The effect of implementing simplified and reduced internal school communication on teachers' perception of workload and wellbeing.

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PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

In June 2019, Hilltop Infant School adapted a survey from the DfE materials (Department for Education, 2018a) to look at issues surrounding workload. 70% of teachers and senior leaders identified that communication was a key trigger to increasing teacher workload. Therefore, the purpose of the research was to measure the impact on teacher workload, wellbeing and pupil progress when communication systems are improved across the school. Following a trust-wide workload and wellbeing survey, HEARTS Academy Trust are committed to reducing teacher workload and improving wellbeing and therefore this has been highlighted as a key area for development. We already have a workload reduction team and a wellbeing team consisting of members of school from each school in the trust. Reducing teacher workload is desirable as it may help to improve teacher retention and wellbeing (Department for Education 2018b; Geiger and Pivovarova (2018); Foster (2019)).

THE RESEARCH DESIGN

To evaluate the effect of changing communication approaches across the school during the workload reduction intervention period, a quantitative analysis was used to compare the data from two groups of children: current cohorts compared to last year's pupils. The analysis compared data from:
- Control group – average points score for Reception and Year 1 collected in the Autumn Term 2018
- Intervention group – average points score for Years 1 and 2 collected in the Autumn Term 2019

The control group and intervention group experienced the following conditions:
- Control group – (IV Level 1) emails are the most frequently used form of communication. All cover, events, courses are recorded in a diary kept in the office.
- Intervention group – (IV Level 2) simplified and reduced school communication through the introduction of both an online, whole school calendar and a daily 2 minute meetings led by a member of SLT.

Figure 1: Research design
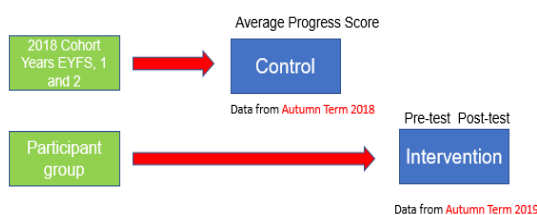
The design allowed for the testing of the following hypotheses:
H1 – Pupil attainment as measured by an average point score will not be affected by improving/reducing communication volume.
H2 – Teacher's perceptions of workload will improve as a result of improved communication.
H3 – Teachers will spend less time checking and responding to emails and asking for further clarification.

LIMITATIONS

A randomised controlled trial was not possible because the whole school conducted the interventions simultaneously. The results are limited by the fact that the data used as a control was from a previous year. In addition, it was unlikely that changing communication would have a direct effect on pupil attainment. However we felt it important to check that no negative effects had occurred as a result of what were substantial shifts in teacher behaviour during the intervention period.

METHODS

Participants and sample size

Hilltop Infant School is a mixed ability school, within an affluent area in Essex. As a school we have 8% of children with SEN, which is below national average (15%). Hilltop Infant School has a PAN (Pupil Admission number) of 75, with a maximum of 225 children on roll.

In Autumn 2018, there were 222 children on roll, 102 boys, 120 girls.
In Autumn 2019, there were 206 children on roll, 92 boys and 114 girls.

Procedures

Control Group:
Emails were the most frequently used form of communication. All cover, events, courses were recorded in a diary kept in the office, where all teachers could add to this. Diary dates were then displayed on a two weekly rota in the staffroom. SLT members were responsible for conveying key messages or key changes to all staff and updating the staffroom board when changes occur.

Intervention:
Simplified and reduced school communication through the introduction/development of the role of the middle leaders within school so that key messages and changes are filtered to all staff more efficiently. This was done through the introduction of both an online, whole school calendar and a daily 2 minute meetings led by a member of SLT.

Materials (and apparatus)

- Workload survey pre- and post-test
- Staff meeting to introduce the project and intervention
- Data collection at Autumn 2 (2018,2019)
- Time use collection sheet x 2 (beginning and end of the Autumn Term 2019)
- Daily meeting protocol
- Online Calendar (Microsoft Outlook)

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Overall pupil progress stayed the same or improved during the intervention period compared to the period that was chosen as a control group comparison. This suggests that there were no negative effects on pupil attainment and progress as a result of changing communication strategies within school. The effect sizes ranged from a very small effect to a large effect.

A reduction of 18% of teacher time was observed during the intervention period when compared with the control period. The results of the staff perception survey were positively influenced by the implementation of improved communication strategies.

RESULTS

In order to assess pupil attainment and progress during the intervention period, where a wide range of communication approaches in the school were reduced in terms of workload, the following analyses took place. Gain scores were first calculated for pre- and post-test data (Reception and Year 1). Separate two-tailed Mann-Whitney U tests were then conducted (tables 1 and 2). For Year 2, post-test only data was available.

Table 1: Reading, writing and maths scores for Year 1 cohort 2019 compared to Year 1 cohort 2018.

	Effect Size (r)	CI (95%)	p-value	[d]
Reading	-0.024	-0.204 – 0.156	0.638	-0.047
Writing	0.226	0.059 – 0.393	0.021	0.463
Maths	0.206	0.038 – 0.374	0.014	0.420

Table 2: Reading, writing and maths scores for Reception cohort 2019 compared to Reception cohort 2018.

	Effect Size (r)	CI (95%)	p-value	[d]
Reading	0.065	-0.106 – 0.236	0.727	0.129
Writing	0.112	-0.057 – 0.281	0.216	0.223
Maths	0.242	0.077 – 0.407	<0.001	0.495

Table 3: Reading, writing and maths scores for Year 2 cohort 2019.

	Effect Size (r)	CI (95%)	p-value	[d]
Reading	0.439	0.282 – 0.597	<0.001	0.971
Writing	0.414	0.254 – 0.575	<0.001	0.903
Maths	0.478	0.328 – 0.629	<0.001	1.081

Figure 2: Intervention teacher time communicating pre- and post-test.
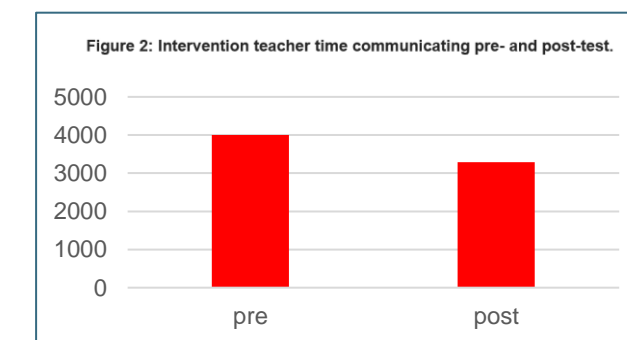
The total number of minutes spent on communication in school was collated both pre- and post-intervention. There was an 18% reduction in the number of minutes spent per week.

A pre- and post- staff survey showed that staff perceptions of communications had improved in four out of five areas: efficiency, less time wasted, being kept informed and sufficient notice of changes. There was no change in teacher perception in relation to responding to emails outside of work.

REFERENCES Department for Education (2018a). Identifying the issues: school workload reduction toolkit. www.gov.uk. Department for Education (2018b). Factors affecting teacher retention: qualitative investigation Research report – Cooper Gibson Research. London: Department for Education. Foster, D (2019). Teacher recruitment and retention in England. House of Commons Library, Briefing Paper, 7222, 12th February. Geiger, T. and Pivovarova, M. (2018). 'The effects of working conditions on teacher retention'. Teachers and Teaching, 24(6), 604-625.