James Dornan MSP  
Convener  
Education and Skills Committee  
The Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

21 February 2017

Dear Mr Doran

**Speech, Language and Communication Disadvantage**

Thank you for your recent letter requesting information on speech, language and communication disadvantage in educational establishments. I am writing on behalf of Dr Maxwell as I am the Senior Education Officer in Education Scotland, responsible for Inclusion. There are several aspects of the work undertaken between Education Scotland and Education Authorities that are of relevance to your questions, as described below.

**Scottish Attainment Challenge**

As you will be aware, The Scottish Attainment Challenge (SAC) is a targeted intervention initiative focused on supporting learners in the local authorities and schools with the highest concentration of deprivation. In very many cases these children and young people experience the specific speech, language and communication issues that you raise.

The SAC is a four year programme, currently nearing the end of its second year. Education Scotland has a crucial role in supporting the Challenge, providing specialist advisors to deliver advice, guidance and, when appropriate, challenge to schools and Education Authorities to help raise attainment in literacy.

The Scottish Government in partnership with Education Scotland asked schools to provide information on what progress they had made in improving literacy as a result of their involvement in the Scottish Attainment Challenge. Some examples of the very positive work being carried out are as follows:

- 111 key literacy approaches to raising attainment were identified from the Year 1 reports and Year 2 proposals submitted by 56 of the 57 schools involved in the ‘School’s Programme’ (June 2016).
- Approaches to support literacy included:
Support of speech and language therapists (9 local authorities, 20 schools)

Storytellers (6 local authorities, 17 schools)

North Lanarkshire’s Active Literacy approach (4 local authorities, 15 schools);

Novel studies (4 local authorities, 13 schools);

Higher order approaches in reading (6 local authorities, 11 schools);

Paired Reading/Reading Buddies (5 local authorities, 10 schools);

Outdoor literacy (3 local authorities, 13 schools);

Specifically targeted approaches included Reading Recovery and Toe by Toe.

25 professional learning approaches were identified, including those that involved training staff in improvement methodology. Improvement methodology approaches included: Collaborative Action Research; Small Tests of Change; Professional Learning Trios; and Lesson Study.

Tapestry was also mentioned by 4 schools as an approach to supporting literacy. Tapestry is an educational organisation that focuses on continuing professional development, promoting CPD programmes, and supporting change at school level.

Addressing the Vocabulary Gap

There is a recognised vocabulary gap between the most and least disadvantaged children and young people. This is one of the key factors for many children and young people with speech, language and communication issues. Education Scotland supports Education Authorities with a range of approaches and interventions, and in designing a curriculum to close the vocabulary gap. Some examples of successful strategies and interventions are as follows.

Working with partners such as Educational Psychology and Speech and Language Therapy, to provide guidance on language development, including vocabulary; to advise on assessments that might be helpful in identifying the vocabulary gap.

Participating in professional learning opportunities that extend understanding of children’s language development and the vocabulary gap.

Assessing, tracking and monitoring the vocabulary gap using a range of approaches, including: observations; collecting baseline data; using developmental profiles (e.g. Teaching Talking); and standardised assessments (e.g. British Picture Vocabulary Scale).
• Developing a literacy-rich curriculum, including all the experiences that are planned for children, wherever they take place. Parents and partners are key participants in supporting this. Daily planned opportunities are arranged for at the appropriate level, for children to read, write, talk and listen across the curriculum, in a literacy-rich learning environment.

• Implementing peer tutoring and mentoring opportunities around literacy that allow children to benefit from support and interaction with their peers in a structured and targeted way, e.g. Paired Reading.

• Undertaking audits of the physical environment and available resources to determine how well they promote positive, stimulating literacy rich interactions that will improve children’s vocabulary.

3 to 18 Literacy and English Review

Education Scotland published its 3 to 18 Literacy and English Review in 2015. This review is part of a series evaluating the quality of children’s and young people’s learning and achievements in early learning and childcare settings and schools in Scotland. It describes and evaluates current practice in learning, teaching and achievement in literacy and English, and sets out key strengths and areas for improvement, including children and young people with speech, language and communication issues.

The review identified the following strengths and areas for development.

**Strengths**

• Across sectors, most children and young people are enjoying their learning in literacy and English as a result of the range of relevant and stimulating contexts.

• Across sectors, children and young people are engaging well with a wider range of texts.

• Overall, there is increasing confidence among staff in using Literacy and English Experiences and Outcomes to ensure learners make continuous progress in literacy and English.

• There is evidence that, where there is strong leadership for literacy, this is leading to improvements in performance and in the quality of learners’ experiences in literacy and English.

• Across sectors, early interventions and partnership working are being used effectively to support literacy development.
Areas for Improvement

- Raising attainment in literacy should continue to be a priority across all sectors to drive up standards, reduce inequity and close the attainment gap.

- Across all sectors, ensure literacy is being developed across all aspects of learning as a tool to improve progress and achievement.

- Improve transitions at all stages to build on prior learning and ensure that there is appropriate challenge and support for all.

- Schools should ensure they are tracking and monitoring children’s and young people’s progress in literacy across all areas of learning and continuing to plan assessment as part of learning and teaching.

- All staff should develop the advanced literacy skills of children and young people in order to challenge their thinking and actively involve them in their learning.

- Local Authorities should continue to support schools through strategic approaches that enable schools to drive up standards in literacy.

Summary

There is much good practice in literacy and English in Scotland’s schools, and in addressing specific issues of speech, language and communication difficulties. However, there is still work to be done to ensure all children and young people leave school with the highest possible levels of attainment in literacy and English. Improving attainment is a national priority and improving literacy has an important role in improving attainment across all curricular areas.

I hope this information is helpful to you.

Yours sincerely,

Mary Berrill

HM Inspector (Senior Education Officer, Inclusion)