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Title

Variation in headteachers' approaches to meeting the needs of primary school children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) in one English Local Authority: a systems approach.

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Abstract

Background.

Recent large-scale research in England has reported lack of equity in the school services and support received by children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), even in schools in similar demographic areas. How headteachers organise support for pupils with SLCN is considered important in determining their school experiences, but there is little research related to

SLCN. The present study analysed the views of eight headteachers to illustrate variation across school systems as reported by heads.

Aims.

The aim was to illustrate and exemplify the wide range of headteachers' views and variation across school systems, and their impact for pupils.

Methods & Procedures.

The study analysed data from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with eight volunteer headteachers in a large-scale qualitative study of co-working and services for primary school pupils with SLCN, the *Language for All* project, in one English local authority. Responses were analysed using a four-level systems model, considering each head's views of the SEND policy environment; whether SLCN was considered when setting school goals and prioritising functions; staff recruitment and staff skills relating to SLCN, and the processes whereby curriculum adaptations were planned and delivered. Following close reading, discussion and review of headteachers' transcribed interviews, the research team classified statements under the systems components, with dissonance sought in line with the study's aim of identifying variation. Responses from four headteachers who reported fundamentally different views were selected for discussion, illustrated by quotations.

Outcomes & Results.

Despite coming under the same authority and policy directives, the systems analysis showed considerable variation. For example, Headteachers One and Two

differed markedly on their schools' reported goals/functions and structures, with resulting difference in educational processes. Headteachers Three and Four illustrated large differences in processes, particularly how language-learning activities were planned and delivered. There was variation around how heads managed SEND funds; whether SLCN was formally recognised as a school priority; the recruitment and training of staff with expertise in SLCN and their recognition at management level; and in the resulting experiences for children, including reliance on outside professionals. All heads recognised the need to support SLCN, and were spending time and effort to secure adequate provision. Nonetheless, the variation shown risked inequality.

Conclusions & Implications.

The systems analysis proved useful analysis and clarification of school organisation that contributes to variation in child experiences. Headteachers were powerful influences on school systems, with further understandings of their views, roles and actions is needed.

What is already known on this subject.

Recent large-scale research in England has reported a lack of equity in school services and support received by children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), even in schools in similar demographic areas. The factors underlying this are unclear, although research also suggests that the views and actions of headteachers are important for all schools. The views of heads are largely unexamined in relation to current SLCN policy and practice in England.

What this study adds.

The study used a systems analysis to classify the views of headteachers who worked in the same LA. They discussed at interview how they organised SLCN provision within their school. Examples were sought that showed variation, in an attempt to account for some of the lack of equity. Considerable variation was shown, in how heads managed the SEND policy environment; whether SLCN was considered when setting school goals and prioritising school functions; in staff recruitment and staff skills relating to SLCN, and in how children with SLCN were taught.

Clinical implications of this study.

Results suggest that a systems analysis can be helpful in clarifying the place of SLCN in a school, and in unpacking some underlying issues that may otherwise remain unexamined. The amount of variation uncovered, even across one local authority, was striking and suggests that systemic differences amongst schools is one cause of inequity in provision for pupils with SLCN.

Introduction

Primary school-aged children in England with speech, language and communication difficulties (SLCN) are mostly educated in mainstream schools, following the school's curriculum adapted to their learning needs (DfE, 2014). SLCN here encompasses children with speech, language and communication needs as either the primary reason for receiving support or accompanying other disabling conditions, and is frequently

linked to literacy difficulties, lower educational attainment, and poorer life outcomes (Law et al., 2009). Pupils' educational attainments depend upon supportive school environments and individually tailored learning experiences, as required by educational, health and social policies that also mandate cross-disciplinary working (DfE 2014; DfE 2015). Key education staff include school head-, class- and specialist-teachers and teaching assistants (TAs); educational psychologists (EPs), and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs). SENCOs are teachers, sometimes on the school management team, who co-ordinate curricular activities for children with special educational needs across the school, liaising with families, school and non-school staff (DfE 2014, §6.90). Each school in England must employ a SENCO. Key non-school staff are often employed by health services, including allied health professionals (physio-, occupational-, and speech and language therapists (SLTs)) and their assistants; health visitors (HVs), and nurses. Further medical, social services and youth justice staff may be involved for individual children. A child's curriculum will include appropriate learning experiences developed with input from professionals, pupils and families (DfE 2014 § 25; Forbes 2008), largely delivered in class by school staff. Devising and securing effective provision for a child is complex, involving the deployment of multi-disciplinary subject-knowledge, problem-solving, communication and interpersonal skills, and resources such as allocated staff, space and materials.

The primary school headteacher is the positional leader (Forbes and McCartney, 2012) responsible for promoting learning for each child within their school, and securing the appropriate range of learning experiences. This requires implementing policy, planning within the curriculum, recruiting and deploying school staff, securing and allocating resources, supporting families and monitoring child progress, whilst

developing a positive emotional climate and ethos. For children with SLCN they liaise with non-education professionals, often via the SENCO, and with LA personnel: their actions can thus enable or hinder co-working amongst professionals. Job demands often compete, and headteachers set their own priorities within a context of overriding pressure for good statutory assessment results.

Ball and colleagues interviewed heads, and report how policy enjoiners are implemented and ‘done’ differently across schools. Headteachers are important in this, influencing school staff. Ball et al. (2011) reported that heads developed individual ‘narratives’ of policy enactment, their:

‘story about how the school works and what it does’ (p. 626).

How a school ‘works’ will influence the education of children with SLCN, potentially in different ways. The *Bercow Report* (DfE, 2008) found high variability and a lack of equity in provision across services for children with SLCN in England (Chapter 5), and the follow-up *Better Communication Research Project* (Lindsay et al., 2012 p. 29) similarly found that:

‘the reality for many is that services are distributed very unevenly, both within schools of similar demographic characteristics, and also between health services’ (p. 29).

Mainstream headteachers’ views were not however strongly represented in these research programmes, and despite their importance remain under researched. The

present paper analyses headteachers' narratives as a preliminary contribution to understanding their organisation of support for pupils with SLCN. Data were taken from the '*Language for All*' study (McKean et al. 2016), a large-scale case-study that interviewed staff from a range of co-working professions in one English local authority (LA) about how schools managed the needs of children with SLCN, and explored barriers and facilitators to interagency work using a social capital analysis (Bourdieu 1986). The present paper adds a different analytic lens by using a systems approach, adapted from Banathy (1992, 1996), which proved productive in evaluating small-scale educational services (McCartney et al. 1998), in comparing services (Forbes and McCartney 2010), and in analysing co-professional practice for children with SLCN (McCartney 1999a; 1999b). Analysing systems components allows consideration of a school's environment, structures, functions, and processes as relevant to SLCN, here based on the views of its headteacher.

Aims.

The aim of this paper was to illustrate a range of headteachers' views, not to synthesise views, offering examples that shed light on the uneven service provision reported by DfE (2008) and Lindsay et al. (2012).

Methods

Data were from face-to-face semi-structured interviews with headteachers within one LA from the '*Language for All*' (LfA) study (McKean et al., 2016), where full methodological details appear.

The 'Language for All' study site and interview methods

McKean et al. (2016) note:

' The research site is approximately 82 square kilometers with at the time a population of 202,152, including 42,712 children and young people between 0-18 years. Around one in five children live in poverty, with 30% of areas ranked within the most deprived 25% in England. This is relevant as prevalence rates of speech and language impairments are significantly higher in areas of social disadvantage, although the formal identification of children having SLCN varies significantly across schools (Lindsay et al., 2011). There is a long-standing history of collaboration between the NHS and LA children's services directorates, facilitated by coterminous boundaries between the organisations and relative staffing stability in key posts. Ninety-eight percent of the fifty-six primary schools were judged good or outstanding by the English school inspectorate (OFSTED)' (no pagination).

Ethical procedures were completed through [Anonymised] University, and research governance procedures through the relevant NHS trust. Eight schools volunteered to participate, and the headteacher of each completed an interview. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in a dialogic style, i.e. using topic guides rather than pre-defined questions, enabling both participant and researcher to explore areas of interest without losing focus, so generating data that may not have been anticipated. Each interview lasted approximately one hour and was transcribed verbatim. Headteachers' responses were classified using systems components, as described below.

Systems components

The systems components used are an adaptation of the applied systems approach used by Bela Banathy for education analysis. Banathy (1992, 1996) devised a three-level model comprising systems environment, functions/structures and process. Systems environment offers a 'bird's eye' overview, describing the context in which a school service operates, here related to national special educational needs and disability (SEND) policies. The functions/structures model gives a 'still picture' of a school, considering its ongoing educational goals and its perceived functions, with instructional and administrative structures considered as sub-components. Processes are the ways a school behaves to meet the needs of pupils, and the actions it promulgates and takes.

In Banathy's (1992, 1996) systems design approach a school system's goals and functions should lead to it setting up appropriate structures, and so these were considered together. However, in applying the model to small-scale educational evaluation, McCartney et al. (1998) identified that many school instructional and administrative structures such as the overall curriculum, the school year and school day, the physical environment and classrooms, staff numbers, age grouping of pupils, and school governance and committee structures are relatively permanent and 'given' structures, conforming to LA and national administrative and pedagogic expectations. They cannot easily be modified by individual schools. New school governance mechanisms in England have loosened such external controls for some schools, but schools in this study were all maintained by the same LA and complied with their

expectations. Other structures however, such as membership of the senior management team, staff recruitment and deployment, and staff training structures, are more clearly under a school's control. How a school developed these structures could be particularly revealing in understanding its commitment to SEND. McCartney et al. (1998) therefore separated functions and structures and discussed them separately, giving a four-level model: the school's systems environment, goals and functions, structures, and processes.

This four-level model proved useful in analysing a specialised educational centre (McCartney et al., 1998) and in analysing co-working between SLTs and teachers (McCartney 1999a and 1999b), and is used here. Key aspects of the systems components related to SEND and SLCN were used to classify headteachers' responses, as detailed below. However, although components are distinguished for clarity, they inter-relate. For example, a headteacher's decisions on a school's priority goals and functions will affect the structures they develop, and these in turn will influence, or determine, the processes and actions that affect the child's learning opportunities.

Systems environment

Local Context

The systems environment considers a school's context including its local community, including factors such as the demographic composition of the community (outlined above for this LA). Schools adhere to national and LA policy enjoiners whilst

accommodating local issues. Pratt-Adams and McGuire (2009) suggest that primary headteachers in English urban schools often undertake their roles within an extraneous setting of relative deprivation and family disruption which influences their job.

Local context is not readily amenable to change by individual schools or heads. However, in this site the LA also attempted to support heads through headteachers' networks and school partnerships, where difficult common issues could be addressed. Such headteacher forums could offer mutual support, and would tend to broaden heads' experience and reduce their isolation. Important here is the head's view of their use of supportive environmental networks.

Policy for SLCN

Statutory policy and recommended good practice to support children with SLCN was common to the schools in the study. Interviews took place between October 2013 and May 2014, just before the passing of a Children and Families Act in June 2014 (CFA: DfE 2014) including pupils with SLCN in England. Subsequently, a detailed Code of Practice was issued (DfE 2015). The key measures to be included in the CFA had already been published (DfE 2012), and schools at the time of interview were working to them. Policy mandated that children, including those with SLCN, would normally attend their local primary school and follow the school curriculum, adapted to their learning needs (DfE 2014, Part 3). Children were to receive a single category of in-school support ('SEN support') detailing management of all in-school provision, including any contributions from visiting non-educational professionals. Children and families were to be involved, with an outcomes-focussed plan developed setting out

the support pupils would receive from education, health and care services (the ‘EHC plan’). These were to replace ‘Statements’ of special educational needs, which still applied to some children in the study. To indicate what support was available LAs were required to detail a ‘local offer’ of their available education, health and care services. All of the schools in the study had bought into this agreed support provided by the LA school improvement service.

The systems environment thus required educational and health professionals, alongside families, to devise and document the learning activities offered to support and/or ameliorate SLCN, resulting in an appropriately developed curriculum for the pupil. The long-standing expectation that multi-professional liaison within and around schools and families is required to meet children’s learning needs (Forbes and Watson 2009, 2012), and the need for collaboration amongst all relevant staff, were firmly embedded in educational, health and social policy (DfE 2014, 2015). Important here is the head’s view of the planning and co-working environment, and how SEND policy could feasibly be implemented in their school.

Finance for SLCN

A further systems environment factor was SEND finance. Baseline LA funding for each school included a notional SEN budget and further monies could be applied for to meet specific SEN needs. Schools also received an additional ‘pupil premium’ for children in economically deprived circumstances, indexed as those requiring free school meals. This money was not ring-fenced, but was to be spent by the school on closing the gap between disadvantaged children and others, and headteachers had considerable influence on how it was spent. Although the pupil premium was not

directly targeted at pupils with SEN, a link exists between SEN and economic deprivation and across England an estimated 30% of pupils with SEN benefitted from this funding (NASEN, 2015 p. 56). School inspections considered how the needs of children with SEN and disabilities were being met, monitoring school spending against pupil achievements. Headteachers were required to manage and monitor these funds, and demonstrate their impact on the educational attainment of pupils, including those with SLCN. Important here is the head's view of securing finance for SLCN, and spending SEND-related resources.

Functions and goals

Functions and goals are the expressed aims of the school in relation to support for pupils with SLCN, alongside its many other goals. These reflect 'ownership' and prioritisation of the need to support children with SLCN, and how the associated practices of differentiation and inter/professional working are recognised and formally embedded within the school's practice. Important here is the head's view of how SLCN is prioritised, and where SLCN sits within the school management plan.

Structures

Structures are a school's organisational arrangements. The headteacher, with support from school management and governance bodies, had an option to recruit staff with specialist skills and knowledge in supporting children with SLCNs, and/or arrange staff training in these areas, enhancing human capital in the forms of staff expertise, qualifications, knowledge and skills. Important here is the employment of specialist

staff, and/or the training of existing staff, and whether the SENCO and/or learning support staff had a formal place within the school senior management team or similar decision-making structures.

Processes

Processes are the ways in which a school meets the needs of pupils, and the actions it decrees and takes. They include the school's development of the language and communication environment throughout the school; specified curriculum adaptations and individualised programmes; additional interventions for particular pupils, and how school and non-school staff implement co-working. Pupils' learning activities in school would usually be delivered by school staff, mainly by classroom teachers and TAs, monitored by SENCOs. Non-school professionals offered assessment, advice, guidance and recommendations on appropriate interventions, and also suggested learning activities, interventions and materials. Headteachers' comments on these issues, particularly on school staff's capacity for planning and delivering language interventions, were analysed here.

Analysis

Close reading and review of headteachers' transcribed interviews was undertaken. Statements were classified under the above systems components for the eight schools, following discussion amongst the research team, and inspected to identify variation across the heads, with dissonance sought in line with the study aim of identifying

variation, seeking ‘telling’ not ‘typical’ quotations. After a first round of analysis, the data was re-examined to identify further contrasts. There was no expectation of typicality, and examples were elected to exemplify different views. The responses of four headteachers were chosen as illustration since they reported fundamentally different views, as agreed by the research team, and evidenced by quotations. Schools One and Two differed markedly on their reported goals/functions and structures, with resulting difference in processes. Schools Three and Four illustrate large differences in how learning activities were delivered, and by whom.

Quotations are directly from interview transcripts, with punctuation and grammar normalised and square brackets marking editorial clarifications. Respondents and schools are anonymised.

Findings

Headteacher One

Systems environment issues

Headteacher One was part of a cluster of partnership schools who met regularly to talk and share local issues and support each other, and of a headteachers’ strategy group with similar functions. These were considered to be extremely helpful:

‘I think the collaborative nature of the headteachers working together in [local district] is highly significant. I think it’s the best practice model.’

Functional issues

Headteacher One argued that developing speech, language and communication was an important curricular function of the school:

‘Speaking and listening is an assessed part of the curriculum. We have to level [attainment] and speech and language supports that good attainment progress.’

Headteacher One also took responsibility for developing a facilitative language environment across the school:

‘It is up to the school to produce a language enriched environment and all good primary schools do this, it’s their bread and butter work for want of a better word. An enriched language environment will support language and communication, and speech and language, and speaking and listening, and literacy generally throughout the school.’

Headteacher One actively promoted multi-professional collaboration and co-working. As illustration, when hosting multi-agency meetings they displayed relevant messages around the room:

‘It’s set up for multi-agency so we have the formal table here and the informal circle here and the display boards are very carefully selected with the content that we want people to read while they are in this room. It’s very explicit.’

Structural Issues

The SENCO was deputy head of School One, and there were several higher-level TAs specialising in SLCN, described by the head as ‘outstanding’. This resulted from positive recruitment policies:

‘As far as [employing] the right people it comes down to recruitment, so I actually go as far back as, the decision I make on the recruitment is: ‘Can I see that person fitting into a school that has huge language acquisition needs?’

Training and gaining experience was seen as necessary for staff, and there were structures to enhance learning:

‘As a head teacher at a school one of the issues [is] you have to make sure that your support staff are very well trained inherently through school CPD, in order to access that [SLT] programme and deliver on it. So once again the school has to look at what is the level of ability of the support staff, and how is the school keeping their professional learning programme for their own support staff at a level where they can deliver on these programmes. They are not particularly challenging as far as the degree of material that has to be worked through, it’s a lot of common sense, but you can do a lot of bad work mispronouncing or doing the wrong steps if you are, let’s

say, a less experienced support staff worker. So you want to know that you have got very experienced people and they are trained well.'

The school had recently received a National Standard award for supporting staff professional learning. Funding for external staff training was secured through school development plan budgets. There were also work-planning structures, including a support timetable based on priority need, and some 'pupil premium' money was directed to children with SLCN.

Process Issues

Headteacher One described a staff who comfortably undertook interventions involving multi-disciplinary collaborations. Further innovations were taking place in organising timely identification of and action on children's needs:

'We are constantly trying to improve our need to ask about children coming in [to school], and when they do come in from children's centres, yes, we do have appropriate information and it is getting better. And they often invite our staff to have conversations about children. But remember we get children who just turn up, the transients who have never been anywhere or the children who have slipped through the net. You suddenly find that this child is unintelligible and should have a Statement or should certainly have a multi disciplinary team in.'

In summary, Headteacher One worked within a supportive collegiate environment, considered that supporting children with SLCN was a main goal of the school, and had implemented appropriate managerial structures, funding mechanisms and educational processes to meet that goal.

Headteacher Two

Systems environment issues

Headteacher Two, uniquely, cited the demands of an exam-outcome focused external environment where increasing maths and literacy attainment was prioritised. This was seen as 'getting in the way' of the need to support SLCN, despite the head's personal reservations:

‘My vision has never changed, whether I’m a headteacher or a teacher, and I actually see speaking and listening as a very important part of children’s development. ... And that’s my role in providing those opportunities. The problem with that is, as a headteacher, is that I’ve got priorities that are put on me that kind of come in, you know, get in the way. So, you have to be, you have to hang on to that and you may, you may be going a route that you might not necessarily have thought you would be doing when you were a teacher, as a literacy coordinator. Nevertheless, it’s, you know, it’s always part of our school environment and our school ethos, speaking and listening. It might not necessarily be as much as what I would have hoped.’

Functional issues

Headteacher Two was personally concerned that SLCN remained a priority school function, despite pressures to increase test attainment:

‘Basically, that’s the elephant that’s in the room, you know, that’s what I’m not mentioning, but it’s SATs [Standard Attainment Tests] and it’s reading and writing, maths, you know. And it’s, as I said at the start, our children come up very low, it’s something we’re constantly striving to achieve. So it would be very easy to push speaking and listening to one side.’

However, amongst the interviewees, Headteacher Two expressed the lowest level of ‘ownership’ of the need to plan for and support children with SLCN:

‘[When] we have a senior management meeting about needs, that children have specific needs ... well, language and communication, actually, is one that we speak of the least, we talk about the least. Based on the fact that we are chasing levels in SATs, and literacy and numeracy are the big ones, so those are the ones that we feel we have to pursue.’

Outside agencies were accessed via the teacher observing a child then speaking to the SENCO, but the headteacher would have welcomed more outside support. In relation to SLT services they were concerned about the low number of sessions available:

‘For instance, I think with speech and language, I think you’ll probably find that people find it quite frustrating because we’ve got a big need and there’s not a lot out there to access, I think. You know, often there’s children in early years and, you know, obviously struggling with it and the teacher’s often said, you know. I don’t know if they get four [SLT] sessions or something like that, not a lot to go on and they’re basically left to it. So, I think, they would probably say that it was quite frustrating, and it’s generally, it makes what goes on in the classroom that improves things. Well, that’s what you’re left with.’

Structural issues

The SENCO in School Two was not on the senior management team. Headteacher Two considered that classroom staff had limited expertise in devising and delivering SLC interventions:

‘We do have TAs in the school that have delivered speech and language packages, but they’ve been given to us, you know, and they just follow a scheme. There’s no expertise, particularly, they’re just following a, something that’s been given to them.’

This was related to limited opportunities for staff to train or develop knowledge about SLCD:

‘The CPD [continuing professional development] isn’t specifically on speaking and listening issues, it’s more a recognition that children need to, need to be

speaking more, need to be communicating more in their class, and that's where the CPD comes from.'

Whilst Headteacher Two had developed some in-school staff training based on coaching and discussion, this largely focused on literacy issues, and was not specifically related to SLCN needs:

'We've also done CPD work ourselves, in-house, just looking at lessons. We do some, we video lessons and then we kind of look at them critically, and then, so there's a lot of that kind of coaching going on as well'.

Process issues

Some children in the school had severe problems related to SLCN, and Headteacher Two was particularly worried about their experiences:

'The ones that you feel frustrated, are the ones with the big problems and the big issues. I think that's where its most frustrating. I think the ones that can be done in house are less so, and you feel like you can actually do something about that. I think it's the ones with the serious issues, very frustrating.'

In summary, Headteacher Two focused on increasing attainment on high-stakes educational assessments, risking 'pushing aside' SLCN, developing little staff

expertise to meet SLCN. They would have welcomed further input from outside agencies, although considering there was not sufficient external provision to access.

Headteacher Two thus differed considerably from Headteacher One in not identifying support for pupils with SLCN as a priority school function, and in not developing a staff team with appropriate skills. These function and structure issues limited the interventions that could be offered at a process level, and sustained a continued high reliance on outside agencies to support children with SLCN, despite their perceived limits.

Headteacher Three

Systems environment issues

Headteacher Three was concerned with the complexity of SEND resourcing, and securing support for children with SLCN, and with networking:

‘At times I feel like I’m a broker. That’s what at times it feels like. Obviously, my role is to ensure that the support they need, they get. That can mean sometimes just going into deficit, and that means then I have to bang on the drum. I sometimes feel as though I’m just constantly knocking on doors saying, “I need more money, I need more...” It’s money, it’s funding, fundamentally, the issue. So I feel I am a brokerage service. I’m also trying to balance the resources I’ve got in school to ensure that that child gets what they require, but it’s not at the expense of the other four hundred and seventy nine children in school, and at times, this year, that’s been

out of kilter. And that's a wider issue, not just speech and language. It's a wider issue, but that's, my role is almost so much more removed from the children now because of the financial implications of what we need to deliver. That, again, some of your questions are going to be far better answered from the SENCO or from the class teacher, because they have far more daily input on it, and I'd be coming, much more that overview of: "Okay, you're telling me you need that. That piece of paper says I need that. That's going to cost me that..." And that's really quite hard, as a teacher myself, because at the end of the day, we're talking about a need for a child. I do feel it's like, I'm almost like a brokerage service.'

In line with their 'broker' role, Headteacher Three used personal informal contacts and networks to access external services for pupils, but reported that these were perhaps not available to all heads:

'I'm lucky, because I've got links there, people I can phone up, and say: "Have you got any spaces? I've got a child who might be right up your street." But I know that system from previous experience. There are probably some heads in [LA] who don't know those bases exist. I don't know that for a fact, but I've got a feeling that that's the case. ... I think what most heads will find is that there is a formal system and there's an informal system. And often it's far quicker to go informally than it is formally. You get to the same point, you obviously get to the point where you have to be formal about it, yeah, and there has to be paperwork around things and, I appreciate that, for some people, the paperwork is the only way they can then justify the spend or the intervention or whatever. But sometimes you can start the process off more quickly, informally, than formally.'

Functional issues

As well as spending considerable time 'brokering' to secure services for pupils with SLCN, Headteacher Three sought further collaboration with health services, and wanted School Three to work even more closely with health professionals:

'I just think, I think, as a bigger picture, I think that we need to be working more closely with health, because you can, an awful lot of children's problems, not just speech and language problems, but children's problems generally, are in some way health related.'

Structural issues

School Three's SENCO was not on the senior management team, but there was a staff group concerned with SEN who worked together. Headteacher Three had implemented training so that the school had skilled and knowledgeable staff working with children with SLCN, developing the school's capacity to provide an appropriate curriculum for many children:

'There's several skilled TAs and one highly-skilled TA, I think, in terms of supporting speech and language within school.'

‘We’ve experience of working with children who we’ve had programmes that have been offered to us, to work in conjunction with external agencies, so we have that kind of level of, there’s a level of expertise within the classroom as well.’

However, at times further specialist expertise was required:

‘There’ll be times where they [staff]’ve been given something or told something and they feel as though it’s just a case of, “Get on with it.” And they perhaps don’t feel as though they’re fully confident to be delivering that. I would imagine that must be the case. But again, I go back to the point, I’ve got someone who’s done an awful lot of this work now, so she’s possibly fairly confident compared to what a new teaching assistant might be asked to do... But obviously, our teaching assistants are generalists, generally, and therefore this is quite specialist, so unless they’ve had experience or support or training, then they may well feel as though it’s a bit daunting.’

Process issues

School Three staff had learned a sign system, and had collected language development activities they thought likely to be useful, to apply to new pupils:

‘Well, we’ve had, over the years we’ve had lots of input from speech and language therapy. So, if you like, there’s almost a box or a file full of suggested activities we can be doing’.

The school constructed individualised child programmes by ‘picking and pinching’ from activities undertaken with previous children with SLCN:

‘So we basically, you almost come up with a bespoke file of tools that we’ve got, which we inherited, which we’ve developed ourselves, which we’ve picked up from training courses, that we’ve picked up or pinched from speech and language therapists when they’re in school. So that will be a sort of fairly bespoke thing for each child really.’

In summary, Headteacher Three's approach was characterised by ‘brokerage’ to access specialist support for children. This was facilitated by the head’s personal social relationships, and considerable informal engagement. Headteacher Three considered intervention to be part of the school's routine provision, adapting materials developed in collaboration with outside agencies for previous children.

Headteacher Four

Systems environment issues

Headteacher Four also had concerns about SEND resources, particularly finding the first ten hours of 'specialist' provision under then statutory Statements of SEN from school budgets. These hours referred to provision that was ‘specially provided’ for a pupil but not ‘specialist’ in nature, and usually funded one-to-one support by a TA, who would be provided from school sources:

‘Because everything’s a case of now is it’s all in your budget, it’s delegated to you. Unless you’ve got a Statement over ten hours, then you’re kind of stuffed. I mean, now we’re told, I have three Statements in Key Stage Two, one for eight-and-a-half hours, so obviously that has to be met, by law, it’s statutory, I don’t get any funding for that, it’s all in my budget. I’ve one of twelve-and-a-half hours, so I get two-and-a-half hours for him, the first ten apparently is in my budget. I have another one of seventeen and a half hours, and again, apparently the first ten is in my budget, so straightaway there’s nearly thirty hours.

And I have one, two, three, four full time support staff, and I have one part time support staff. Two of those are in nursery, so that’s them completely out of the equation, nursery and reception rather, who have a full commitment having run on there. And then I have the other two-and-a-half for the rest of my school, and, of course, when you think, that’s, one is immediately taken up by a full statement then the other one’s taken up by another half a statement and other work, and then that’s it, time has gone. We used to offer better partnerships even last year, we can’t this year because we’re not meeting our statutory requirements unless I take staff off to do that.’

Functional issues

Headteacher Four reported that meeting children's SLCNs needs was a high priority, partly to support literacy development:

‘To be honest it’s very high, and it is one of our kind of ones that’s knocking on the door all the time, because, as I say, our biggest issue is writing, and children

can only write if they can speak, and if children speak, they can read. It's kind of that chicken and egg situation in terms of, we invest an awful lot of time in reading, so that our children can write, but before we get into that stage, we want them to be able to communicate efficiently. And so we know that we have to put in that level of support into our nursery to try and achieve that. And one of our problems is that I think we spend a lot of time fire-fighting the consequences of poor speech and language, such as the behaviour in nursery, that obstructs the amount of time we put into intervention.'

However, SLCN did not feature in the school plan:

'Not as a specific.'

Structural issues

The SENCO was not on the senior management team, but the deputy head had a role in planning for SLCN:

'[Planning for SLCN] comes under two guises in terms of literacy coordinator, who kind of has it effectively attached to her role. But, to be fair, she is the deputy head, and she would be more with me in terms of, we just plough it down further, in terms of availability, to the SENCO and to the early years staff'.

Headteacher Four also reported that staff implementing learning activities did not always have the required expertise. However, they were not sure that further training of assistants would be sufficiently helpful:

‘You’ve got to bear in mind it’s usually Level Three teaching assistants who deliver, who are absolute salt of the earth people, who will do everything they possibly can, do all the homework in terms of learning about what to do, but I think it makes a difference when you have someone who’s qualified to do that job, doing the job. I think that’s the problem. I think the impact should be greater. And, I suppose for me, they would then have the knowledge and understanding to keep an eye on that child and then pick them back up and put them back in the system. That’s not to say our support staff don’t, they do highlight children to us all the time who they’re concerned about. But [to] have a specialist signpost tool is much better.’

Lack of staff knowledge was related by Headteacher Four to the level and non-specialist nature of available staff training, and more of this was not seen as a solution:

‘There’s some training, not a lot, and then there’s more informal support. So, not specialist, which I think is the problem. I think if we had specialist intervention, it would be much better, but, obviously, for specialist intervention you usually need space, which is a premium in our school, and you need staff, which, again, is very difficult.’

‘We’ve got a lot of people that are doing Level Three teaching assistant qualifications who are coming in, that’s another additional tier of support, but they’re not specialist, and they’re just, you know, following a sheet of instructions. And

sometimes you kind of worry. You wouldn't, you know, if you put your car in a garage, you wouldn't let the volunteer come in and do the diagnostics check on your BMW, would you? And yet at the minute, there's almost, "Oh, you've got some additional bodies in there, ply them towards that support". Well, no, that's not really appropriate, and that can do more damage than good sometimes, I think.'

Process issues

Headteacher Four was acting to deal with the lack of available expertise by buying support for children with SLCN from educational psychology services:

'I invest an extra four thousand pounds a year in educational psychologist because I see that's a desperate need for us. I don't think it's a great use of my money, but I think I have to use it in order to get, I suppose, the key to the golden door of intervention. But it's a very, very expensive, long drawn out process. And you get a child from having a [preliminary case] to get through for a Statement, etc., it's almost a thousand pounds a child. And we don't recover that from anywhere, that's just straight out of school budget.'

In summary, Headteacher Four saw the role of the school as supporting children, but was concerned about the lack of expertise available, and purchased this where possible, rather than attempting to further train assistant staff.

Both Headteachers Three and Four had concerns about funding structures, and reported that supporting children with SLCN support had high priority. Both reported

extensive personal action attempting to secure provision, and both schools employed assistants with some training. They differed considerably however on processes. Staff in School Three adapted activities used with previous children to undertake speech, language and communication teaching, whereas Headteacher Four was not confident about the utility of such approaches, and sought to purchase expertise from psychology services where possible.

Discussion

Systemic variation across the headteachers' views is summarised next.

Variation in Systems Environment

All schools came under the same SEND legislation and were maintained by the same LA, eliminating potential variation pertaining to other English school types, such as academies, free schools and private schools. Headteachers One and Three were both supported by peers, but whilst Headteacher One's networks were reported as formal LA organisations set up to support schools, Headteacher Three used a personal network, reportedly not available to all other school heads. Such use of informal personal relational agency to 'broker' support for pupils was in their view a quick way to recruit support, but risks inequality where resources are limited, and disadvantage for pupils whose heads are not linked in this informal way.

The views of Headteacher Three and Headteacher Four on the overall lack of resources were similar, stressing the need to operate complex budgetary decision

making seeking to increase resources. Headteacher Three reported ‘banging the drum’ and ‘knocking on doors saying, “I need more money ...”, and so expending time and effort to secure funds. Headteacher Four also described constant efforts to balance assessed child need against limited provision. Multi-disciplinary approaches to meeting needs have high direct and transaction costs, and the complexity of support models and negotiating provision risks inequality, due both to inadequate resources and to varied headteacher success in making them ‘work’.

Variation in functions

Both headteachers Two and Four linked SLCN support to improving literacy outcomes. Headteacher Four prioritised both communication and literacy development as important school functions. Headteacher Two however suggested that SLCN needs were in danger of being ‘pushed to one side’ as a priority school function, despite expressing personal concerns about this. They related this to environmental pressure to achieve higher outcomes on standard tests of literacy and numeracy. This appears to be a less integrative approach, with the risk that social use of language is not fostered, and the focus on oral language development is lost after the early years. Under the 2015 Code of Practice (DfE 2015, § 6) pupil communication and interaction is one of four broad areas of need that should be planned for, and future research may identify less variation in overt prioritisation, and a focus on the needs of children with SLCN.

Variation in structures

There was variation in management structures, with the SENCO also the deputy head in School One, the deputy head in School Four supervising planning for SLCN, and a staff group for SEN in School Three. School Two reported no management team involvement, and that SLCN was seldom discussed.

There were also differences in staff recruitment policies, and in staff training.

Headteacher One recruited experienced staff and trained staff, and funded higher-level assistant posts: School Three also had skilled TAs. Headteacher Two was aware that staff could deliver but not develop learning activities, but did not mention training. Headteacher Four had a different view, considering that training school staff was in fact unlikely to develop sufficient expertise, which was rather sought outside the school.

Variation in processes

Unsurprisingly, there was resulting variation in processes. Headteacher One was moving forward with attempts to identify children's needs earlier, and school staff in their view could deliver appropriate learning experiences. Headteacher Two was concerned about the experiences of children with severe SLCN difficulties in their school. Headteacher Three considered that the school could apply activities and approaches gleaned from previous co-professional work in ways likely to be helpful. This runs a risk of using inappropriate or ineffective 'second hand' approaches unsuitable for an individual child's needs, although outside professional views on applicability could also be sought. Headteacher Four reported that staff could 'do what they were told', implementing interventions planned by others such as SLTs, but

lacked expertise in planning interventions. Rather than risk inappropriate use of existing approaches, School four aimed purchased external expertise.

The variety of practices revealed reflects the power that lies with the headteacher, and a key issue is that their different decisions and actions risk inequalities of provision and child learning experiences across schools. Current English SEND reforms offer enhanced roles for governing bodies and SENCOs (DfE 2015), intended to offer additional managerial resource supporting or removing some responsibilities from the head, potentially reducing the amount of future variation. However, there is a parallel move in England away from centralised LA influence towards atomisation of governance structures through the creation of free schools and academisation. This may serve to exacerbate inequality: the data here suggest that the use of LA networks allowing discussion of shared solutions to common issues were helpful, and are not replicated by other governance structures. The role of the LA as an important influence requires further investigation.

The study was small-scale, there was no objective measure of activity, and no child outcome measures were taken to validate school practices. Larger-scale studies could address these issues. However, the systems approach provided analytical purchase on and examples of headteachers' varied views under relevant systems components, suggesting that further use of systems approaches may be productive in considering schools' practice.

Each head recognised the need to support pupils' learning, although they were perhaps at different points in their journey to achieve this, and employed different approaches. Indeed, it was rather surprising to find so much variation amongst schools maintained by one small LA.

Conclusion

The focus here on variation means that no conclusions can apply to all headteachers or schools, but some broad conclusions regarding the variety of school cultures and systems into which SLTs and other professionals must 'bridge' are warranted. Some headteachers reported insufficient staff expertise within their school to plan speech, language or communication interventions, although all had the capacity to deliver planned activities. They were happy to seek support from specialist language teachers, EPs and SLTs, and welcomed co-working. They were at times concerned about the limited amount of outside help available, and the 'paperwork' needed to access it. Co-working appears essential to prevent practices that are effectively exclusionary, but is in itself complex and requires 'work' to develop specific skills, shared values and practices that is not always explicitly acknowledged (McKean et al. 2016).

Headteachers were aware of potentially unmet pupil need, and had variously attempted to deal with the situation. Systems approaches may be helpful to headteachers in further reviewing and altering their practice.

The four headteacher interviews were selected to show differences, and do not represent all of the variations in the study. In fact, the variation within the same LA is marked. Children attending the LA's schools could experience very different speech,

language and communication development approaches, and, one might argue, outcomes. We have no data on child progress or whether the schools' varied practices resulted in different outcomes for children with similar assessed needs, although this is likely. Assuming there are different effects, it is difficult to square a shared notion of 'good practice' in providing equality of educational opportunity and standards of entitlement for SLCN provision with the varied approaches of powerful headteachers, and the different drivers they acknowledge.

The systems model provided useful in analysing key issues, and clarifying their underlying dimensions within the complexity of school planning. However, the findings of headteacher positional power without necessary resources, and the wide variation in 'solutions' to the issues that arose were somewhat worrying. There is a danger that a pupil's entitlement to an appropriate curriculum is lost in a school system where their needs may be prioritised, or not; their curriculum is delivered by skilled expert staff, or not; and their support needs are funded appropriately, or not. The study has highlighted considerable variation in practice even within one LA concerning such fundamental issues, and careful monitoring of what now happens as new SEND reforms 'bed in' is required.

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