

Welcome to the Autumn Edition of the *Afasic Abstract*. In this edition we report on a major research programme funded by the Department for Education. This was part of the government's response to the review led by John Bercow which reported in 2008.

Sometimes as parents, practitioners or researchers we wonder what, if anything, will result from these reviews, well, in this case, a lot happened. Substantial funds were committed to improve services and this research programme was commissioned to guide future policy.

As ever we welcome your comments and are particularly keen to hear about innovative work in practice. Please continue to write or email us at [Julie.Dockrell@ioe.ac.uk](mailto:Julie.Dockrell@ioe.ac.uk) or [geoff.lindsay@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:geoff.lindsay@warwick.ac.uk).

## About the editors

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## The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP)

**Geoff Lindsay**

The Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) was commissioned as part of the Better Communication Action Plan, the Government's response to the Bercow Review of services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

This had recommended a programme of research 'to enhance the evidence base and inform delivery of better outcomes for children and young people'.

In this issue of *Afasic Abstract* we present an overview of the BCRP as a whole, and provide more detail about three of the research areas.

The BCRP was designed as a programme of inter-related projects addressing a broad range of issues identified in the Bercow Review. It was developed organically. The first year's programme of five projects was agreed between the research team and the Department for Education. Once underway, as a research team we engaged with a range of partners including Afasic to review emerging results and shape the next phases of the research programme.

The BCRP was conceived as addressing the interface between research, practice and policy. It was designed as a programme of research that was rigorous but also of direct relevance and usefulness to practitioners,

researchers, policy makers and commissioners, and to the parents and young people with SLCN themselves. In particular the BCRP addressed the following issues as a basis for developing recommendations for future policy and practice, and guidance for some areas of practice:

- Trajectories of development of children with SLCN over time, in differing contexts.
  - Support and interventions being offered currently by schools and by speech and language therapists.
  - Evidence base for current practice including indicative costs.
  - Perspectives of parents and children regarding the services they use and the outcomes they value.
- A total of 17 reports are being published to the DfE, comprising:
- An overview report, which draws on the evidence across the BCRP and presents the main recommendations from the research programme. This report is aimed particularly at non-specialist policy makers and commissioners, and parents.
  - Four thematic reports: these are intended to be the main source of information for policy makers, commissioners, practitioners, and researchers with expertise in SLCN.



- ▶ Understanding speech language and communication needs – Profiles of need and provision.
- ▶ The perspectives of children and young people who have speech, language and communication needs, and their parents.
- ▶ The relationship between speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD).
- ▶ Effectiveness, costing and cost effectiveness of interventions for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN).

- Ten technical reports presenting the full details of the research.

Our earlier findings were published in two interim reports which are already available on the BCRP website, together with the initial analyses of national pupil data.

We hope that this ‘3-level’ approach will help readers find the type of information most helpful to them: a focus on accessibility, while we are also presenting full research details so the evidence for our findings is also available.

Although the BCRP finished in March 2012, work will continue. The Communication Trust has been funded by the DfE to disseminate findings over the coming year. We will be further developing practical resources from the BCRP, including a web-based version of the *What Works Review* of interventions for children and young people with SLCN and the dissemination of the *Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool*.

Our dissemination programme will address specific issues relevant to different children and young people with SLCN, and how our research findings can help shape policy and practice. The Communication Trust will work with ourselves to target research findings to its member organisations.

We will disseminate our findings to parents in association with Afasic, and to practitioners and commissioners of services. We will also engage with the DfE to contribute to policy development resulting from the BCRP.

We are working to ensure that BCRP will help to further raise awareness among parents, professionals and policy makers of the nature of SLCN and the issues involved in improving identification and assessment of needs, development of provision and the evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions.

#### Accessing the BCRP reports

Our own BCRP website will provide a link to all the reports and other information.

<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/bettercommunication>

You will also be able to access the Department for Education and The Communication Trust sites from this address when they are set up.

## Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool

**Julie Dockrell**

Quality first teaching requires both effective classroom management and targeted support of oral language skills. All children need to be provided with effective opportunities to develop their language skills in mainstream settings. The monitoring of their needs must be embedded within educational contexts that provide opportunities for children to improve their ability to talk and communicate more effectively. As part of the BCRP we designed a tool that could be used in classrooms and we carried out a feasibility study in 101 reception and Key Stage 1 classroom settings.

The communication supporting classroom (CsC) observation tool was developed from a review of research evidence which had identified aspects of the teaching

and learning environment in classrooms which support the development of oral language skills, both understanding and speaking. The full report provides details of the evidence that was used and the ways in which this evidence was rated.

The research evidence reviewed for the project allowed us to identify three main areas which captured the research literature and were, therefore, included as dimensions in the Observation Tool:

- Language Learning Environment – the physical environment and learning context. This dimension lists what is available within the environment. Many of the items are semi-permanent features of the classroom reflecting the infrastructure to support

language learning; other aspects address how the teacher manages the learning environment.

- Language Learning Opportunities – the structured opportunities to support children’s language development. This dimension is indicative of the opportunities for language learning that are available in the classroom, e.g. group work.
- Language Learning Interactions – the ways in which adults in the setting talk with children. These include techniques used by adults to acknowledge the children’s needs (such as getting down to the child’s level, pacing language used, confirming contributions), to support them in developing



their language skills (e.g. labelling, using appropriate open-ended questions), to encourage non-verbal communication (such as praising good listening skills), to direct language learning (e.g. commenting), and to model language responses (e.g. scripting). These three dimensions are all important. However, they are not of equal importance. It is unlikely that a strong environment could compensate for a lack of opportunities to develop oracy skills and appropriate pedagogy to support these skills.

During the feasibility study we worked collaboratively with practitioners, including SENCOs, speech and language therapists and teachers. Practitioners unanimously found the tool helpful, accessible, easy to use and, with guidance, a reliable recording of classroom features that support communication. We found that many classrooms scored highly on the Language Learning Environment dimension indicating that classrooms had captured many of these key features. Scores for the Language Learning Opportunities and Language Learning Interactions

were lower and this pattern was consistent across the three year groups observed.

The CsC tool provides schools with a flexible, evidence informed, way of developing teaching and learning opportunities to support oral language. It profiles what is happening in classrooms and provides a framework to develop practice and training and identifies areas to target to support children's oral language skills. The tool is available from the BCRP website and we are happy to collaborate with professionals who wish to use the tool in their settings.

## What works for children with SLCN

*James Law*

Evidence based practice is central to our understanding of how to meet the needs of children with SLCN. To help us understand what works for children with SLCN we adopted a two pronged approach. We started by searching through the literature for the best studies that show us which interventions have been shown to work. We found a wealth of studies dealing with a range of different types of speech and language needs, most provided by speech and language therapists, many involving parents and some making use of teaching and speech and language therapy assistants. Most of the interventions are for children from three to six years, although there are a handful of interventions for younger and older children. We only looked at studies which had used the best research designs to increase our confidence in the results.

But, of course, the literature is only one source of information about what we offer children with SLCN. An alternative approach is to ask the therapists and teachers themselves what they do. Accordingly we carried out an on-line survey of current practice and were very pleased with the

well over 500 responses that we received. Respondents told us about the interventions that they used most often and we then went and sought out the research evidence supporting those interventions, with some surprising results. We found that although some of the interventions reported overlapped with those identified in our search of the literature a number of practitioners cited interventions for which there was little or no established evidence at all.

We then combined these two sources of evidence into a database which we have called *What works for children with SLCN?* We identified 57 interventions either currently in use or published in the research literature. Of those only 3 (5%) were found to have the strong level of evidence, 32 (56%) had moderate evidence and 22 (39%) had indicative evidence. Seventeen (30%) of the interventions were specifically relevant for improving a child's speech, 22 (39%) targeted language, and the remainder were aimed at a combination of speech, language, communication, and complex needs. Five were

universal interventions, 13 were clearly targeted interventions and 16 specialist interventions. The remainder we considered likely to be used across the three levels, adapted to meet the needs of individual children.

We conclude that there is a sound emerging evidence base with relative strengths in some areas. There have been too few large scale intervention studies to draw firm conclusions about how services should be delivered but there is plenty of positive evidence about individual techniques. Similarly there is not yet sufficient evidence to suggest that any one of the interventions described here could readily be scaled up and rolled out but there are many areas where larger effectiveness studies would be warranted. The *What works for SLCN* resource will be developed further in the coming months by The Communication Trust and with input from practitioners across the UK as a website, soon to be available hosted by the Communication Trust for everyone to look at. Please check the BCRP website for details.

<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/go/bettercommunication>



## Perspectives of children with SLCN and their parents

Sue Roulstone

The Bercow Report recommended a research programme that would identify ways to deliver better outcomes for children and their families. It was therefore important within the Better Communication Research Programme (BCRP) to gain an understanding of what parents and children might consider as better outcomes. Furthermore, in any investigation of services, it is important to consider the perspectives of those in receipt of services, in this case the children and young people with SLCN and their parents. The BCRP therefore included questionnaires, focus groups, interviews and workshops with parents and children to investigate their perspectives. The detailed findings appear primarily in two technical study reports<sup>1,2</sup>. The issues summarised here are discussed in more detail in Roulstone & Lindsay (2012)<sup>3</sup>.

Children with SLCN reported a poorer quality of life than their peers. For children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) this was across a number of their life domains; for children with language impairment the focus of the poor quality of life was on their own moods and emotions and on social acceptance and bullying. Whilst not all children and young people with SLCN will experience social exclusion or bullying, they do appear to be at increased risk. It is important therefore to investigate and understand the particular circumstances that lead to bullying and social exclusion and be alert to children's own reports. It is also important that we attend to the emotional needs of these young people and develop appropriate support.

It is the expectation that children will be involved in setting of their learning and development targets. However, judging by the reactions of children who attended

the BCRP workshops, their school targets did not tally with their own aspirations and interests. We need to find better ways of selecting interventions and setting goals in partnership with children and young people with SLCN in order to ensure that they are meaningful and motivational. The implementation of programmes such as 'Achievement for All', which provide a structure within which schools discuss aspirations, concerns and targets with both children and parents, could support the development of appropriate target setting for children with SLCN.

Generally parents who were consulted in the BCRP were satisfied with the way that their child's difficulties had been identified, the progress that their children were making and with the provision offered. However, the process of identification of need and the allocation of services was still variable; some parents experienced a lack of understanding of their child's needs and a small but nonetheless important minority, were either unaware of what was being provided for their child or dissatisfied with provision.

Parents indicated that they are looking for interventions that will improve their children's ability to communicate so that their independence and inclusion increases, that is, parents are looking for interventions that improve the longer term quality of life for their children. Communication skills and linked academic skills of literacy and numeracy are valued by parents in that they contribute to a child's potential for independent living, for employment or for the development of friendships.

For children and young people with SLCN, communication skills are a vital underpinning skill that can support development towards

independence and inclusion. The challenge will be to identify for each child the particular communication skills that are needed and the most appropriate evidence-based interventions to achieve them.

Although practitioners may be targeting skills of relevance to children's inclusion and increasing independence, information is rarely routinely collected about these outcomes; they are not typically used as a way of measuring the success of interventions either in daily practice or in research. A key recommendation from the BCRP therefore is that services and schools should collect evidence that focuses on outcomes that are valued by children, young people and their parents, as a means of evaluating what we do.

### References

<sup>1</sup> Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J., Palikara, O., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2012). *Profiles of need and provision for children with language impairment and autism spectrum disorders in mainstream schools: A prospective study*. London: DfE.

<sup>2</sup> Roulstone, S., Coad, J., Ayre, A., Hambley, H., & Lindsay, G. (2012). *The preferred outcomes of children with speech, language and communication needs and their parents*. London: DfE.

<sup>3</sup> Roulstone, S. & Lindsay, G. (2012). *The perspectives of children and young people who have speech, language and communication needs, and their parents*. London: DfE