

Children with Speech and Language Difficulties: A Collaborative Approach to Training Resource Teachers

The need for collaboration between teachers of pupils with special educational needs and other professionals has become increasingly apparent. A summer course, organised by speech and language therapists for resource teachers, was successful in addressing identified needs of the teachers while also highlighting the importance of multidisciplinary efforts in addressing children's speech and language difficulties.

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INTRODUCTION

Developmental speech and language disorders refer to any disorder in children who are not acquiring spoken and/or written language skills in accordance with an age appropriate developmental pattern (Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 1996). This may include difficulties with speech, phonological awareness, comprehension and expression of language at a number of levels including syntax, semantics and pragmatics. The term *disorder* usually refers to those presenting with speech and language difficulties where skills are not acquired in accordance with normal developmental patterns. For the purposes of this article the broader term of speech and language difficulties will be used because the training course which was designed for resource teachers included children with a range of speech and language problems. Children who have speech and language difficulties come from all social and economic backgrounds. Speech and language difficulties can persist for years (Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase, and Kaplan (1998; Johnson, Beitchman, Young, Escobar, Atkinson, Wilson, Brownlie, Douglas, Taback, Lam, and Wang, 1999). It is difficult to estimate the prevalence of speech and language difficulties because prevalence studies have used different criteria, measures and definitions. However, estimates in the literature range from 3-15% (Dockerell, George, Lindsay and Roux, 1997). According to Law and Tamhne (2000), the general consensus is that the percentage of children reaching school age with significant speech and language difficulties is around 5%.

It is widely acknowledged in the literature that speech and language difficulties are a hidden handicap and they may have an adverse effect on the child's life (Ripley, Barrett and Fleming, 2001; Dockerell and Lindsay, 1998).

Speech and language impairment is devastating at any time in life, but for children it is particularly damaging, for it disrupts every aspect of their lives - their learning, their self-esteem, their relationships with others.

(Ripley et al., 2001, p. vii)

The development of adequate speech and language skills is a fundamental requirement for learning. Almost every educational skill presupposes the use of language (Dockerell and Lindsay, 1998). Spoken language is the main medium of instruction in schools.

Since language is an essential vehicle for children's learning, children with speech and language difficulties are more challenged than most in accessing the curriculum (Martin and Miller, 1996). Children with specific speech and language difficulties often present with associated literacy problems.

The co-occurrence of spoken and written language difficulties is not a coincidence. Both can stem from deficiencies in the underlying speech processing systems.

(Stackhouse, 2000, p. 94)

The management of children with speech and language difficulties requires a multidisciplinary and inter-agency approach. The team working with a child with speech and language difficulties comprises the child's family and members of the multidisciplinary team. In Ireland, educational provision for children with speech and language difficulties is provided by the Department of Education and Science (DES), whereas speech and language therapy services are provided through the Department of Health and Children. In Ireland, speech and language therapists generally provide services to children in a clinical setting. Speech and language therapists also work in Language Classes in national schools, which are joint Department of Education and Department of Health initiatives for children with specific speech and language disorders. Law, Lindsay, Peacey, Gascoigne, Soloff, Radford, and Band (2002) state that in the United Kingdom, the division of services between health and education inevitably creates tensions as to where the responsibility lies for service provision for children with speech and language needs. This is equally the case in Ireland.

There have been many developments in recent years in the area of special needs education including the introduction of resource teachers. According to Circular 08/02 (DES, 2002), the post of resource teacher is an additional post allocated to assist a school or cluster of schools in providing an education to children with identified special educational needs arising from a disability. These needs include specific language disorder. The role of the resource teacher is to provide additional teaching support for these children with identified needs who are fully integrated into mainstream schools. However, one of the difficulties which arises is the lack of training for resource teachers in the area of speech and language disorders. It is a common complaint of initial teacher training that the time to develop special educational needs expertise, let alone that specific to speech, language and communication, is very limited (Lindsay and Dockerell, 2002). Becton (1999), in an Irish survey, found that teachers identified a need for training in dealing with children with speech and language difficulties. Teachers reported a need for information on the role of the speech and language therapist, how to identify speech and/or language problems, when to refer for speech and language therapy and guidelines for fostering the development of language skills in the classroom. While teachers may now have guidelines for fostering development of language in the classroom, my experience leads me to believe that teachers still have training needs in terms of managing children with speech and language disorders.

The need for collaboration between the speech and language therapist and the teacher is well documented in the literature (Martin and Miller, 1996; DES, 2002; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 1996). Collaboration requires effective joint working resulting in a positive outcome for the child (Lindsay and Dockerell, 2002). While it is acknowledged that collaboration is essential, many barriers to best practice exist. McCartney (1999) describes structural and systemic barriers to collaboration of speech and language therapists and teachers (e.g., timing and location of service delivery and different models of intervention resulting in different relationships with families). One of the real challenges to collaboration is the small number of speech and language therapists in Ireland. The demands on the speech and language therapy services are increasing and the capacity of the profession to meet these needs falls short. The recruitment and retention difficulties in the speech and language therapy profession have been well documented (Bacon, 2001).

In Galway, speech and language therapy provision for children with speech and language difficulties is delivered primarily by two agencies (i.e., the Western Health Board and the Brothers of Charity Services). In response to increasing numbers of requests from resource teachers for information about speech and language difficulties and consequent demands on the time of speech and language therapists dealing with such requests, the Western Health Board and the Brothers of Charity Services agreed that a training course which would address some common themes should be offered to resource teachers.

METHOD

The process of designing and delivering the course followed the stages outlined here:

Stage 1: *Identifying the needs* – In collaboration with members of a Learning Support Network (under the auspices of the local Education Centre), it was agreed that a multidisciplinary and multi-agency approach would be desirable to ensure a holistic approach to the management of these children. An organising committee was established comprising of members of the relevant agencies (i.e., the Western Health Board, Brothers of Charity Services, the National Educational Psychological Service [NEPS] and members of the Learning Support Network). The learning needs of the resource teachers were drawn up based on input from the Learning Support Network.

Stage 2: *Planning and design* – The practical aspects of the course were organised by the Education Centre, that is, organisation of the venue, lunch, notification of teachers, and sanction to attend the course from the Department of Education and Science. The course was run over five days with two two-hour sessions per day. The number of places was limited to twenty-five participants.

Having identified the learning needs of the resource teachers it was agreed that the overall aim of the course was to improve the confidence of the resource teachers in their ability to manage children with speech and language difficulties. This required an understanding of the nature of speech and language difficulties and the impact of these difficulties on the child's ability to access the curriculum. In order to promote a deeper

understanding of speech and language difficulties in the classroom, an active learning approach was adopted with an emphasis on case-related learning. On completion of the course it was hoped that the participants would be able to:

- **interpret psychological and speech and language therapy reports**
- **understand speech difficulties**
- **understand different types of language difficulties and the implications of these difficulties in the classroom**
- **plan educational programmes for children with identified speech and language needs**
- **use resources creatively and effectively**
- **understand the implications of speech and language difficulties in the life of the child and family**
- **understand how the speech and language therapy services work**
- **understand how the language classes in the area work**
- **reflect on their own practice and identify areas for change**
- **draw up an individual education plan for children with speech and language difficulties**

It was agreed that speech and language therapists with particular expertise in specific areas would be invited to contribute to the course. There was a strong consensus that input from parents of children with communication disorders would be valuable so that the resource teachers would gain insight into the impact of speech and language disorders on the family. The course content is outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Outline of the Course

Day 1	Understanding and interpreting psychological reports (NEPS) Understanding speech difficulties (WHB)
Day 2	Managing communication disorders in children with learning disabilities (BoC)
Day 3	Part 1: What is specific language impairment? Planning educational programmes for children with receptive language difficulties (WHB) Parents' perspectives
Day 4	Part 2: What is specific language impairment? Understanding and interpreting speech and language therapy reports Planning educational programmes for children with receptive language difficulties (WHB) Language classes (WHB and language class teacher)
Day 5	Phonological awareness (WHB) Individual Education Plans (NEPS) Questions

(NEPS National Educational Psychology Service; WHB Western Health Board; BoC Brothers of Charity)

The format for most sessions was a short presentation on the topic in question followed by practical group work. For example, the speech and language therapist gave a short presentation on each of the subtests in the *Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals - 3 (CELF 3)* (Semel, Wiig and Secord (1995)). The resource teachers were then given case studies of children with specific deficits on these subtests. They were asked how the difficulty might impact on the child in the classroom. The teachers were also given resource materials and were asked to plan suitable activities for the child.

EVALUATION

On the first morning of the course, the resource teachers were asked to document their expectations of the course. A post-course evaluation form was devised with statements based on the expectations of the participants. Participants were asked to give their responses to 16 statements which measured their level of agreement with statements about the workshop on a five point Likert scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The items consisted of 13 positively worded statements and 3 negatively worded statements. Negative responses were included to test if responses were consistent and to identify potential questionnaires where only one point on the Likert scale had been selected, thus enhancing the reliability and validity of the scale.

RESULTS

In total, twenty-five resource teachers attended the five-day course.

1. Expectations from the course

Eighty percent of the teachers hoped that they would become more confident in managing children with speech and language disorders, e.g. planning educational programmes for these children, interacting with parents and class teachers, interpreting psychological and speech and language therapy reports. Seventy percent of the teachers hoped that they would obtain practical advice and suggestions on how to help children with speech and language difficulties including when and how to refer a child to the speech and language therapy service. Fifty percent of the resource teachers hoped that they would obtain information on the resources available to work with children with communication problems. Twenty percent of the teachers hoped that they would learn more about conditions such as autism, Down syndrome, attention deficit disorder and dyspraxia.

2. Participants were requested to complete a questionnaire at the end of the course and the outcomes can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Responses to the post-course questionnaire (n=24)

	SA (%)	A (%)	U (%)	D (%)	SD (%)

As a result of attending this course I have a greater understanding of speech and language difficulties	83	17			
As a result of attending of this course I have a greater understanding of different types of speech and language difficulties	74	26			
I now feel more confident in my ability to recognize difficulties and knowing when to refer on to speech and language therapy	50	50			
I now have a better understanding of the speech and language therapy service	66	34			
I feel more confident in my ability to plan specific educational programmes for children with speech and language difficulties	37	58	5		
I am more aware of the resources which are available to work with these children	64	36			
I feel more confident in my ability to use materials more appropriately and effectively	50	50			
I feel that I will be better able to interpret speech and language therapy and psychology reports	62	33	5		
I have gained some ideas which I can apply in the classroom	86	14			
Information was presented in a way which I could understand	100				
I have gained insight into the impact of speech and language difficulties on the family	86	8	6		
I feel that I will be better able to work with parents	55	37	8		
I learned nothing new as a result of attending this workshop	5			5	90
I do not feel more confident about my skills as a resource teacher	5			33	62
My own personal objectives were largely met as a result of attending this workshop	61	34		5	
I could not relate much of the information presented to the classroom situation	10	5		20	65

SA, Strongly Agree; A, Agree; U, Undecided; D, Disagree; SD, Strongly Disagree. Numbers in bold represent the highest percentage of responses in each category.

Teachers made positive comments at the end of the questionnaire, e.g.:

I learned a tremendous amount at this course.

A most beneficial course.

This was an excellent course. It was very informative, great ideas and lots to be carried back to the classroom.

As a newly appointed resource teacher I found the course excellent and feel that I can now plan a course of work for 3 of the children with speech and language difficulties in my group with much more confidence.

A very informative and enjoyable course. I would highly recommend this course to all teachers working with children who have learning disabilities--an essential course.

I found input from the parents very good. I would hope that there would be closer links between the resource teacher cluster and the speech and language services.

I thought the course was really good and it's the kind of course that should be compulsory for every teacher.

Excellent course, I have been a resource teacher for 5 years and I have never attended such a well presented, useful and practical course and for that I say thank you.

I would have liked more time/opportunity to look at and discuss materials – maybe different teachers could recommend what resources they find useful.

I would like a follow-up course.

DISCUSSION

This course was an attempt to address some of learning needs of resource teachers with regard to speech and language difficulties. Feedback from participants on the course was for the most part positive. All participants reported that the information was presented in a clear manner. The practical workshop dimension of the course ensured participation by all of the teachers. At the end of the course all participants had a better understanding of the roles, models of service delivery and constraints of the speech and language therapy and educational psychology services. Sixty-two percent of the teachers strongly agreed that they would be better able to interpret speech and language therapy and psychological reports.

In terms of the learning outcomes of the course, eighty-three percent of the participants strongly agreed that they had a greater understanding of speech and language difficulties. Eighty-six percent strongly agreed that they had obtained ideas which could be applied in the classroom and they reported that they had gained insight into the impact of speech and language difficulties on the family. Many teachers found the input from parents particularly valuable. The parents spoke about their journey through the assessment and diagnosis process. They talked about day-to-day life in their homes, the struggle of getting homework done, the fragility of their children's confidence and their own personal feelings of frustration, guilt, etc. When the resource teachers reflected on their practice in terms of how they deal with parents, many felt that there was a strong need for more regular meetings and contact with parents. They reported that they also became more aware of the issue of homework and the amount of time which a child with a speech and language difficulty may spend at homework tasks. Ripley et al. (2001) emphasise the importance of working in partnership with parents and of supporting them particularly during times of transition. Fifty-five percent of teachers felt strongly that they would be better able to work with parents.

One of the aims of the course was to help teachers to plan specific educational programmes for children with speech and language difficulties. This aspect of the course was challenging for the resource teachers. Only thirty-seven percent of the resource teachers strongly agreed that they felt more confident in their ability to plan programmes, whereas fifty-eight percent agreed with this statement. Many teachers reported that while they have resource materials, the challenge lies in using these materials effectively and appropriately. During this course, teachers were given opportunities to share their experiences. However, it was interesting to note that during this workshop there was dependency on the speech and language therapists in that some teachers tended to look to the therapists for answers and solutions rather than problem-solve the issues themselves. Working in partnership with teachers requires a shift of emphasis from the “expert” model to a more collaborative model. In the “expert” model the consultant assumes responsibility (e.g., the therapist provides materials and programmes which are implemented by the teacher). In the second model, speech and language therapists work with teachers to develop their own programmes and solutions are generated creatively. Equality is implicit in the latter model with each discipline contributing information from a different perspective (Schein, cited in Reed, 1992).

CONCLUSION

In summary, the feedback from this course was very positive and the learning outcomes for the participants were for the most part achieved. The format and style of the course was well received as one hundred percent of the participants strongly agreed that the information was presented in a clear manner. The combination of giving information and group work was effective. This course strongly highlighted the need for ongoing training and development for resource teachers working with children with speech and language difficulties. The need for joint training in strengthening collaboration between speech and language therapists and teachers has been highlighted in the literature (Paradice, 2001; Lindsay and Dockerell, 2002; Rinaldi, 2001). Forbes and Welbon (2001) highlighted the need for input on inter-agency working for service managers at both systems and structural levels that can make the organisational changes necessary to support the inter-agency, cross-organisational work of teachers and speech and language therapists. Much work needs to be done to achieve greater collaboration between speech and language therapists, educational psychologists, teachers and parents in the management of children with speech and language disorders and this course was a step in the right direction.

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