

DEVELOPING PROVISION FOR CHILDREN WITH SPEECH, LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION NEEDS; THE ROLE OF KEY STAGE 1 CLASSROOMS

Dr Joanna Vivash

Abstract

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are thought to have a negative influence on a child's subsequent development and educational attainment and SLCN is the most prevalent primary educational need for children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) in primary schools. As part of a wider investigation into provision for children with SLCN, 12 observations of Key Stage 1 (KS1) classrooms were completed to explore the language environment. The results highlighted that many classrooms had the structural features conducive to an oral language rich environment, however, the opportunities to practice language skills through interactions with adults and peers did not appear to be as well embedded. A number of elements are highlighted which consider those things that may need to be in place such that teachers are supported in developing provision for children with SLCN, as well as to enhance the language development opportunities for all children.

Who Are the Children With SLCN?

The term SLCN can be thought of as an umbrella term and children with SLCN are not a homogenous group. There is much variability in the specific need, concurrent difficulties and the causality of the impairment. Some children may have difficulties with the use of language to convey meaning (expressive language), difficulties with understanding what is being communicated (receptive language) or they may experience difficulties with understanding the social use of language (pragmatics). Further, some children may have a primary need of SLCN, others may have difficulties where SLCN may be thought of as a secondary need; for example, children may have conditions such as cerebral palsy, autism, hearing impairments or acquired brain injury which can affect their speech, language or communication.

Why Consider Children with SLCN?

Research, such as that by Dockrell and Lindsay (2000), has highlighted how speech and language difficulties can impact on a child's education through problems accessing the curriculum, interaction and social skills, and through their attention and approach to learning. Further, a wide range of literature exists considering the socio-behavioural functioning of children with SLCN and there is widespread acknowledgement of the risk of negative social and emotional outcomes, including increased risk of victimization and bullying (Conti-Ramsden & Botting, 2004; Savage, 2005), difficulties in resolving arguments and conflicts (Stevens & Bliss, 1995), and lower levels of self-esteem and self-confidence (Lindsay, Dockrell, Letchford, & Mackie, 2002).

Figures from the DfE highlighted the prevalence of SLCN with 30.6% of children having a primary need of SLCN within state-funded primary schools (Department for Education, 2013). Given the negative outcomes associated with SLCN mentioned above and the significant proportion of children affected, it is vital that further understanding is gained as to how schools can support the needs of these children.

The implications of the new SEND reforms on children with SLCN

The introduction of the Children and Families Act (2014) which has driven current Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) reforms and the introduction of Education, Health

and Care Plans (EHCP) raises particular issues for children with SLCN. Firstly, for the majority of children with SLCN, they are unlikely to be eligible for an EHCP as many of their needs were met at the previous classification system of School Action (SA) or School Action Plus (SA+), whereby additional in-school support at SA, or external agencies for children at SA+ are provided which aim to meet the child's need in their school. As these categories no longer exist and have been replaced by one classification of SEN Support which aims to focus on a graduated response as part of a local offer as set out by the Local Authority (LA), there are concerns as to how children's SLCN will be met due to the variability this may bring. Additionally, a key tenet of the Act was the joint commissioning between Health and Education services which is particularly pertinent for children with SLCN given support is often received from professionals from both Health and Education; the Act does not, however, give a clear indication of how joint commissioning will work in practice.

Thus, given the prevalence of children with SLCN and changing educational climate which aims to support them, it is imperative to explore those factors which can support children with SLCN in mainstream settings.

The importance of KS1 classrooms on developing oral language

The negative implications of SLCN on educational attainment are widely acknowledged and literature into specific skills which are arguably necessary for classroom learning have shown some of the difficulties children with SLCN may have. For example, children with language difficulties have been shown to have difficulties with acquiring literacy skills (Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase, & Kaplan, 1998), writing difficulties (Dockrell, Ricketts, Charman, & Lindsay, 2014), difficulties with numeracy (Harrison, McLeod, Berthelsen, & Walker, 2009), working memory (Baddeley, 2003) and executive functioning skills which are concerned with the planning and organising of tasks and higher order reasoning skills (Henry, Messer, & Nash, 2012). Further, the importance of educational contexts in fostering such skills are well established. Indeed, Dockrell et al., (2015) highlighted how providing environments which are supportive of oral language development in KS1 can support both literacy development and enhance talk which is thought to contribute to academic learning such as discussing, collaborating and problem solving (Resnick, Michaels & O'Connor, 2010).

In order to explore the classroom environment, the Communication Supporting Classroom (CsC) Observation Tool was used. The CsC Observational Tool aims to explore classroom features which would support oral language growth and support school staff to develop opportunities and interactions for language learning (Dockrell et al., 2015). The CsC Observation Tool is widely accessible to practitioners and includes a guidance document on how to complete the tool and examples of what may be observed. Moreover, the tool is available free of charge from the Communication Trust website (<http://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/resources/resources/resources-for-practitioners/communication-supporting-classroom-observation-tool.aspx>). The CsC Observation Tool considers three dimensions, the Language Learning Environment (LLE) consisting of 19 items which are either observed or not; Language Learning Opportunities (LLO), consisting of 5 items, and Language Learning Interactions (LLI), consisting of 20 items, both of which can be observed a maximum of 5 times. In total, 12 classroom observations were carried out in 6 different primary schools in the Eastern England region. This included five Foundation Stage Classrooms, three Year 1 classrooms, one Year 2 classrooms and three mixed KS1 classrooms.

How the role of KS1 classrooms in supporting oral language development is realised in practice

Firstly, when considering patterns across the schools it was generally true that the mean ratio score for the LLE was higher than the mean ratio scores for both the LLO and the LLI, suggesting that many of the environmental features conducive to an oral rich language environment were present however the opportunities to develop oral language through purposeful interactions did not appear to be as well embedded.

When thinking about the classroom environment in particular, on the whole many of the environmental features thought to be conducive to supporting oral language were in place across most of the classrooms. This included many structural features such as quiet areas, good light and open space and typically signs and pictures were used to identify and label learning areas and resources; however only half of the classrooms displayed the children's work and only one classroom had displays which invited comments from the children. All classrooms had an appropriate range of books available and most had specific book areas available.

When considering if there were any differences between the different year groups it was noted that all Foundation Stage classrooms observed had role play areas and easy access to free play resources however these were missing from two of the Year 1 and Year 2 classes, and the mixed Yr 1/Yr 2 class which raised an interesting point regarding the role of play in language development. Weisberg, Zosh, Hirsh-Pasek, and Golinkoff (2013) suggested that play can support language development through encouraging symbolic thinking, social interaction, exposure to vocabulary and engagement, and Roskos and Christie (2001) argued that the language a child uses in play supports literacy development. However, whilst play opportunities are likely to have greater impact in the early years (Weisberg et al., 2013), and it is important to note that whilst there may be a correlation between play and language, the relationship is possibly not a causal one; however, one could argue that there is still a role for play in Years 1 and 2. For example it could be suggested that for many children with SLCN, their language development may be not be at the same point as their peers and thus would benefit from the opportunity to have access to play based resources which correlate to their developmental level of language.

Interactions between the children and adults was another area that was considered, with the teachers and TAs appearing to be more confident in the use of techniques which may be considered classroom practice; for example getting down to the child's level, using a slow pace and using the child's name. However, there appeared to be few examples of adults talking with children or using specific interaction techniques relating to directing language learning or language modelling responses, which may additionally support children's language development. Indeed, interactions which include modelling of target words, expanding the utterance, and recasting are thought to lead to faster language acquisition (Chapman, 2000) and Justice (2004) argued that competence in the use of strategies such as extending, labelling and scripting are fundamental to providing high-quality verbal input. However, it is also recognised that these techniques are often used less frequently than would be hoped (Girolametto, Weitzman, & Greenberg, 2003) and one suggestion is that a teacher's pedagogical skill may influence the interaction and quality of teacher talk (Dickinson, Hofer, Barnes, & Grifenhagen, 2014).

Thus, this raises an important point relating to how teachers' skills may impact on the support children with SLCN will receive in practice. Indeed, Dockrell, Lindsay, Roulstone, and Law (2014) suggested that all children are entitled to effective teaching to support SLCN; however, one could question the feasibility of achieving this if teachers do not feel confident to do so. Indeed, Wilson and Demetriou (2007) noted the role of teacher

confidence and how a teacher's self-belief was linked closely to their learning and classroom practice.

Finally, as mentioned previously, there is increasing evidence to suggest that children with language difficulties are at risk of developing literacy difficulties. Indeed, Bishop and Snowling (2004) argued that children's ability to read was affected by SLI, as these children may have both phonological and non-phonological language impairments; it is also noted that children with language difficulties are at risk of literacy difficulties (Stothard et al., 1998). Further, Dockrell, Ricketts, et al. (2014) suggested that children with language impairments may struggle with writing due to a number of difficulties associated with components of the oral language system such as phonological processes, vocabulary and grammatical accuracy.

However, it is noted that opportunities to develop literacy skills further were missed. For example, almost all classroom environments observed failed to produce displays which invited comments from children, and failed to have literacy specific areas available, a key component of a language rich classroom environment (Justice, 2004). Moreover, it was also noted that interactive book reading was not an activity that was widely seen during the observation period despite the promising gains which children make in terms of emergent literacy skills and vocabulary development when exposed to this opportunity (Hargrave & Sénéchal, 2000; Justice, Kaderavek, Fan, Sofka, & Hunt, 2009)

What implications does this have on teachers and schools?

It is noted that whilst the observations were a reflection of what was occurring at the school during the observation period, it does not mean to say that the items not observed were not happening at other times of the day. However, arguably whilst there were many positive findings highlighted as to how KS1 classrooms were supporting oral language development, it appeared that there was a potential gap in teachers' understanding as to how this could be maximised. It could be argued that one way of supporting teachers in developing their use of talk with children would be through training however the evidence as to whether this occurs in practice is limited. For example, whilst Starling, Munro, Togher, and Arciuli (2012) highlighted how training to secondary school teachers resulted in an increase in language modification techniques used in the classroom and Leyden, Stackhouse, and Szczerbinski (2011) noted that the implementation of a whole school approach to supporting SLCN appeared well-regarded by key staff, reporting an increase in the use of visual support strategies, and adult-child directed speech, there is little clear evidence as to how this directly relates to outcomes for children with SLCN and it would appear that professional development alone is not enough to lead to a change in language practice (Neuman & Cunningham, 2009). Instead, it may be that teachers and schools look for additional support and arguably in may be that Educational Psychologists (EPs) could have a role to play. Indeed, EPs frequently offer consultation to schools and through working collaboratively to joint problem solve around their provision for children with SLCN it may be that teachers can be greater empowered to embrace the responsibility of meeting the needs of children with SLCN in KS1 classrooms.

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Biography

Dr Joanna Vivash is an Educational Psychologist currently working for Cambridgeshire County Council. She completed her Doctorate in Educational Psychology (Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology) at UCL, Institute of Education in 2015. Areas of specialist interest include language development and factors influencing provision for children with SLCN.