National Assembly for Wales

Children and Young People Committee

EO 07

Inquiry into Educational Outcomes for Children from Low Income   Households

Evidence from : Afasic Cymru

Afasic is the UK charity representing children and young people with speech, language and communication needs, working for their inclusion in society and supporting their parents and carers. Afasic is

Afasic is a member organisation celebrating its 45th anniversary this year. Our members include parents, young people with speech and language and communication needs, professionals and others who support us. Afasic Cymru was launched in response to devolution and celebrated its tenth anniversary last year.

Our vision is of a society which embraces 'communication' as a basic human right, and where all children and young people up to the age of 25, with speech, language and communication needs, get the support they require to enable them to reach their potential and participate fully within it.

Information about speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Speech, language and communication are fundamental life skills. Speech, language and communication skills underpin literacy, learning in school and college, socialising and making friends, and are crucial for employment prospects and understanding and regulating emotions or feelings.

Many children and young people struggle to communicate. Some of their communication needs are temporary and others have more persisting needs. UK wide studies have shown that approximately 10% of all children have persisting speech, language and communication needs which may present as a child's main difficulty or it may be associated with other conditions such as autism.

A child or young person with SLCN:
- may have difficulty understanding language
- may have difficulty learning and remembering words, and putting words together to make sentences
- may have difficulty articulating speech clearly
- may have difficulty using language appropriately in context

Children or young people with speech, language and communication needs may have some or all of the above difficulties; each person is different.

Speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) may be difficult to spot. This means that instead of communication difficulties people may see children struggling to read, showing poor behaviour, or having difficulties learning or socialising with others. Some children and young people may become withdrawn or isolated.

SLCN may only come to light in secondary school due to increasing social and academic demands. In some young people, their difficulties appear to resolve during primary school only to re-emerge during secondary school.

Context to this inquiry response

This response is based on our service experience and knowledge of the research into speech, language and communication needs. In particular the Better Communication Research Programme as highlighted by the following papers:

- A Generation Adrift (January 2013) by The Communication Trust.
- The links between speech, language and communication needs and social disadvantage (February 2013) by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Speech and Language Difficulties.

The links between poverty and speech, language and communication needs (SLCN)

Prevalence

The links between social disadvantage and SLCN are complex. However there is plenty of evidence to confirm that a variety of factors mainly linked to social advantage, limit the development of children's communication skills[i].

Social disadvantage is strongly linked to the prevalence of speech, language and communication. There is strong evidence that the prevalence of SLCN is higher in socially disadvantaged areas. In some areas of deprivation, more than 50% of children start school with SLCN.

The Welsh Government has acknowledged that social advantage is linked to vocabulary levels at age 5. Children from low income families lag behind by nearly one year in vocabulary at school entry, with gaps in language much larger than gaps in other cognitive skills (Waldfogel et al, 2010).

Impact

The links between social disadvantage and SLCN run in both directions. Social disadvantage influences the prevalence of SLCN, and SLCN influences later social and economic outcomes of children and young people.

Children need language to learn. SLCN has a knock on effect on school readiness, literacy and school performance generally, so it also puts children at risk of a wide range of other long term consequences in terms of literacy, mental health and employment. A study using data from a UK birth cohort of 17,196 children, following them from school entry to adulthood, found that, even after adjustment for a range of other factors, vocabulary difficulties at age 5 are significantly associated with poor literacy, mental health and employment outcomes at age 34 (Law et al 2009).

There is also significant links between SLCN and behaviour, although the nature of this is complex. As part of her oral evidence to the All Party Parliamentary Group, Professor Karen Bryan highlighted that research has consistently shown that at least 60% of young offenders have SLCN but in only 5% of cases were they identified before the offending began (Bryan, 2004). A study into young people not in

education, employment or training (NEET), showed that over half (54%) of the individuals who completed the speech and language therapy assessments had a severe communication disability. Only 21% had previously been referred for speech and language therapy (Lanz, 2009).

Identification

Many children and young people with SLCN are not being accurately identified or supported across the key stages.

The Communication Trust 'Talk of the Town' programme found that approximately 40% of children with SLCN were not being identified; among the most difficult to spot were older students.

The Better Communication Research Programme concluded that Teacher's assessment of children's development at age 5, which is based on on-going observations, rather than formal tests, can be used to identify children at risk of late educational difficulties. However one off screening still only identifies 50% of the children with SLCN so regular monitoring of children's language skills by suitably trained staff is more effective.

Vocabulary at aged 5 has been found to be the best predictor (from a range of measures at age 5 and10) of whether children who experienced social deprivation in childhood were able to 'buck the trend' and escape poverty in later adult life

Prevention and mitigation

It is not poverty per se but the child's communication environments that make the difference.

Difficulties may be prevented or mitigated by effective oral language learning environments coupled with regular monitoring of needs over time. In this way, when additional support is needed, it is provided in an appropriate and timely way. One Better Communication Research Programme study examined three aspects of support for children's communication:
   i)   the language learning environment (physical environment and learning context),
   ii)   the language learning opportunities (the structured opportunities to support children's language development) and
   iii)   language learning interactions (the way that adults in the setting talk with children).
The study found that scores on the second and third aspects were lower, emphasising the need that all school staff should be able to make good use of the interaction techniques shown to develop oral language.

Afasic Cymru is examining approaches that develop a whole systems approach. We are currently looking at piloting a whole school approach that explores the above three aspects including elements linked to the leadership and management of a school that can support communication effectively.

Recommendations

1. Afasic Cymru is pleased to note that the Welsh Government has invited Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford from the University of London to look at the Foundation Phase including progression from Flying Start.

a) Flying Start and Foundation Phase interventions and outcomes need to be robustly evaluated to include specific reference to speech, language and communication outcomes.

2. The sustainable professional development of the workforce is essential to the provision of effective universal provision. This critically includes good oral language environments across the key stages, including improved identification.

a) Afasic Cymru is keen to support the development of a framework for a whole school approach so that an educational establishment can systematically provide an oral language environment that fosters excellent communication skills linked to the school improvement framework.

b) Afasic Cymru would like to see this implemented as an integral but enhanced part of the National Literacy Programme.

c) Afasic Cymru considers that for schools to break the link between attainment and poverty, it is essential that speech and language training is a mandatory part of initial teacher training.

d) Afasic Cymru is working to develop the information that is available for the continuing professional development of all teachers and support staff across the education system, from early years through to further education.

References

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