Identifying the challenges and opportunities to meet the needs of children with Speech Language and Communication Difficulties

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ABSTRACT

The views of experienced educational practitioners were examined with respect to the terminology used to describe children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), associated problems and the impact of speech and language difficulties in the classroom. Results showed that education staff continue to experience challenges with the range of terminology used to refer to the children's needs. Terms used to refer to difficulties with speech were least familiar to the respondents. Difficulties were noted in distinguishing between children with SLCN and children where English was an additional language. Respondents indicated a variety of additional difficulties experienced by the children. Literacy difficulties were reported to be more prevalent in children with language difficulties whilst levels of bullying and anxiety were reported to be higher in children with speech problems. Respondents reported that tools for identifying speech and language difficulties and procedures for accessing effective resources are required.

Concern has increased about how to provide an equitable and efficient service for children with speech, language communication needs (SLCN) (Bercow, 2008). A significant minority of children have SLCN with childhood language delay being the most common form of childhood disability (Law, Parkinson, & Tamhne, 2000). Much discussion has taken place about diagnostic criteria and to the labels given to different forms of SLCN (Bishop, 2014). However, less attention has been given to the ways in which children's SLCN are identified and supported in mainstream education settings (but see Lindsay, Dockrell, Desforges, Law, & Peacey, 2010; Mroz & Hall, 2003) or to the ways in which teachers are trained to meet children's SLCN (Mroz, 2012 is an exception in relation to early years practitioners).

The majority of children with SLCN have their needs met in mainstream classrooms and speech and language therapists (SLTs) are increasingly working in school settings rather than clinics (Dockrell, Lindsay, Roulstone, & Law, 2014). Consequently, education staff play a key role in both identifying children with such needs and supporting pupils' language development. Yet educational practitioners in the UK report that they experience a number of challenges in meeting the needs of children with SLCN (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001; Marshall & Lewis, 2014; Marshall, Ralph & Palmer, 2010; Mroz & Hall 2003). Moreever, there is a general awareness that teachers need a better understanding of speech and language development and of the difficulties that can ensue (Antoniazzi, Snow, & Dickson-Swift, 2010; Snow, 2014). Little attempt has been made to systematically examine the barriers education staff experience in meeting the children's needs, their understanding of the different profiles of language learning needs and the resources required to support practice in school settings.

The current paper aimed to examine current understandings of SLCN in education by reporting the results of an online survey that sought information from experienced practitioners working in educational settings. Data were collected about professionals'

understanding of SLCN, any associated difficulties they considered that the children experienced (e.g. literacy and socio-emotional issues), the ways in which the needs of children with SLCN were met in their schools and the resources and tools that are required to improve how the needs of children with SLCN are supported.

Who are the children with SLCN?

An accurate identification of children's SLCN is essential so that appropriate support and curriculum differentiation can be put in place. However, this is challenging since the terminology used to refer to children's SLCN is varied (Dockrell, Lindsay, Letchford, & Mackie, 2006), has changed over time (Bishop, 1992) and different terms have been used concurrently by SLTs to refer to the same group of children (Dockrell et al., 2006). The defining features of language difficulties and the appropriate terminology used to describe them continues to raise concern (Bishop, 2014; Reilly et al., 2014). For example, the Better Communication Research Programme reported that the term 'speech, language and communication needs' was used in different ways by different professional groups (Dockrell, Lindsay, Roulstone & Law, 2014). These different uses of the same term were reported to be both confusing and impacted on communication between parents and the professional groups. Use of the term SLCN in the Bercow review (2008) was broad, so that it encompassed all children with a language or communication difficulty. In contrast the DfE SEN Code of Practice (Department for Education and Skills 2001) limited the term SLCN to a primary special educational need separate from other primary needs, such as hearing impairment, moderate learning difficulty or autism. This more restricted use of SLCN was employed by the DfE to collect national statistics on prevalence. Roulstone *et al.* (2012b) found that teachers and local authority (LA) officers used this more restricted definition most frequently, whereas SLTs usually followed the broader category usage adopted in the Bercow report.

Whilst terminological issues have been identified as an area of concern, little attention has been given to the ways practitioners understand the profile of the children's language skills and to consideration of the ways in which children with speech difficulties are differentiated from those of children with language difficulties. Speech difficulties have different developmental patterns, socio-demographic associations and require interventions that are distinct from those offered when there is language difficulty (see for example Reilly et al., 2009). Such differences between speech and language profiles have implications for commissioning services and prognosis. We aimed to examine how familiar educational staff were with the range of terms used to reflect specific types of speech and language difficulties and to establish the extent to which teachers were able to differentiate the needs of children with speech difficulties and language difficulties.

SLCN and associated needs

A major challenge for practitioners involves distinguishing primary SLCN from other developmental disorders. For example, the overlap and differences between children with SLCN and Autistic Spectrum Disorders (Conti-Ramsden, Simkin, & Botting, 2006; Williams, Botting, & Boucher, 2008) raise significant challenges for professionals (Dockrell et al., 2006). By corollary, children's primary educational needs may change throughout the school years. In a substantial minority of cases initial needs, which were considered to be related to speech and language difficulties, later became associated with moderate learning difficulties (Dockrell et al., 2014). This indicated that language skills can impact on learning and attainments.

Speech, language and communication difficulties impact on a child's progression in a range of areas. Of particular concern has been the impact of SLCN on literacy skills. It is now well-documented from experimental studies that children with language difficulties are vulnerable

to difficulties in learning to read accurately and fluently (Bishop & Adams, 1990; Conti-Ramsden, Botting, Simkin & Knox, 1991; Fraser, Goswami & Conti-Ramsden, 2010; van Weerdenburg, Verhoeven, van Balkom & Bosman, 2010). Literacy difficulties, involving both reading decoding and reading comprehension, are evident in children with SLCN in primary school (Botting, Simkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2006; Dockrell & Lindsay, 2004). Similarly, a significant proportion of children with SLCN (around 40% depending on age and what measure is used) experience challenges with social-emotional development and behaviour (Lindsay & Dockrell, 2012; Lindsay, Dockrell & Strand, 2007; St Clair, Pickles, Durkin & Conti-Ramsden, 2011). In sum, whilst the primary manifestation for many children with SLCN will be with speech and language, there are broader ramifications for learning and behaviour. How these difficulties are understood in educational practice requires further clarification.

Given these complexities, education staff can provide unique information about the struggles the children have in accessing the curriculum (Dockrell & Lindsay, 2001). This knowledge can serve to help clarify terminology and communication between professionals and identify appropriate resources to meet the children's needs. Confusion in terminology impacts both on children and the services that they receive, the funding of research and the interventions which are evaluated. Previous work has suggested that teachers have concerns about their knowledge and resources to support children with SLCN (Marshall et al., 2010) and report an absence of tools to identify children's difficulties in the early years (Mroz & Hall, 2003). We reasoned that experienced practitioners with experience of SLCN and SLTs would have a more nuanced understanding of the current educational context for children with SLCN and the information that they can provide should be the basis for developing practice and for refining future research questions.

Methods

Participants:

Experienced practitioners who were completing a master's programme on special and inclusive education completed the survey. Fifty-nine students participated, of whom 48 were working in school settings at the time. Thirty-five were based in urban settings in the South-East of England. The majority (n = 29) were based in classrooms with the remaining respondents having either advisory roles or working as SENCOs. Thirty-six respondents worked in primary schools in either reception (n = 10), KS1 (n= 12) or KS2 (n =14) classrooms. Twenty–seven of the respondents had been in their current role for more than two years.

Respondents worked in diverse school settings with significant numbers of pupils from areas of social disadvantage: English was spoken as an additional language by on average 25% of children and the mean number of pupils with SEN per school was reported to be 20%. Twenty percent of pupils in the respondents' schools were reported to require support for SLCN.

Eighty two percent (*n* = 40) of respondents reported having had experience of supporting a child with SLCN either in their current or previous roles, with the majority reporting that their schools had access to an SLT (82%). However, a minority (10%) reported not knowing whether or not their school had access to SLT services. Visits by the SLT were reported to be weekly by around half of the participants (55%) and SLTs worked both by withdrawing pupils (72%) and working in the classrooms (38%).

Overall the respondents met our criteria of experienced practitioners, where experience refers to SLCN and/or SLTs work, in settings which were representative of current English classrooms.

Questionnaire:

The questionnaire was developed following a review of the research literature that related to SLCN and from a focus group with SENCos (who were not participants in the study reported here). A pilot version was tested with a group of practitioners and amendments were made to clarify questions and response options were increased, as appropriate, based on their advice. The majority of items required respondents to indicate their views on three-, four- or five-point Likert scales. Demographic information and categorical decisions about the relationship between specific language behaviours and speech/language difficulties were not collected by Likert scale. Instead nominal data were obtained. Participants could omit questions if they felt they were unable to respond.

Procedure

The entire class of masters' course students taking the module were given the link to the survey on survey monkey and were asked to complete the questionnaire. The survey was anonymous and participation was voluntary. No course credit was gained by completing the questionnaire. Feedback about the survey results was provided to the students on the last day of the module.

Results

The results of the survey are reported under three headings: 1) the *barriers* to meeting the needs of children with SLCN that respondents reported are identified; 2) respondents' *understanding* of SLCN terms and their reports about speech-, language- and other associated features of SLCN are given; and 3) respondents' views of their professional development *needs* and the resources they would like access to in relation to SLCN are reported. χ^2 tests were used for statistical analyses of nominal data. Data obtained using Likert scale formats were normally distributed and were analysed using parametric statistics (the results were also checked using non-parametric statistics and no differences were found).

Barriers

Barriers were divided into: those experienced during practice in schools (Table 1); issues when differentiating types of SLCN and comorbidity between SLCN and other developmental SEN (Table 2); and those involving access to services (Table 3). Responses for all items indicated that these issues were problematic.

The ratings for barriers in school practice were near ceiling (maximum ratings were three which a respondent used when that barrier caused significant difficulties) on those items related to lack of training with respect to SLCN (Table 1). Table 1 shows that there were practical difficulties in identifying children with SLCN, the training the respondents had received and knowledge about how to support children with SLCN.

Table 1. Respondents (n =45) ratings of barriers experienced during practice when faced with SLCN (three-point Likert scale 1 not a barrier to 3 causes significant difficulties)

Barrier in Practice	**Mean**	**SD**
Difficulties in identifying children with SLCN	2.47	0.77
Lack of training in relevant areas related to SLCN	2.67	0.47
Difficulties in knowing how to support children with SLCN	2.84	0.43

Table 2 shows that there were difficulties in differentiating: ASD from SLCN; and general learning difficulties from SLCN as was predicted. However, these were more problematic than was anticipated. It was not predicted that there would be difficulties in differentiating speech from language difficulties, nor from differentiating EAL children from those with SLCN. The ratings indicated that the latter two (rows three and four) were more marked than the predicted barriers to differential diagnosis of children with SLCN.

Table 2. Respondents (n = 45) ratings of difficulties experienced in differential diagnosis of: SLCN and other SEN (rows one and two); SLCN and EAL (row three); and speech from language difficulties[2] (row four) using a three-point Likert scale where 1 indicates 'not a barrier' and 3 indicates 'causes significant difficulties'.

Barrier in differentiation	**Mean**	**SD**
Differentiate children with ASD and children with SLCN	2.07	0.77
Differentiate children with general learning difficulties and children with SLCN	2.09	0.68
Being able to differentiate children with English as an additional language and those with SLCN	2.21	0.91
Being able to differentiate speech from language difficulties	2.35	0.72

The data in Table 3 on access to services were collected on five-point scales, so direct comparison with the data in Tables 1 and 2 is not possible. Table 3 shows that respondents were reasonably confident about their ability to identify professional support services for children with language or speech difficulties and that they were able to access resources to support children with language or speech difficulties.

Table 3. Rating of confidence by respondents (N=45) (1 confident to 5 very unconfident)

Confidence in identifying:	**Mean**	**SD**
Professional support for children with language difficulties	2.66	1.06
Professional support for children with speech difficulties	2.71	1.06
Resources to support children with language difficulties	2.66	0.96
Resources to support children with speech difficulties	2.82	0.96

[2] We use the generic term speech difficulties to refer to expressive speech difficulties

Responses on familiarity with the terms used to describe specific types of speech and language difficulties were collected on a four-point scale (scores of one indicated never heard the term and four indicated knew the term well). Figure 1 provides means and SDs for respondents familiarity with terms used to refer to SLCN. As the figure shows the generic term SLCN was familiar to the majority of respondents with 42 per cent of respondents reporting that they had a clear understanding of the term. Means were computed for terms that referred to language problems and those that referred to speech problems. The overarching term SLCN was not included.

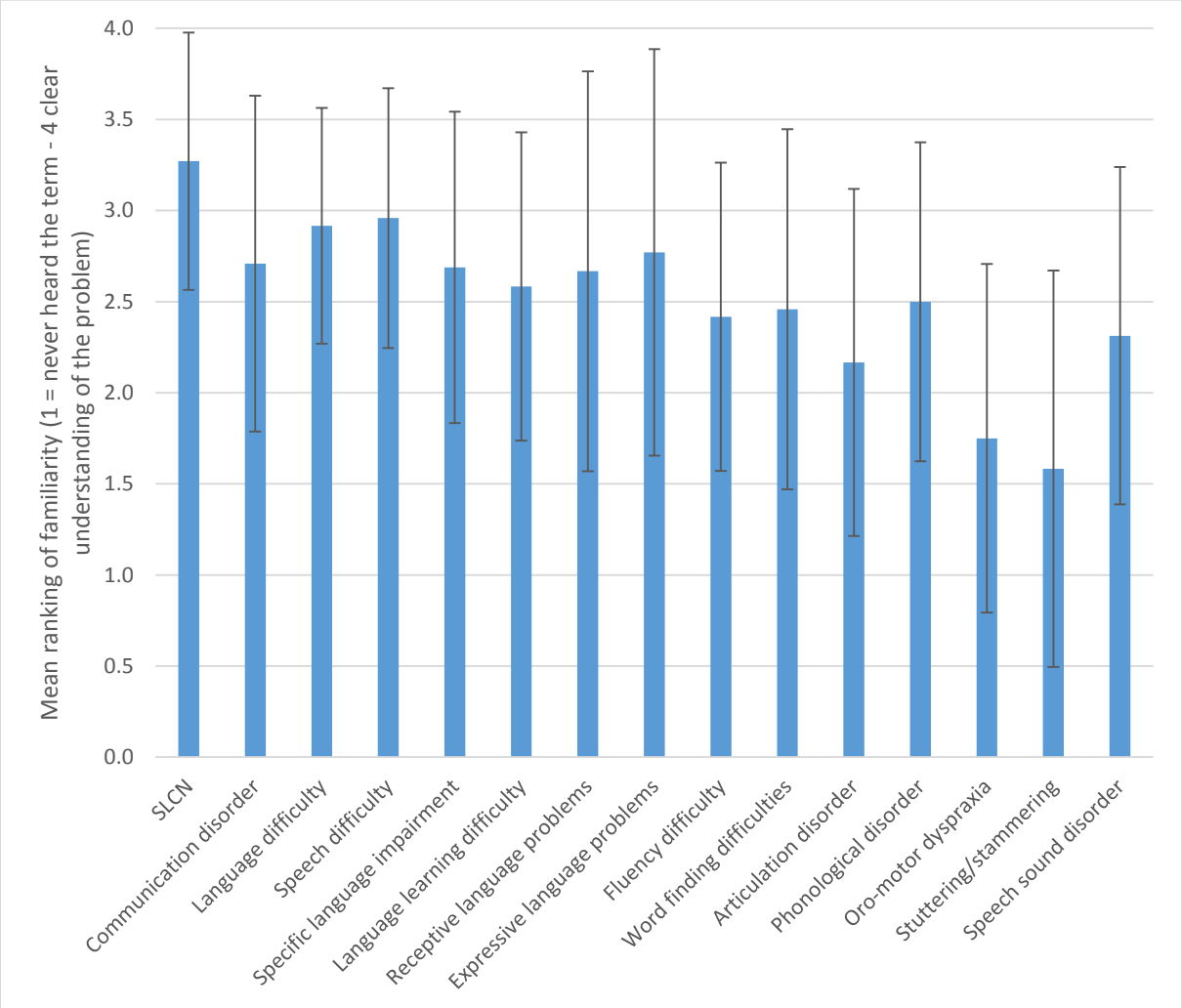

Figure 1. Mean (SD) familiarity with terms related to speech and language difficulties.

Participants reported significantly greater understanding of terms related to language problems than speech problems (Language $M = 2.7$ $SD = .73$; Speech $M = 2.3$, $SD = .62$; $t(47) = 6.73$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.59$).

Understanding SLCN

On average respondents felt that children from areas of disadvantage (62%), those who had English as an additional language (54%) and those who experienced other special educational needs (90%) were more likely to experience speech and language difficulties than their typically-developing peers. Respondents also reported that children where English was an additional language were more likely to have speech difficulties than language difficulties ($\chi^2(2, 40) = 10.65$ $p = .005$).

To further understand respondents' conceptualisation of the problems children experience, respondents were also asked to report which language behaviours they felt were associated with speech difficulties and which they felt were associated with language difficulties. The data are presented in Table 4. Stuttering and stammering were predominantly associated with speech difficulties (75%) while errors in word choice (67%) and spoken grammar (63%) and inability to follow instructions (71%) were associated with language difficulties. Hesitations were considered common in both speech and language difficulties (54%). Nonetheless over 25 per cent of respondents were unsure whether dysfluency, excessive talking, repeating words or phrases and circumlocutions were associated with speech or language difficulties.

Table 4. Respondents' identification of specific language patterns associated with Speech and Language difficulties (% (N))

Problems with	**Errors in choice of words**	**Errors in spoken grammar**	**Inability to follow verbal instructions**	**Stuttering stammering**	**Dysfluency**	**Not seeming to listen when spoken to**	**Very talkative**	**Hesitation**	**Repeating words or phrases**	**Selective mutism**	**Circumlocutions**
Speech	2 (1)	4 (2)	(2)	75 (36)	12 (10)	2 (1)	10 (5)	10 (5)	6 (3)	13 (6)	4 (2)
Language	67 (32)	63 (30)	71 (34)	0	15 (7)	40 (19)	13 (6)	6 (3)	19 (9)	4 (2)	19 (9)
Speech & Language	(27) 13	27 (13)	15 (7)	21 (10)	35 (17)	17 (8)	4 (2)	54 (26)	38 (18)	31 (15)	4 (2)
Not sure	2 (1)	2 (1)	6 (3)	4 (2)	27 (13)	10 (5)	27 (13)	21 (10)	25 (12)	25 (12)	67 (32)

Given the reported associations between language difficulties and literacy difficulties respondents were asked whether literacy difficulties (reading decoding, reading comprehension, spelling, writing texts) were associated with speech or language difficulties. Given the different patterns of difficulties reported in the literature for children with speech and language difficulties separate questions for speech and language were included in the questionnaire. Respondents indicated on a four-point scale how they rated the four aspects of speech difficulty as being associated with speech difficulty (grey rectangles in Figure 2) or language difficulty (white rectangles in Figure 2). High scale values indicated no problems are experienced. As Figure 2 shows literacy difficulties were often thought to also be present when there were language and speech problems. All literacy difficulties were rated as more likely to occur with language difficulties as opposed to speech difficulties. The ratings differed significantly for all literacy difficulties (Spelling (t (41) = 2.39, p = .02, Cohen's d = 0.56; Reading decoding, t (41) = 3.53, p = .001, Cohen's d = 0.91; Reading comprehension, (t (40) = 4.68, p < .001, Cohen's d = 1.25; Writing texts, t (39) = 3.58, p = .001, Cohen's d = 0.83). Apart from spelling these are large effect sizes indicating that respondents viewed the likelihood of literacy problems as much greater for children with language difficulties.

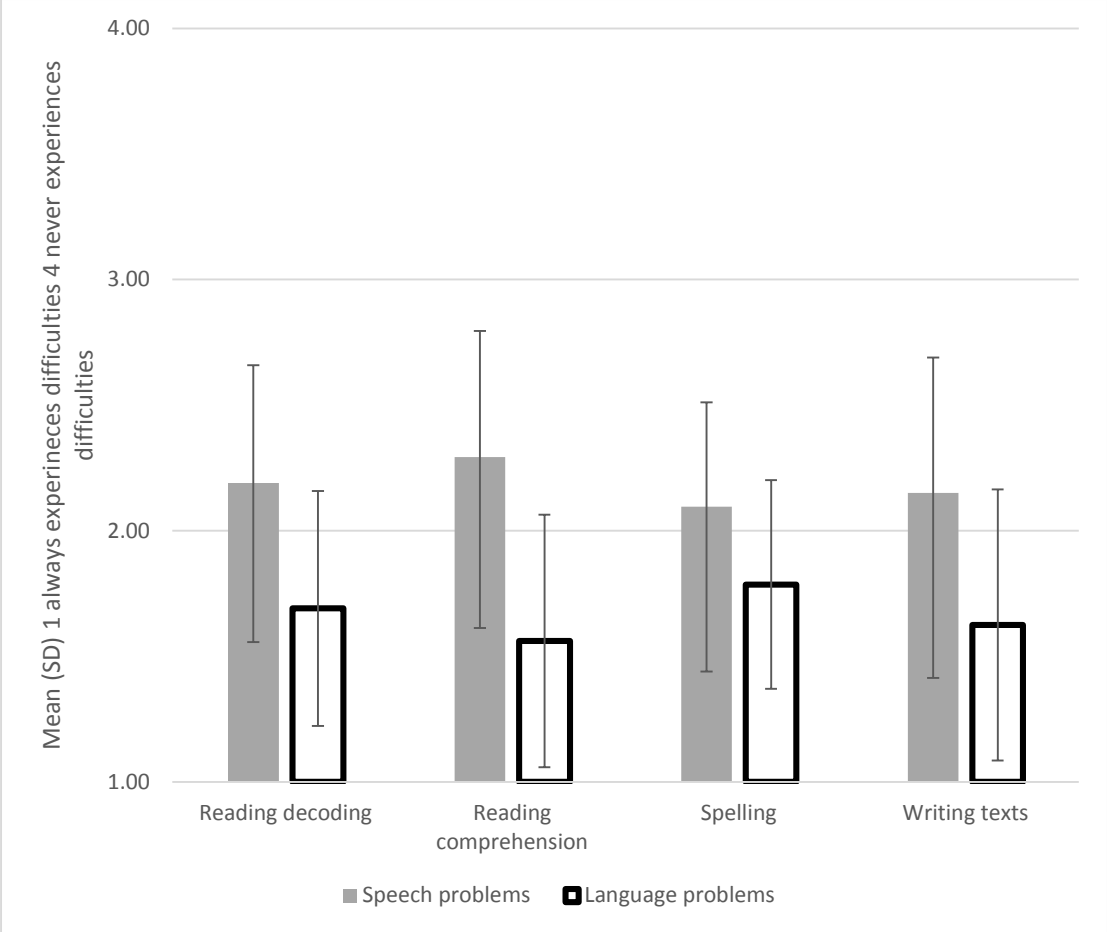

Figure 2. Respondents mean ratings of the likelihood of literacy difficulties for children with language problems or speech problems (1 always experiences difficulties to 4 never experiences difficulties).

Finally respondents' views of the co-occurrence of socio-emotional difficulties with language or speech difficulties were examined on a four-point scale (where high ratings indicated that these problems were not present. On average, there was a tendency for respondents to report that children with SLCN experienced these difficulties. As Figure 3 shows there were minor differences between reports of socio-emotional difficulties between children with speech or language difficulties. Exceptions were that children with speech difficulties were reported to be bullied

more (t (41) = -3.42, p = .001, Cohen's d = 0.57) and to experience higher levels of anxiety (t (44) = -3.08, p = .004 Cohen's d = 0.54).

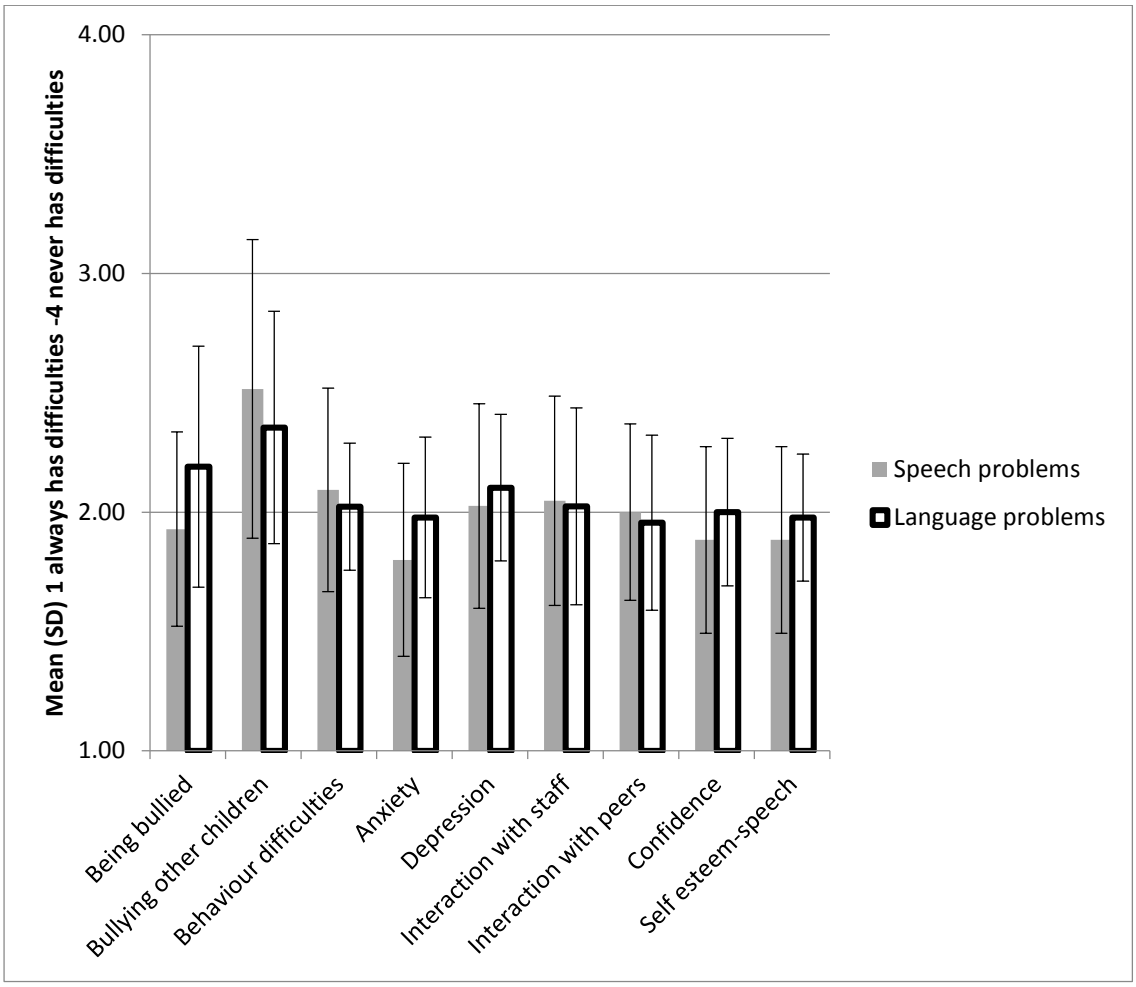

Figure 3. Respondents mean ranking (SD) for socio-emotional difficulties associated with speech or language problems (1 always experiences difficulties to 4 never experiences difficulties).

Resources needed

Many of the respondents indicated that they had not received information about speech difficulties (60%) or language difficulties (56%) in their initial training. Similarly advice on how to support the children (speech 68%; language 60%) and information on resources (speech 71%; language 64%) was notably absent during their training. Despite 51 per cent of respondents feeling confident about identifying

speech and language problems, there was significant agreement that a tool for identifying children with language difficulties (73%) and speech difficulties (64%) would be extremely useful.

Discussion

In this preliminary study we sought to explore the views of experienced educational practitioners about the needs of children with Speech or Language difficulties. The respondents were working in settings where access to SLTs was the norm. However, challenges in meeting the needs of children with SLCN were evident. Respondents reported difficulties with identification and training and indicated particular challenges were experienced in knowing how to support children in school. A 'what works' database for children with SLCN exists (Law *et al.* 2012) and is available from The Communication Trust on an interactive website (www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/schools/what-works). The majority of the interventions are classified as targeted or specialised, few interventions are available as generic approaches to supporting oral language development. It is, therefore, important that respondents felt confident about identifying professional support. Differentiating children who spoke English as an additional language from those who had speech or language problems was regarded as challenging. This could explain the report by the BCRP concerning the over-identification of children with English as an additional language as also having SLCN in the national pupil database (Dockrell, et al, 2014). Respondents also felt children who had English as an additional language were more likely to experience speech problems. This may arise partly because some of the signs of speech difficulty can be confused with those of word-finding difficulty (Howell, 2013). For instance, children who have word-finding difficulty interrupt

their speech with filled and unfilled pauses and repeat monosyllabic function words that precede content words that may be difficult to find (MacWhinney & Osser, 1977).

As expected respondents were familiar with the generic term SLCN and felt that they understood the implications of the diagnosis. There was much greater variability in their understanding of other terms that are in common usage and terms related to speech problems were least well understood. There are ongoing attempts to standardise the terminology used by SLTs and researchers (Bishop, Snowling, Greenhalgh & Thompson, 2015). The results from the current study suggest that any recommendations should engage educational professionals who work with the children and final decisions should be disseminated widely with clear guidance and training.

To our knowledge this is first study to differentiate educational professionals' views about the impacts of speech and language difficulties. Children with speech problems were reported to be bullied more often and have higher levels of anxiety than children with language difficulties. In contrast, whilst literacy difficulties were generally reported to be high, children with language difficulties were thought to have more problems than those with speech problems. Again the data speak to the importance of profiling children's needs to identify appropriate resources and interventions.

Profiling needs is, however, challenging. Respondents reported the need for the development of tools to identify speech and language problems. Such tools will need to be able to differentiate between children with English as an Additional language (EAL) and children who speak English only as their native language. For example, tests of non-word repetition exist for native English-speaking children (Gathercole, Willis, Baddeley & Emslie, 1994) but this disadvantages children whose first

language is not English (Masoura & Gathercole, 1999; Windsor, Kohnert, Lobitz & Pham, 2010). Non-word repetition is widely used to detect language, speech and other cognitive difficulties, so specific instruments are required to ensure children who speak English as an additional language are not disadvantaged because the tests are not appropriate for their language background. These difficulties need to be identified within the context of effective pedagogy (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2009), where progress is limited despite *high quality* instruction (Dockrell et al., 2015).

Recently there has been an attempt to address the needs of educational practitioners and disseminate work around SLCN more widely (see for example the Communication trust which is a coalition of over 50 non profit organisations working with children who have SLCN https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/) and to provide a range of inservice supports for teachers. However the current study suggests that despite an increased awareness about SLCN and the availability of SLTs, a number of challenges remain. These include a lack of training related to SLCN and the difficulties reported by the respondents in knowing how to support children with SLCN, lack of familiarity with many technical terms used by SLTs (and researchers), lack of awareness of some key markers of speech and language difficulties and, importantly, problems in distinguishing speech from language difficulties.

Given the small and select sample, the current results can only be taken as indicative and are in need of extension and replication. If the needs of children with SLCN are to be identified and addressed appropriately to reduce the longer term impacts these will have, it is important that schools and staff rise to the challenge and consider systematic training and the implementation of reliable identification and intervention practices.

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