ATTAINMENT OF SCHOOL PUPILS WITH A SENSORY IMPAIRMENT

1. INTRODUCTION

The Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) welcome the opportunity to contribute to the Education and Culture Committee Inquiry. The RCSLT notes that the Committee has limited the scope of this short inquiry to those children with a sensory impairment and no other disabilities. It also notes that the Committee is only looking for concise and specific suggestions at this stage, and thus this submission follows that guidance.

2. ABOUT THE RCSLT

The RCSLT is the professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs) across the UK, providing leadership and setting professional standards. Speech and language therapy provides life-changing treatment, support and care for children and adults who have difficulties with communication, or with eating, drinking and swallowing. SLTs are allied health professionals. They work closely with parents, carers and other professionals, such as teachers, nurses, occupational therapists and doctors. The RCSLT currently has around 1400 members in Scotland, 60% of whom work with children and young people.

3. Linking Speech, language and Communication ability with ATTAINMENT

Speech, language and communication (SLC) ability is fundamental to attainment.

Hearing and visual impairment are major barriers to the both development of and every day use of speech, language and communication abilities – that is

- the ability to perceive visual or audible information and therefore understand others and the world around you and
- the ability to express oneself clearly and easily verbally and / or in writing.

Effective SLC skills are essential for children if the aspirations of the Curriculum for Excellence are to be met – that is for all children and young people to become successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

Strong evidence supports the assertion that early language skills underpin children’s reading and writing abilities later in life.

Research highlights a clear link between speech and language skills literacy and learning.

Researchers suggest ability in spoken language is likely to have a mediating effect on the impact of social disadvantage by improving the child’s ability to negotiate with peers,
establish friendships, create and retell stories and contribute to the development of literacy and other more academic skills.

Having SLC needs on the other hand can lead to a variety of negative outcomes for children into adulthood and into employment. Studies have shown, for example, between 88-100% of a sample of young people not in employment, education or training who were formally tested had underdeveloped SLC.

Children with SLC needs are at higher risk of having associated behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.

Self confidence and self esteem are vitally important for children in primary schools. Several studies have shown children with communication difficulties are at a higher risk of reduced self esteem and that children with SLC needs (from the age of eight upwards) rate themselves lower with respect to their academic ability, achievement and their relationships with peers.

The evidence linking SLC competences with educational, economic and social disadvantage is compelling. A Scottish Government commissioned review in 2007 showed that in comparison with the general population people with communication support needs (or SLC challenges often identified as literacy difficulties) are more likely to:

- experience negative communication within education, healthcare, criminal justice system and other public services
- be misjudged in terms of cognitive and educational level
- be unemployed or employed at an inappropriately low level
- be victims of crime
- be convicted of crime
- have difficulty accessing information required in order to utilise services

3.1 Improve Attainment by providing the right speech, language and communication support

Getting speech, language and communication support right is fundamental to optimising attainment.

This means:

a) **Equitable access to speech and language therapy (SLT)** assessment, intervention, advice and support for the child, parents, families and anyone in the CYP workforce working with children

Support must include an assessment of the communication capacities of the whole family, working with both parents where possible, and not just an assessment of the child.

We must ensure that every local authority area in Scotland provides equitable SLC support and intervention for children, parents and professionals. These services, however, can be patchy. For example, the provision of specialist SLT services for d/Deaf children, including
the provision of specialist training for professionals, varies across Scotland and have been under pressure or eroded due to a lack of funding\(^1\). Specialist services must be maintained.

b) **“Early access” to services**, including access to specialist services, i.e. from the time that parents know their child has a sensory impairment.

We must ensure there is emphasis on SLC support in the early years, before the child reaches school.

Good communication between child and parents from birth is fundamental to attachment. Evidence tells us all well being outcomes including attainment depend to some extent on strong attachment. Parents therefore need equitable and easy access to the right support, advice etc. as soon as they know their child has severe sensory impairment.

With the right SLC support, including an engagement with SLT services, children should be provided with a good foundation in their speech, language and communication attainment. This early years attainment is necessary for the next stage of school-based learning.

SLTs can work with children and their families from birth and give those children a successful platform from which to build in the school years.

**Equitable, sustained, full school day access to specialist teachers for deaf learners and BSL user Communication Support Workers.** RCSLT is concerned about the level of provision of these key staff - ideally employed by the school and part of school staff.

**3.2 Better implementation of evidence based, recommended approaches to enabling speech, language and communication development and ability**

The RCSLT produces evidence-based clinical guidelines for SLTs working with children and young people with sensory impairment/s.\(^2\).

These clinical guidelines recommend:

a) **SLC development activities are integrated into everyday activities both at school and at home.**

This requires:

c) a positive attitude from staff towards a child with a sensory impairment that in turn helps classmates have a positive attitude

d) training on optimising SLC development and ability for all CYP staff (and classmates) – spanning basic to expert levels of competence

e) provision of SLC resources specific to the child in the classroom, at home, anywhere the child wants to communicate

f) positive partnership working across the whole children and young people workforce team

g) leadership and commitment from head teachers and staff\(^3\)

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\(^1\) The RCSLT will deliver a presentation by a specialist SLT to the Cross Party Group on Deafness on June 10\(^{th}\) 2015 that will provide information on SLT services for d/Deaf children across Scotland.

\(^2\) Communicating Quality 3 practice guidelines are currently being updated by the RCSLT. The detailed guidelines on working with children with sensory impairment/s are available on request.
SLTs are used to working as part of multidisciplinary teams and supporting the child as part of this team. We must ensure these teams are working well and properly co-ordinated so that SLC activities are well-integrated across the school.

3.3 Create and maintain positive, inclusive communication environments

Children cannot learn to their full potential if they are trying to learn in an environment that makes it hard for them to understand and / or express themselves.

Inclusive Communication environments apply a wide range of “ways of communicating” which match the communication strengths on the people expected to use that environment.

For children who have a visual impairment an inclusive communication environment then is an environment which

a) As a matter of course sound, smell and tactile cues are used to help effective understanding and expression by child in every interaction they have – with the building itself - and people within it.

b) All printed and online information (like letters, homework sheets) is available in audio and doors have tactile symbols on them.

c) All staff have completed visual impairment awareness training - developing competencies in staff from basic to expert levels in educating visually impaired learners.

For children and young people with a hearing impairment, an inclusive communication environment means:

a) As a matter of course signing, gestures, pictures, symbols and visual aids are used to help effective understanding and expression by child in every interaction they have – with the building itself - and people within it.

b) All staff have completed general deaf awareness training

c) Staff have completed signing training at basic, skilled and highly skilled levels

An inclusive communication environment ensures that both the child and teacher (and their peers and other staff) fully understand each other, which is vital to a child’s learning and attainment. Inclusive communication environments must be created and maintained at school, at home, at after-school activities – basically, wherever children and young people may access or wish to communicate.

The RCSLT suggests that the recommendations of leaders in the field of sensory impairment are mainstreamed throughout all school environments - for example guidance issued by Deafblind Scotland.

4.4 Support emotional wellbeing

Children learn well and do better when they are happy and a child’s emotional development will affect their learning, both social and educational. Self confidence and self esteem are vitally important for school children.

3 See: A guidance document to support improved partnership working between education and allied health professions services. http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2010/05/27095736/0
Children with a sensory impairment and no other disabilities or complex needs, who are the focus of this inquiry, may well be the only child in their school environment who are d/Deaf or visually impaired or blind. Communication difficulties that may arise for many reasons between the child and their teachers, or between the child and their social group, can cause emotional difficulties.

Several studies have shown that children with communication difficulties are at a higher risk of reduced self esteem and children with SLC needs (from the age of eight upwards) rate themselves lower with respect to their academic ability, achievement and their relationships with peers.

The RCSLT suggests that:
   d) the transition into school is crucial for a child who already has a sensory impairment, to ensure their SLC needs are properly met right from the start
   e) a positive, inclusive communication environment is provided to alleviate or reduce communication difficulties between the child, staff and their peers so that positive relationships can form
   f) counselling provision is available and accessible for this group of children in particular

SUMMARY

To improve the attainment level of school pupils with a sensory impairment, it is crucial to:

- Provide the right speech, language and communication support
- Integrate speech, language and communication support into school and home
- Create and maintain positive, inclusive communication environments
- Support emotional wellbeing

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