Selective Mutism: Information for Parents and Caregivers

<http://www.cheo.on.ca/en/selective-mutism>

Helping Children and Youth with Selective Mutism

<http://www.cheo.on.ca/uploads>Selective%20Mutism>Selective%20Mutism%20ENG.pdf>

eMentalHealth.ca -Local Areas of Support

<https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Ottawa-Carleton>Selective-Mutism/index.php?m=heading&ID=421>

Teaching students with an exceptionality can be difficult, but can be seen as a rewarding challenge once adequate resources and strategies have been put into place. The child's success is the priority.

