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All contributors can be contacted individually for further information. We hope you enjoy this edition.

Systemic approaches to children with specific speech and language difficulties

Geoff Lindsay and Julie Dockrell

What is ‘good practice’ in working with children with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD)? We are now very familiar with pleas to improve and to produce the best we can as practitioners and researchers and the government has a number of mechanisms whose purpose is to push up standards. But we also know that life is not so simple, especially when considering children with various developmental difficulties. Nevertheless, seeking to implement optimal practice must surely be correct.

We recently completed a study seeking to explore ‘good practice’ for children with SSLD funded by the Nuffield Foundation. We started with examples reported by practitioners and policy makers as good practice from an earlier study, also funded by Nuffield, and guided by our own practice and research experience. We wanted to examine the total system, from national policy and its interpretation and implementation at LEA and trust level, right through to the practice in the school. For example, the use of specialist language units/resources (LRs) as opposed to a full mainstream approach will be an LEA policy decision, but this might be influenced by a joint process with the speech and language therapy (SLT) service. Implementation will depend on the practitioners involved. Hence we can imagine a series of systems from policy-making to the teacher/SLT working together for an individual child which together make up the total LEA/trust system.

We identified six LEA/trust pairs (case studies) that had reported different types of good practice in the earlier study and experience of effective collaboration between the LEA and the trust. They were selected to represent different locations (urban/rural) and models of support: high use of specialist provision (i.e. language units/resources in mainstream school), mainstream school focus, and an intermediate model. The six were investigated from policy formulation by senior managers to the work of individual practitioners with children. We collected information from teachers, SENCos, SLTs, educational psychologists (EPs), senior managers about their work in general, and that with specific children, across all key stages. We also interviewed the parents to gain their perspectives on the experiences of their own children, examined documents (e.g. individual education plans) and observed practice in schools. We wanted to identify the evidence for the reported good practice in these six cases.

As the LEAs had different policies, we were able to investigate good practice in specialist LRs and mainstream. In the former we found a high level of support for children from SLTs, between 1 and 3 times per week; much work in small groups/pairs using individual language programmes, with attention to specific skills; parents
were often following up at home guided by the SLT and teacher; and the teaching assistant (TA) would do regular follow-up work in school. There were many examples of differentiation strategies and adaptation of language to aid the children. Monitoring and assessment were regular and specific - in some cases on a daily basis against specific targets.

These LRs could be divided into two main types with different characteristics for the children. In the 'segregated' model (units) interviewees talked about the high level of support and safe environment they provided, while in the 'integrated model' interviewees commented upon their careful placement of the children with SSLD with experienced teachers, the children being full members of the class, and classmates being tolerant and supportive.

In full mainstream provision the children were typically provided with speech/language support by withdrawal from the class, with other elements of their individual education plans (IEPs) being incorporated into everyday work. The special educational needs coordinators (SENCoS) in these settings also stressed the use of a range of differentiation strategies including the use of small steps and modeling. Use of TAs was again common but SLTs worked through the teachers rather than directly with the children to a much greater extent.

However, the study confirmed two of our earlier worrying findings: support in all types of provision, mainstream and specialist, dropped off significantly at KS3/4 and teachers reported relatively little access to continuing professional development to support their work with children with SSLD.

We also collected data from SLTs and EPs, each with important roles in the system. SLTs had a focus on diagnosis of the children's needs, an approach which is not comfortable for many educationists who prefer to focus on identifying needs. However, about two thirds of SLTs wrote progress reports for annual reviews. EPs, by contrast, were much less likely to be involved directly with the children once their needs had been identified and, after a statement had been written – for example, only 7% always wrote progress reports for the annual reviews. The SLTs recognized the many demands on EPs, who of course, must deal with the full range of special educational needs, not only SSLD, and reported expecting only some children, typically those with social and behavioural difficulties, to be referred to the EP.

There were several overarching themes from these case studies. Collaboration was central, from policy makers down to teachers, SLTs, EPs and parents at the school level. This was not unproblematic and its exact manifestation depended in part on the type of organisation in which they were working, e.g. whether there were LRs or a full mainstream approach. It could vary from joint working to the SLT serving as a consultant to the teacher, or an EP to an SLT. Other major themes included the importance of training, including joint training; careful monitoring and evaluation of practice as well as children’s progress; and the ‘fine-tuning’ of interventions in LRs where such practice was more easy to implement than in mainstream.

We found evidence that children with SSLD were being included and a good deal of consideration by teachers of differentiation of language and the curriculum. But we also found teachers often had a limited understanding of the children’s wider problems, e.g. their behavioural, social and emotional development which is often compromised in children with SSLD.

Benchmarks of ‘good practice’ that emanate from the study encompass flexibility including a variety of provision (units/resources and mainstream) and skills in differentiation to meet different types and levels of need; active involvement of professionals at all levels; informed school staff, well supported by SLTs and, to a lesser extent, EPs; and collaborative partnerships making effective use of each others’ expertise within whichever system the professionals were working.

However, the study also raised the intriguing question – what, then, is effective practice? The characteristics we have identified can justifiably be seen as ‘good practice’ on a number of dimensions, but there was a lack of evidence of their effectiveness. For example, decisions to develop either a mainstream service or specialist LRs may be based on beliefs about inclusive education and the systems necessary to achieve this. But this is a very different question to what works best for these children with SSLD in terms of their academic and social development. We are currently visiting all the six case studies to share these findings - both the generic across the study and those particular to each site. The distinction between ‘good’ and ‘effective,’ practice for that particular LEA/pair is a matter of great interest. It is also central to practice in all LEAs and trusts in the country.

References
Dockrell, J E, Lindsay, G, Letchford, C and Mackie, C. Educational provision for children with specific speech and language difficulties: Perspectives of speech and language therapy managers. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders (in press)
Addressing the challenge of assessing expressive language in children with severe speech disorders

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Children with speech disorders can present a significant challenge to professionals with regard to the assessment of their expressive syntactic abilities. The most obvious reason for this is that their speech may be too unintelligible to identify the words they are targeting. In addition, because of their speech difficulties, they may refuse to attempt assessment items or produce utterances at a level below their true linguistic potential. Consequently, it is difficult to accurately determine whether these children have syntactic problems in addition to their speech difficulties. This limits our ability to design and implement effective interventions with these children.

This research assessed whether a purposefully designed sentence imitation task could be used as a reliable, effective and efficient method of assessing the expressive syntactic abilities of children with different types of speech disorder. The primary advantage of sentence imitation is that the listener knows the target the child is supposed to produce and is therefore able to evaluate the child's productions in relation to target words and structures. Existing sentence imitation assessments are not suitable for a number of reasons:

(i) They often lack systematic grading in terms of sentence length and syntactic complexity
(ii) The phonological output demands may penalise children with speech disorders, and
(iii) Scoring is ‘all or nothing’ and therefore does not cater for the imperfect productions of children with speech difficulties.

To address these limitations, a finely graded sentence imitation task was designed (from 2 to 9 words in length) where phonological characteristics were kept as simple as possible. A novel scoring system was devised where careful consideration was given to scoring criteria in order to credit a child with the marking of a sentence component (morpheme) as opposed to its correct production. The children's imitations were evaluated according to three syntactic categories: content words, function words and inflections.

The research focused on two groups of 14 children with different types of speech disorder as defined by Dodd (1995): the consistent group (CPD) used atypical phonological processes consistently, and the inconsistent group (IPD) used atypical phonological processes inconsistently. Their performance was compared to 33 children with typical development and 13 children diagnosed with expressive language difficulties (SLI) who are known to experience difficulty with sentence imitation. The groups were matched for age (4-6 years old), receptive language and on a non-verbal screening.

The results showed that the group of children with CPD performed as well as the children with typical development, apart from their imitation of inflections. In contrast, the group of children with IPD showed greater syntactic difficulties, though there was significant variation within the group. Further analysis revealed that the abilities of 8 of the children with IPD were comparable with the CPD group of children. The remaining 6 IPD children exhibited difficulties imitating content and function words comparable to those of the SLI group. The reliability of this task was confirmed when the same pattern of responses was obtained in a later study with different participants. The findings were further supported by more extensive assessments of syntax.

The fact that all the children attempted to imitate the complete set of sentences suggests that this sentence imitation task is effective in eliciting sentence output from children between the ages of 4 and 6 years, even those with atypical speech. It also proved effective in discriminating between children with and without difficulties. Hence, this sentence imitation task may be considered a useful assessment tool that successfully addresses the challenge of assessing children whose syntactic difficulties may be masked by their unintelligible productions.

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References
Practitioners' Corner

In this section the views of different practitioners who work with children who have language and communication difficulties are presented. By considering the views of different professional groups and practitioners working in different contexts we hope to highlight the range of strengths and needs the children experience. If you would like to express your views here please contact one of the editors.

Having a most enjoyable and challenging role as advisory teachers for speech and language in the London Borough of Barking and Dagenham this article has provided the opportunity to reflect on the main pre-requisites for our job. It was decided that a large car boot, strong biceps, a lunch you can eat at traffic lights or in a car park, and a friendly smile were essential.

The team of two advisory teachers for speech and language (part of the Central Inspection and Advisory Service Educational Inclusion Team) provides advice and support to all schools in the borough of Barking and Dagenham.

We advise on all aspects of speech and language, from whole class and school inclusion strategies in order to increase pupils' access to the curriculum, to assisting with target setting and programmes to develop an individual pupil's speech and language skills.

Since the team was established in September 2002 the main focus of our work has been awareness raising and training.

Firstly we encourage all the schools to receive our inclusion strategies, awareness raising training. This was devised collaboratively with a therapist from the Primary Care Trust and an educational psychologist.

The training consists of three twilight sessions or one half day delivered at the school setting for all staff. (A large boot for resources and training materials is essential).

The training, supported by a handbook, covers seven areas of speech and language: attention and listening; auditory processing, speech production, semantics, grammar, cognition and pragmatics.

Each of the seven sections provides a definition of terminology used, indicators of need, developmental milestones, inclusive strategies, suggestions for individual and small group activities and resource suggestions. At key stage 3 subject information is also provided.

Secondly, we have devised a course following the Joint Professional Development framework foundation stage (commissioned by the DFES and set up by I CAN).

Twenty-three schools have now completed this six session course, delivered over a year. Each of these schools now has an LSA and teacher with an extended knowledge of speech and language. The participants become the link personnel between the school and services for speech and language. The number of pupils referred to these plans.

Thirdly, the advisory teachers provide centrally based courses on individual subjects, such as word finding, visual support, cued articulation, and phonological awareness.

This is a rewarding job but huge, as speech and language impinges on every lesson and all areas of a child's life. Liaison with other advisory teams and support agencies is essential.

This is certainly not a job without rewarding challenges. As the number of pupils referred to the team continue to rise, so too do the expected skills of school staff in understanding how to meet their needs.

We are kept very busy giving advice on how to update individual speech and language programmes, how to implement programmes, how to include the programme targets into the curriculum, how to include and involve parents…..And so it goes on, which is why eating at traffic lights, the calming sounds of Classic fm and a cheerful smile are essential.

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Intervention studies funded
The Nuffield Foundation is seeking to fund a small number of intervention studies for children with language difficulties. This is in response to the recommendations of an expert group advising the Foundation on its research policy in this field. Dr Catrin Roberts reports that she received a very encouraging number of submissions and that a shortlist is currently under review. It is expected that the Foundation trustees will decide on those it wishes to fund at its meeting in November. This is an exciting development that builds upon the Nuffield's well established position as a funder of research for children with language difficulties with a focus on effective intervention.