

**MORE THAN WORDS CAN SAY:
THE DIVERSE COMMUNICATION NEEDS OF YOUNG CHILDREN
IN THE FOUNDATION STAGE**

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Background

It is now acknowledged that delay in language development is the most common childhood disability (Law *et al.*, 2000) and that language skills play an important part in all later learning (Barnes & Todd, 1995).

The acquisition of language boosts learning enormously enabling children to reflect upon and change their cognitive functioning, and represents a core symbolic system which underpins human cognitive activity, vastly increasing the efficiency of memory, reasoning and problem solving (Goswami, 2008: 14). Language, therefore, as a symbolic system, is central to the whole process of learning and reasoning (Whitehead & Bingham, 2011).

Policy

English government policy places increasing emphasis on the assessment and diagnostic roles of early years practitioners (Mroz and Hall, 2003) in meeting the individual needs of young children in the Foundation Stage (for birth to five years).

Inclusion and Diversity

The EYFS framework makes particular reference to children's cultural and linguistic differences, and the critical role of the practitioner in providing opportunities to develop and value differences. 'practitioners must plan for the needs of children from black and other minority ethnic backgrounds, including those learning English as an additional language ...' (2008: 6)

EAL or Additional Needs?

It can be 'extremely difficult to ascertain whether children's problems in making progress in their settings are due to their limited experience in English language, or due to their learning difficulties in general'

(Fumoto, Hargreaves and Maxwells 2007:137)

Benefits of ECI

The benefits to children, families and society of early intervention are well documented .Early detection and intervention of children's individual needs can 'alter the learning trajectories for children with consequent benefits' as:

Early capability makes later learning more efficient and enhancing early capability at the outset of learning also increases the complexity of what can be learned. (Goswami, 2008: 8)

Communication Development

Children's communication skills are acquired and actively shaped through the intervention of other persons as mediators between the child and a social-cultural environment. (Vygotsky, 1962; Bruner, 1983)

In many early years settings, children come from varied multicultural backgrounds that incorporate many different traditions and values (Ang, 2010: 43).

The ability to communicate using gesture, touch, eye gaze, pointing, drawing and other methods of creative non-verbal expression have all been recorded in pre-school children's repertoire of strategies (Flewitt, 1985; McTear, 2008; Nadel, 1993; Trevarthen, 1995)

The role of the early years practitioner

Adults' sensitivity towards children's ethnic and cultural backgrounds is essential to creating a social-emotional climate that is conducive to learning.

(Fumoto et al: 137)

This study

Aims

The paper aims to describe and analyse the speech language and communication needs (SLCN) of young children aged birth to five years in one local authority (LA) in England and the reported professional response of early years practitioners to those needs.

Research questions

- Specific research questions are as follows:
- What early identification, assessment and intervention requirements does policy place on practitioners in early years' settings?
- How do practitioners across a range of settings implement policy requirements?
- What are the views, understandings and reported practices of practitioners with respect to SLCN in the EYFS?

Methodology

The case study research to be reported here focuses on professional behaviour in its everyday context, specifically upon the interaction between 'young children and the persons, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment' (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998: 996). It explores key issues affecting those in the case study settings through the use of questionnaires and interviews (Denscombe, 2010). The study thus represents a study of a contemporary phenomenon in its natural setting using mixed methods and multiple (case) sites (Yin, 2009) with maximum variation of sites.

Findings

Of sixty-four practitioners who responded, they reported that they were supporting children as young as 12 months old and, as might be expected, the number of children with SLCN reported rose in parallel with maturation from 7 (2.9%) out of a total of 239 children for the 12-24 month age range through to 188 (13.3%) out of a total of 1,406 for the 24-48 month age range, as it became more easily identifiable that a delay existed. Numbers of pre-schoolers decreased between 48-60 months, as children entered school.

Expressive language

Fifty-one participants described aspects of children's SLCN, with 17 reporting difficulty in producing speech sounds, 15 with difficulty in speech fluency, 12 with delayed speech, 8 with selective mutism, another 8 described as having delayed language, 6 with unclear speech, 6 with difficulty in using appropriate gesture, 5 with limited vocabulary, 5 reported as having unspecified communication difficulties, 4 described as having immature speech, 4 with general speech difficulties, 3 children described as non-verbal and 2 as quiet/reluctant talkers. One or two others reported other language and communication needs such as lack of intentional communication.

Receptive language

In terms of children with receptive language development, 24 participants reported that they were supporting children who needed help. Thirteen children were reported to lack understanding of language, 12 to lack of social interaction and play skills, 9 to lack attention and listening skills, 3 to have general behavioural difficulties, 2 to have hearing problems and a further 2 to lack understanding of rules or following instructions. A further two children were described as having 'unspecified receptive language needs' or 'memory difficulties'. Participants from ten settings stated that none of the children currently attending their setting had SLCN

Early signs of a delay or disorder

Practitioners' perceptions of the early signs of a delay/disorder included:

Lack of speech in particular children at the expected age norms :

some children may just be shy or watching and taking it all in and not speaking, but it's how they relate to other children, what they're doing if you have your back to them and your ear to them, how are they expressing their needs and interests, then you get a total picture' (teacher in a maintained nursery).

Not being able to follow simple instructions or understand what was being said, evidenced by attempts to pick up cues from other children or being unable to follow instructions when multisensory cues were removed

Lack of interaction with peers /social communication difficulties:

'children may be communicating inappropriately, so they're just talking over everything because they're not understanding what's expected of them in that sort of circumstance' (teacher in an ICAN centre).

Needing support in developing concentration, attention and listening skills, and in being ready to learn was also highlighted by four practitioners.

An absence of early babbling was regarded as an indication of a need for extra monitoring:

'out of the babbling develops the early words, so I would need to know that they were making those early sounds' (manager of a day nursery).

The way in which children 'behaved' and the need for recognition that there may be an underlying cause of certain behaviour related to communication were also indicated by some practitioners:

it may be that perhaps their behaviour was being supported, whereas actually it's a speech and language difficulty that's behind their behaviour/difficulty with relationship or general difficulties' (teacher in an ICAN centre).

Cultural aspects

Six out of ten practitioners said they would find it difficult to identify if a child with EAL had a communication delay or disorder. Those who said they felt reasonably confident about this said they would :

- Talk to parents about the child's language at home and identify key words to use within the setting
- Assess whether the child was picking up any words and/or the routine at the setting in English and use this as an indicator,
- Go to visit the child in the home setting to assess their communication there if they were concerned
- Plan activities for the child to do in the child's home language within the setting to assess whether the child is able to comply with requests/instructions
- Refer the child for speech and language therapy

Cultural aspects

One practitioner described the impact of ‘the language barrier’ as:

“communicating beyond the here and now and naming things can be difficult. You can always find ways to express yourself if there’s a language barrier by the use of pointing and gesture, but it’s difficult to talk about what you did last night” (teacher in a maintained nursery)

One practitioner mentioned cultural differences in reaching developmental milestones:

“culturally, we have children for whom it is natural to be weaned later than we would expect, still be using bottles at the age of three and four and to be potty trained later than we would normally expect.” (SENCo in a pre-school)

PMLD and EAL

One child is Polish, at the moment his language is a barrier, he knows his name and hello. We have interpreters if we want to speak with mum.

We have a home-school diary for daily communication with parents, children travel here by bus, so this is important. I write in his diary that he has had a nice day then take photos of him being happy and engaged and send them home with 'D very happy at school' underneath which gives her reassurance. Mum has given us some key words such hello, good looking.

Gesture, signing and body language work well with him, but communication isn't his only need (he has lots of sensory processing needs), therefore his primary target is to engage, he recognises his name, he will look at you, but his world is very small, at the moment we're trying to access that, we are communicating with role modelling, play, key words, objects of reference, keep it simple, show him objects, lots of intensive interaction, mimicking his voice, mum speaks to him in Polish at home. We have strategies in place to support him, but the language is not the whole picture.

He has the same curriculum as other children, but everything we do with him is based on familiar objects. I wouldn't expect him to recognise or associate with things he hasn't seen before, so everything is within his world. Everything is about routine, and routines that are repetitive and what's familiar.

Timetables are important and very structured. I have children who have to know what's coming next, if they don't know what's coming next, it really unsettles them.

Teacher in a special school (all 8 children in the class have profound and multiple learning difficulties or severe learning difficulties of which communication delay/disorder is a feature)

Impact on peer relationships

Practitioner perceptions of the relationship between communication development and children's peer relations were diverse, including:

Children can be 'very tolerant' of differences in peer interactions

Children with delayed language and communication skills might experience difficulties in requesting a turn and sharing, inviting other children to join in with their play

There might be an impact on children's pretend/imaginative and role play/shared attention resulting from delayed language and communication skills:

we have children from a mainstream nursery visit us and it's nice to see them talking and playing the role play area, cooking and pretending, our children are nowhere near that ability (teacher in a special school).

One teacher explained the impact on child-initiated play:

child-initiated play causes me no end of grief, if we don't directly give the child choices or take them to activities, they can't access them. It's only child initiated in the fact that I'm giving them two or three things to choose from, they're communicating their likes and dislikes but only within the parameters of what we're able to offer them directly (teacher in a special school).

Another practitioner felt that as children 'play in a solitary or parallel way until they are three anyway, there would be no impact on play', if a child experienced a language or communication delay.

The adult role

Practitioners' perceptions relating to their own role in supporting children related mainly to modelling language and vocabulary and practitioners described this aspect as key. This relies on knowing and acknowledging the child's developmental level and what motivates them *'so that you can model just a bit more than they're doing but not too much for them to process which may overload them'* (teacher in a maintained nursery).

Facilitating activities and relationships was felt to be important *'the play experiences that adults provide is key in an early years setting because children don't always get that at home'* (SENCO in a pre-school).

Providing opportunities to communicate in an appropriate environment was reported by some practitioners:

the way things are set out, spaces to talk through, tubes to talk through, games where there's a reason to say something because the other person can't see from there they are so you have to tell them (teacher in a maintained nursery).

Other practitioners felt that adults interacting with the child and providing communicative relationships was important :

interacting with them in all areas of communication, so smiling, eye contact, talking to them when they're tiny, giving them vocabulary for things, being caring in a way that provides one-to-one exchanges and supporting them to communicate in a group as they get older (manager of a private day nursery).

In summary, practitioners are concerned that children with communication delays and disorders, left unrecognised and unsupported, will experience difficulties throughout life and will face particular difficulties at school.

Supporting children with EAL and SLCN may be an area where more training is needed. However, practitioners are clear that their own role at this stage as communicative partners and facilitators of communication development in order for young children to build positive relationships with others.

This role is seen as a platform for positive social, emotional and cognitive development and requires sensitivity towards children's cultural and linguistic heritage.

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