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Developing professional learning for staff working with children with speech, language and communication needs combined with moderate-severe learning difficulties

Introduction

Recent changes in teachers' pay and conditions in Scotland have put continuing professional learning at the forefront of major shifts in teaching practice (SEED, 2001). Teachers are encouraged to continue their professional learning in recognition of the importance of this lifelong process through formal and informal routes, for example, the Chartered Teacher scheme in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2002). Edwards and Nicoll (2006) stated that professional competence in teaching is based on continuing professional development (CPD) through reflection and experience. The General Teaching Councils for Scotland and England outline standards for CPD that include both formal learning and informal development of knowledge and skills.

The study was undertaken as part of my PhD that examined the verbal and nonverbal communication of teacher-pupil interaction where the child has speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) combined with moderate-severe learning difficulties. The research involved working with teachers in schools for pupils with additional support needs. Teachers routinely reported that they had few opportunities for formal learning in relation to the special needs of the children they worked with and expressed a desire to have more support for children with SLCN and moderate-severe learning difficulties. Without many formal learning opportunities to extend their theoretical knowledge, they relied on colleagues to develop their knowledge and skills. As a speech and language therapist, I was interested to know how they developed their professional learning for children with severe communication

difficulties. The main methods for informing themselves were a range of activities that could be described as formal and informal learning, feedback, and reflective practice; these areas will be briefly reviewed as a background to the study. Although these processes of professional learning overlap to some extent in practice, it may be useful to examine each element in turn.

Literature review

Formal and informal learning

In common with other professions, teachers are encouraged to keep up with current educational trends and to update their skills (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985; Menmuir & Hughes, 1998; Bolton, 2001). The McCrone agreement (SEED, 2001) outlined the requirements for teachers in Scotland as an additional 35 hours of CPD with portfolio evidence and an annual professional review. Initial teacher education in Scotland is through an undergraduate degree or postgraduate diploma. Specialist teacher education for additional support needs, including speech, language and communication, are offered after initial teacher training through modules leading to postgraduate qualifications at certificate, diploma or masters levels.

Formal learning can be defined as acquiring factual knowledge, usually in an educational setting (Malcolm, Hodkinson & Colley, 2003) although the authors note that many aspects of formal and informal learning overlap. The importance of informal learning has been recognised by a recent government White paper where informal learning is defined as learning for its intrinsic value and which may augment work-related skills (Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, 2009)

Eraut (2004) differentiates informal learning more explicitly from formal learning by highlighting the interpersonal aspects of learning from other people that exist in less structured and more varied contexts in the workplace. Eraut also notes that teachers' informal learning is assumed to be part of the job and gaining knowledge in this way is often not recognised as learning, in contrast to the learning associated with formal education or inset/in service training. As a result, teachers may be unconscious of the extent of their informal learning. Malcolm et al. (2003) reviewed the literature to define formal, informal and non-formal learning. They described the interrelated process when formal learning from a course is embedded in practice and discussed with colleagues. They contend that while different activities have aspects of both formal and informal learning, the amount of each differs. The distinction between formal and informal learning may therefore be somewhat artificial but for the purposes of this study the distinction will be maintained.

One example of where teachers might be assumed to need or have specialist knowledge and skills is working with children who have SLCN with moderate-severe learning difficulties. Davis and Florian (2004) define communication levels for these children as at an early intentional or pre-intentional level. Their communication may be individual, difficult to interpret, and is often through nonverbal means including augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) such as signing or assistive technology (Coupe-O'Kane & Goldbart, 1998). These children are likely to have additional support needs (ASN) defined as requiring additional support to access the curriculum and gain benefits from the school experience (Scottish Government, 2004). The specialist nature of teaching pupils with speech, language and communication difficulties often requires additional competencies (Miller & Wright,

1995). The knowledge base that teachers would develop for communication with these children is therefore likely to include early preverbal interaction development, and understanding of AAC options.

Feedback

One aspect of informal learning about communicating with pupils with SLCN that teachers mentioned to me in discussion before the study was through feedback from more experienced colleagues including other teachers and speech and language therapists. Peer observation of classroom working with follow-up discussion has been found to be useful in professional learning for teachers (Rose & Reynolds, 2008). Peer feedback and discussion has been shown to be mutually beneficial as it should involve both parties in reflecting on practice (Brockbank & McGill 1998, cited in Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). Peer learning was also noted to be effective in managing the translation of teachers' knowledge and skills into workplace settings (Glazer & Hannafin, 2006). They found support in the literature for different types of reciprocal interactions between colleagues leading to learning communities.

Video analysis is another feedback method that has been promoted for reviewing and improving interaction and communication skills for adults working with children.

Video recording has been used in a number of training programmes for early communication including Intensive Interaction (Nind & Hewitt, 2001), the Hanen (Manolson, 1992), and Early Bird (Shields, 2001) programmes. One of the schools involved in the study had recently been involved in an action research project using video recordings to track pupil progress with communication. An unexpected benefit

of reviewing the videos had been that the teachers had commented on their own interaction and begun to modify it as a result.

Using video-recordings to reflect on practice for teaching has also been described by a number of studies. Olivero, John, and Sutherland (2004) proposed that use of video kept the focus of reflecting and evaluating practice grounded in the classroom as opposed to theorising on professional knowledge. McLarty and Gibson (2000) noted that use of videotaping in qualitative research literature was restricted, notably in their field of emancipating research for people with complex needs. However, they suggested that videotaping interaction had the advantage of multiple playbacks, which enabled careful observation of fleeting and faint nonverbal behaviours. In this regard video is able to capture interaction that might otherwise go unnoticed by the other partner.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice in teaching is not a new concept and owes much to the writing of Dewey (1933) whose work has inspired more recent writers such as Kolb (1984), Schön (1987) and Boud (1995). The qualities of the reflective practitioner are now encouraged for both undergraduate and postgraduate training in the climate of continuing professional development. Reflective practice includes reflecting on one's own practice as a method of consciously learning from experience (Boud, 1995). Evaluating the experience involves action planning to inform future learning as part of the reflective cycle (Kolb, 1984). Refining practice involves unearthing the theories on which that practice is founded and this enables professionals to examine and develop personal theory as it arises from practice (Fish & Coles, 1998). Zeichner and

Liston (1996) caution that reflective practice needs to be carefully defined and practised effectively to be a method of empowering teachers to learn from their own experiences. They are concerned that teachers' experience is often not acknowledged as a valid source of knowledge;

'...because of teachers' direct involvement in the classroom, they bring a perspective to understanding the complexities of teaching that cannot be matched by external researchers, no matter what methods of study they employ' (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 5).

Teachers are therefore encouraged to learn from their practice and integrate new knowledge into practice by reflection; that is, to continue their professional learning (SEED, 2001).

Research aims and hypotheses

The aim of the study was to examine how participants developed their knowledge and skills for working with children who had speech, language and communication needs combined with moderate-severe learning difficulties. The study examined four aspects of professional learning for participants with reference to communication and interaction; these were formal learning, informal learning, feedback, and reflective practice.

As Miller and Wright (1995) concluded that additional competencies are required for children with communication needs, it was hypothesised that the majority of teachers would have had some formal learning on ASN/SLCN and communication strategies. The McCrone report (SEED, 2001) had been widely implemented for some time, so a second hypothesis was that most participants would rely on formal and informal

feedback to evaluate and modify their performance in interaction. A third hypothesis was that the majority would report use of reflective practices, including videotaping for that purpose.

Method

Participants

The 49 participants were staff working in 8 schools or units for children with ASN in 3 local authorities in Scotland. Staff were asked to participate if they worked with children with ASN, regardless of how much experience they had with these children resulting in 34 teachers and 15 classroom assistants completing a questionnaire.

Teaching experience with these children ranged from 3 months to 32 years. No claims can be made that the group are representative of Scottish teachers or assistants, as no normative data exists to permit such an assertion.

Procedure

A questionnaire (see Figure 1) was devised to survey participants' experience of learning about both ASN generally and children with SLCN specifically, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and through feedback and reflective practice opportunities. The rationale for using a questionnaire to address the four areas was that the method ensured anonymity so participants would feel able to be truthful about their experience in relation to learning, feedback, and reflection. It was also a quick method as the questionnaire was short, requiring about 5 minutes for participants to complete. Classroom assistants were given the same questionnaire as teachers with an option provided for "Not applicable" as Question 1 asked about initial teacher training.

The questionnaire format included closed, open, and multiple-choice questions on formal learning, feedback, reflective practice and videotaping. These terms were not defined to participants beforehand. The options for multiple-choice questions were generated from discussion with teachers during the data collection period of the PhD to ensure validity. Comments were also invited to supplement suggested options. Participants were also asked to rate their own feelings about preparation for teaching by using a Likert scale for Question 1c and on frequency of use of videotaping.

The brevity of the questionnaire enabled general feedback about the results to be incorporated into a workshop format on communication. The use of immediate feedback to 4 workshop groups provided an opportunity for comments from participants about the topics in an open forum. The workshops were offered to the schools that had participated in the PhD study, in order to address some of the concerns participants had about their learning on children with SLCN. Four schools were invited to host the workshops. In 3 schools for children with ASN, the majority of staff agreed to participate in completing the questionnaires followed by a workshop. The 4th school hosted a session following this format that included individual staff members from 4 other schools where children with SLCN attended a unit in a mainstream school. The workshops did not form part of the main data collection but general comments were noted from the discussions and are included in the discussion section below. Comments from the questionnaires and workshops were analysed by clustering comments into themes relating to the questions to summarise participants' views. In the workshops I presented on teaching strategies for children

with SLCN, based on pre-linguistic milieu teaching research (Yoder & Warren, 2002; Warren & Walker, 2005).

Figure 1: ASN questionnaire

| Additional Support Needs Questionnaire | |
|---|--|
| Prior learning | |
| 1. Did you have any initial teacher training about any of the following? (Please tick all that apply to you): | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Not applicable as I had no initial teacher training (Please go to Question 2) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | No initial teacher training on additional support needs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Children with special needs/additional support needs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Children with speech, language and communication needs |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Early language and communication |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Augmentative and alternative communication (e.g. signing, symbols, switches) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | General communication strategies for children with ASN |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Teaching strategies for children with speech, language and communication needs |
| 1b If any of these topics were covered, approximately how many hours were spent on these in your course? | |
| 1c. How well do you think this teaching prepared you for your current work? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | not at all |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | a little |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | satisfactory |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | well |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | very well |
| Additional comments: | |
| Current learning | |
| 2. Where does your current knowledge in working with children who have additional support needs/speech, language and communication needs come from? (Please tick all that apply to you) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | In service training |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Post-graduate courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Conferences |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Other external courses |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Text books |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking with teachers |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking with speech and language therapists |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking with parents |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking with physiotherapists |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Talking with other professionals (please specify profession) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | Classroom experience |
| Feedback about your teaching | |
| 3. Feedback is one way to learn about your own teaching methods. | |
| Do you have feedback on your teaching? <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> Yes | |
| If you do have feedback, how often do you receive this? | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | everyday |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | at least once a week |
| <input type="checkbox"/> | at least once every 2-3 weeks |

at least once a month

at least once a term

at least once a year

Who normally gives you feedback?

How useful do you think feedback is for you personally?

Reflecting on your practice

4. Reflecting on your practice can also be part of continuing professional development. Do you currently include reflective practice as part of your learning? No Yes How do you do this?

Is the time for reflective practice built in to your timetable? No Yes

How useful do you think reflective practice is for you personally?

Use of videotaping

5. Do you use videotaping in the classroom?

No Rarely (1-2 times a year) Occasionally (1-2 times a term)

Frequently (more than 2 times a term)

Do you use video for feedback on your teaching methods or interaction?

No Rarely (1-2 times a year) Occasionally (1-2 times a term)

Frequently (more than 2 times a term)

Do you use video as an aid to reflective practice?

No Rarely (1-2 times a year) Occasionally (1-2 times a term)

Frequently (more than 2 times a term)

Additional comments:

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought from education officers for the 3 local authority areas.

Once granted, the head teachers of each school were approached and meetings arranged to discuss the proposed study. The head teachers also received written information about the aims and nature of the research. Head teachers and teachers consented to be involved on the understanding they could withdraw from the study at any time. The questionnaires were submitted anonymously although it was possible to identify teachers as they had undertaken initial teacher training. References to teachers, pupils and the schools were then removed in the questionnaires to ensure

confidentiality. The design of the questionnaire and workshops was based on the ethical framework outlined by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

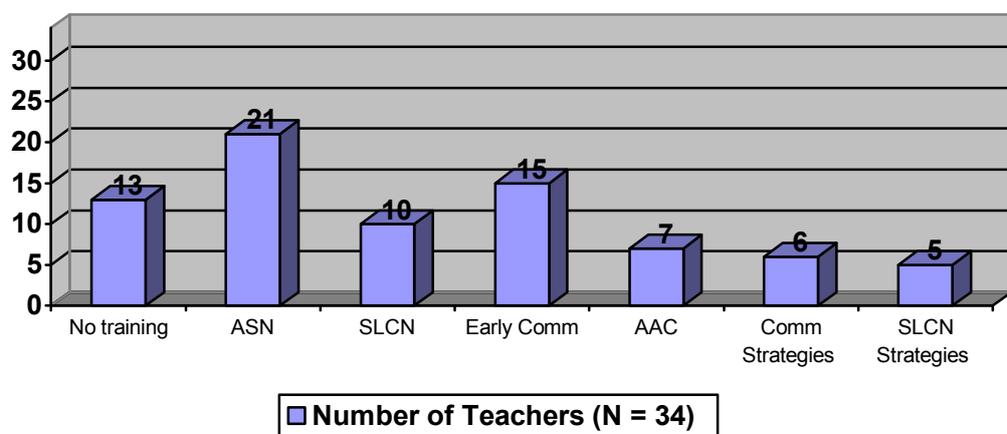
Results

The results are presented in 4 sections for findings on formal and informal learning, feedback and reflective practice.

Formal learning

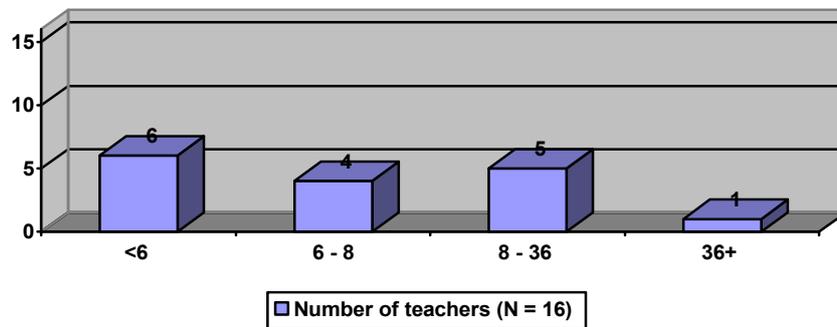
The first part of the questionnaire investigated the amount and type of teachers' learning for children with ASN and SCLN. The 34 teachers completed the question as it asked about their experience of initial teacher training. Of this group, 13 had not had any pre-qualification subject learning about children with ASN or SCLN. The remaining 21 teachers had some specialist training on ASN; the range of topics they had covered is shown in Figure 2 and included ASN, SCLN, early communication, alternative and augmentative communication (AAC), general communication strategies, and strategies for children with SCLN.

Figure 2: Teachers with pre-qualification subject learning for children with ASN



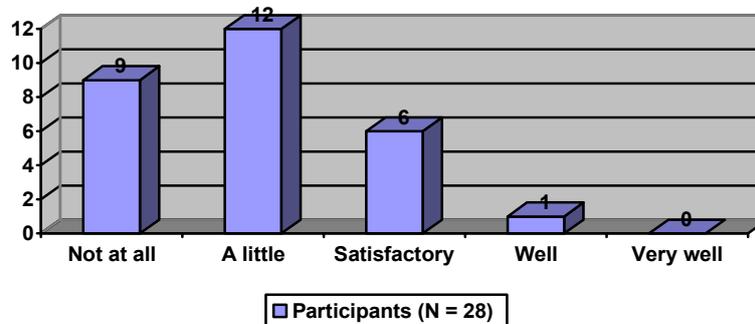
Those participants who had undertaken initial teacher training were also asked how many hours of teaching on ASN they had received in their course. Sixteen teachers responded and reported a large variation in the amount of training both in terms of topic coverage for ASN and in terms of time spent on the subject. The majority of teachers (10 of 16) had received less than 8 hours learning about children with ASN as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Hours of undergraduate/post graduate learning about ASN



Participants were asked to rate how well previous learning had prepared them for their current work with children who had ASN/SLCN. Twenty-eight people ranked themselves on a 5-point scale. Most teachers felt that previous learning had not helped them or was of limited use in their current work. The results are shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: The contribution of prior learning in relation to current work



The rating scale was provided for participants to focus their thinking in considering prior learning. Based on these figures, the majority of teachers felt that pre-qualification courses did not prepare them satisfactorily for working with children with ASN. Themes from their comments on this section show that content on early child development and a day release format were useful.

Informal learning

The remaining questions applied to all of the 49 teachers and classroom assistants. The second question concerned where they had acquired their current knowledge in working with children who had ASN/SLCN. Participants were asked to indicate any options that applied, so the numbers total more than 49. All 49 participants listed classroom experience as the way they learned about working with children with ASN/SLCN. Most also learned through talking to other teachers (N = 47) or speech and language therapists (N= 43), and inset/in-service training (N =45), while 40 cited textbooks, and 37 people also learned from parents.

Feedback

The second hypothesis was that most teachers would rely on formal and informal feedback to evaluate and modify their performance in interaction. All 49 participants thought feedback was personally useful to some degree. The majority of participants (N =41) said they had feedback on their teaching. Most people (N = 43) had feedback at least once a term through formal processes but 13 also considered the informal feedback they had everyday from other staff and pupils. Only six people indicated that they had feedback once a year through annual review.

As most people interpreted feedback to mean the formal feedback process, the majority (N = 35) indicated the head teacher or senior management as providing feedback. Other staff, including classroom assistants, were sources of feedback for 20 participants. Pupils were seen as an important source of feedback for 5 people. Typical comments included *'Class staff, (give feedback) when I ask for it. However, it usually focuses on pupil responses to a particular idea/lesson.'* *'Other class staff (give feedback) on a daily basis. We discuss what works best. The head teacher assesses on a termly basis.'* *'The head teacher (gives feedback), but auxiliary support can "crit" you each lesson!'* *'Pupils give us feedback every day. Other class staff, every two or three weeks'.*

Comments on feedback indicated that feedback was mainly seen as a method of professional improvement and learning but for some participants it was also confidence building if it was framed in a constructive way. 38 teachers and assistants commented that feedback from others was useful. Typical remarks included *'(Feedback is) very useful particularly since it is framed in a constructive way'*, and *'It's very helpful in both confidence building and improving on teaching techniques'*. Most participants rated feedback as very useful for their work. Participants also valued discussion with their colleagues and other professionals for feedback when working with children with SLCN.

Reflective practice

The third hypothesis was that most teachers would report that they reflected on their practice, and employed videotaping for that purpose. Participants were asked if they currently included reflective practice as part of their learning. Forty-one participants

said they routinely reflected on their practice. From this group, 31 people reported that they reflected mainly with other colleagues, in planning by evaluating lessons or through self-study. Participants were not given a definition of reflective practice and their comments revealed that they had a range of understanding of what it might mean. Some people commented on formal activities such as evaluations, reading journals, or Chartered Teacher modules; for example, '*...evaluation of lessons as part of postgraduate certificate and diploma*'. Other comments focused on the individual routinely reflecting on aspects of practice either alone or through discussion with colleagues; '*I reassess the day to identify areas that require improvement and try to develop these next time.*' When asked whether time for reflective practice was built into individual timetables, 24 participants responded that it was not built in but '*I just do it*'. One teacher commented '*Thinking about it I probably should. I and my team reflect constantly but informally. I don't necessarily count it as part of my learning*' (teacher's own emphasis). This comment suggests that school teams should discuss and clarify how informal reflection on practice differs from a formal process and how both relate to professional learning.

Participants were asked to rate how useful they thought reflective practice was for them personally. The majority (N =29) rated it as essential, very useful or important for them. Comments included '*(reflective practice) is very useful – helps to identify areas that require development and areas of strength*'; '*having completed the first module of the Chartered Teacher programme it's essential for further professional development*'; '*Very useful although sometimes I think you can think too much on what went wrong as opposed to what went well.*'

Participants were asked about the use of videotaping in class, and for the purposes of feedback on teaching methods, interaction and reflective practice. The choices in these questions were defined as no use of videotaping, rarely used (1-2 times a year), occasionally used (1-2 times a term), or frequently used (more than 2 times a term). 22 participants from 47 who responded used videotaping occasionally or frequently in class for recording pupils' progress while 17 people did not use video recording. The findings for use of videos as feedback on teaching methods or teacher-pupil interaction are shown in Figure 4, with 31 of 45 participants never or rarely using video for this purpose.

Figure 4: Participants' use of video for feedback on teaching methods or interaction

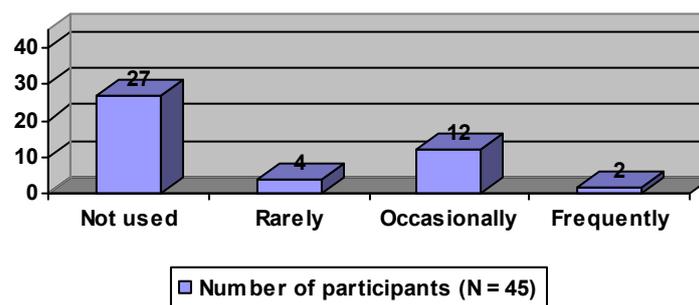
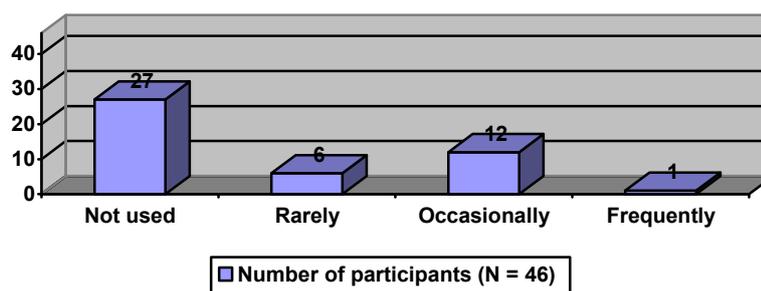


Figure 5 shows that 33 of 46 participants rarely or never used videotaping as a reflective aid but their comments indicated some willingness to consider it for the future; *'Never thought of it – used it in assessment'*, *'Probably a very good idea'*. Where videotaping had been used, comments demonstrated that participants found unexpected benefits in using it in this way *'The videotaping was originally to record the child's progress. But in doing so we also reflect on our own strategies and teaching methods.'*

Figure 5: Participants' use of video as an aid to reflective practice



In some cases there were other considerations that might result in video recording not being used regularly; for example, *'Used to use (video) regularly as Teacher of the Deaf. Now work with pupils with challenging behaviour. Problems with staffing for videoing (as we) need staff to maintain behaviour.'* One third of participants used or would consider using videotaping for feedback or as an aid to reflective practice.

One school had undertaken a project on the effectiveness of using video to record pupils' progress during the period of the research. After viewing these over one term, teachers commented that they noticed their own teaching as well as changes in the child's behaviour; *'We recently used video profiling which on watching after a few times has been very helpful and informed my practice.'* Teachers from this school reported that they were more positive about using video to reflect on their own interaction styles because of the research.

The results from the questionnaires were fed back during the workshop sessions for the schools. The process generated discussion on how reflective practice was perceived by individuals and by the culture within each school. The head teachers commented that this forum was useful for discussing teaching practice in relation to ways of learning about pupils' speech, language and communication needs. They were also surprised that a minority of teachers reported that time for reflective

practice was not included in their school day, as under the McCrone agreement, there was potentially some provision for this type of activity in work hours (SEED, 2001). The head teachers had assumed that teachers were using time in the day that was set aside for planning, continuing professional development and other non-class based activities, to reflect on their practice. Staff discussions about this issue were subsequently planned to clarify what reflective practice involved and how these types of activities would be included in the working week.

Discussion

Formal and informal learning

The study aimed to survey how knowledge and skills were accessed and developed for teachers working with children with SLCN and moderate-severe learning difficulties. Teachers' prior learning experience for working with children with ASN and communication difficulties showed that more than half had some form of additional formal learning. However, most teachers felt that initial teacher training and postgraduate learning did not prepare them for their current work with children with SLCN. This result supports Carpenter's findings that fewer teachers have specific training in working with children who have moderate-severe learning difficulties (Carpenter, 2007). Julian and Ware (1998) also identified lack of specialist qualifications through postgraduate and inset/in-service provision as an issue for teachers working with children with SLCN combined with severe and profound learning difficulties.

During the workshop sessions, teachers expressed a lack of confidence in their own abilities to assess children's speech, language and communication needs and to know

when to move them on to the next level in language development. They commented on feeling under-resourced for materials and knowledge to support their practice. However, it became evident during workshop discussions that individually and collectively they had extensive knowledge through sharing experiences and reflecting on action, as described by Schön (1987). Confidence has been identified as the most important factor in mid-career learning as it enables people to actively search for ways to extend their learning (Eraut et al., 2000). A lack of confidence might be due to the privileging of formal learning over informal learning. Kennedy et al. (2008) interviewed key informants about teachers' professional learning including representatives from the General Teaching Council for Scotland, Her Majesty's Inspectors of Education, the National CPD team, and Learning and Teaching Scotland which advises on curriculum development. Based on the interview evidence, Kennedy et al concluded that informal aspects of learning relationships, based in classrooms, are essential to professional learning. However, informants believed that teachers were more inclined to rate formal learning above informal activities (Kennedy et al., 2008). Teachers' assumptions and expectations about formal and informal learning were not examined in my study so further exploration of this area is necessary to inform the debate.

In relation to formal learning, participants felt that making the link between theory and practice was easier if the formal learning could be applied to experience in parallel learning. This finding is supported by Malcolm et al. (2003) in relation to real learning taking place when formal learning was applied in the classroom along with problem-solving with peers in integrating new knowledge into practice.

Participants in this study also learned informally on the job from a variety of sources including colleagues, other professionals, and inset/in-service courses. Eraut et al. (2000) found that confidence developed from receiving feedback and informal support from peers to problem-solve at work. Glazer and Hannafin (2006) noted that many factors must be in place for effective peer learning including supportive relationships, personality and beliefs about learning, dedicated time, and support from management. The use of peer learning and developing communities of practice for sharing learning has implications for the types of postgraduate support that teachers need when working with children with SLCN. The nature of informal support and the importance of constructive feedback were not explored further in my study but would be useful areas for future research.

The findings highlight the difficult nature of the task for initial teacher training courses in preparing teachers to work effectively in this field. Working with children who have SLCN combined with moderate-severe learning difficulties is highly specialised. It is unrealistic to expect that initial training programmes for teachers or indeed speech and language therapists, would be able to cover a complex area to the point that practitioners felt prepared for this type of work. However, professionals should be able to develop competency in skills during initial teacher training including observation, behaviour management, and evaluating literature.

Reconstructing experience may be useful when teachers feel, as they did in this study, that they have a limited knowledge base from which to work and expertise is accepted as emerging from experience combined with understanding. Recognition of competency and the process of acquiring skills and professional judgement are key concepts in continuing professional development and reflective practice. However, it

is essential that teachers have access to specific information sharing from other professionals, experts, and support networks.

Feedback and Reflective practice

Feedback was interpreted in different ways by participants from formal annual review by management to informal daily peer feedback, but was seen as useful by most people especially if it was framed positively. Professional development is considered more likely to occur through constructive criticism (Hogston, 1995, cited in Hammersley-Fletcher & Orsmond, 2005). Peer observation and feedback are also seen as effective in promoting professional learning but these processes are dependent on trust and the nature of the professional relationship (Schuck, Aubusson & Buchanan, 2008).

Professional learning portfolios require evidence that knowledge from formal learning situations has been applied to practice. The process of integrating or developing new knowledge in practice involves evaluating the experience through reflecting on practice. Boud and Walker (1998) contended that the social and cultural context affects the forms of reflective practice that develop. The context in schools was supportive as the participants in my study reported that they routinely reflected and found this process useful. However this process was usually informal and most participants did not think that time for reflecting was allocated as professional learning in the working week. Boud and Walker (1998) outlined a number of conditions that need to be in place to facilitate meaningful learning from reflection and caution against the type of mechanistic reflecting that does not respect individual differences or circumstances for learning. School teams are therefore recommended to

clarify the role and contribution of informal and formal reflection to professional learning.

Videotaping was rarely used for reflective practice although its potential was recognised in comments. Detailed video analysis has provided a useful method of understanding the more subtle signs of communication that may be used in interactions where pupils are mainly nonverbal communicators (Burford, 2000).

One of the barriers to using video more often in this way was the lack of staff to act as camera person, particularly in classes where pupils had challenging behaviours. There is evidence that pupils with challenging behaviour are more likely to be at risk of communication breakdown (Harris, 1995) and arguably more in need of sensitive individual communication interchanges. One solution might be to involve other professionals such as speech and language therapists or educational psychologists in making videotapes. These groups are increasingly likely to have skills in using video evidence to highlight positive interaction strategies to parents and teachers as a result of training in Hanen (Manolson, 1992) and Early Bird (Shields, 2001) programmes.

The findings are from a small number of participants so should be treated with caution as they may reflect the schools' cultures on professional learning and how management interprets it. The participants did not have detailed definitions of the concepts to relate to their own constructs about professional learning so different interpretations may have affected the results. Although the results were anonymous, these were discussed in the workshop sessions, which may have affected how honest participants felt they could be when colleagues would be present. Throughout the paper an assumption has been that professional learning is of value, although as

Kennedy et al. (2008) note it is difficult to measure whether the increase in CPD hours has improved pupil learning.

The results of this study suggest that professional learning about communication with children who have ASN/SLCN was usually accessed and developed informally. Teachers expressed a lack of confidence in the informal aspects of learning and valued formal learning more highly. The results suggest that school teams should agree on definitions for reflective practice and feedback and how these contribute to professional learning. There should be opportunities for real and sustained development from constructive feedback and reflecting on practice if these are built in as routine practice. The amount and variation in formal training in SLCN at initial teacher training and postgraduate levels was highlighted. Lack of access to or availability of this type of professional learning may be an important factor in shaping teachers' perceptions of their competence with children who have speech, language and communication needs.

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