

## **Communication in Schools: A case study in Wythenshawe**

### **Early Identification of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) within a Federation of Schools in Wythenshawe, Greater Manchester**

#### **1. The project in a nutshell**

The Communication Trust's Talk of the Town project (TOTT) is a community approach to early identification of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and works with partners to embed a continuum of effective support for children and young people with SLCN. It is an example of multi-agency working between a range of local and national partners within a small area of Wythenshawe.

The Wythenshawe area has historically suffered from severe social and economic problems with the former ward of Benchill having been assessed as the most deprived in the country in the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000.

#### **2. Background**

The Federation consists of Benchill and Baguley Primary Schools and Newall Green High School (NGHS). Also intrinsic to the project is Newall Green Primary School, the local NHS Speech and Language department, The Schools Network, independent consultants, Manchester University, The Communication Trust and its consortium members and a range of other local and national agencies.

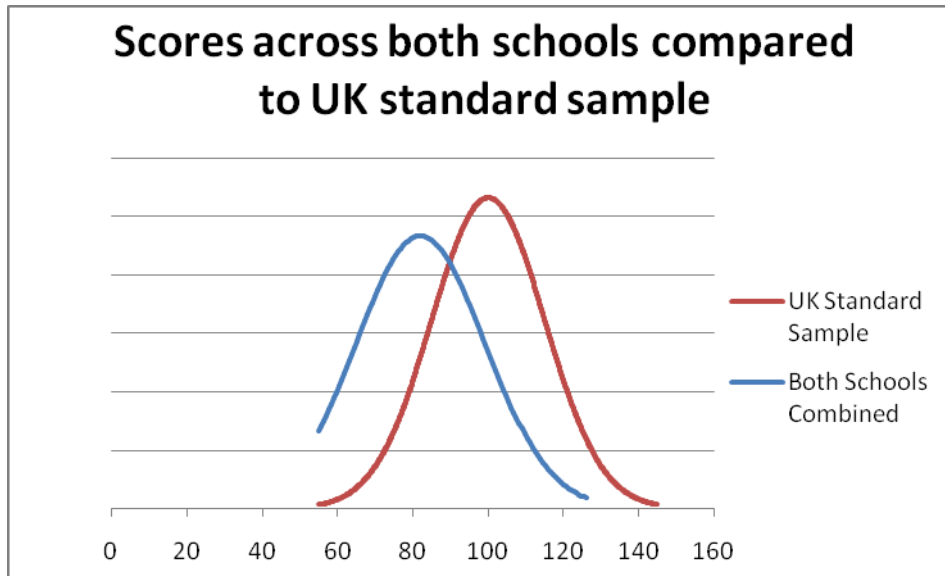
From April 2011-September 2011 The Communication Trust has worked to identify the needs of the Federation and wider community in relation to speech, language and communication (SLC) and designed a programme of work to support this need. This paper looks at the current level of speech, language and communication skills amongst a sample of children and young people within the Federation. It also captures the awareness and knowledge of SLC amongst the workforce.

#### **3. The level of SLCN at entry into the Federation**

To gain a better picture of the level and breadth of SLCN amongst the children that enter the Federation, standardised language assessments were completed on all the children that entered Benchill and Baguley Primary Schools at nursery age (105 in total). The children's ages ranged from 3 years and 1 month (37 months) to 4 years and 2 months (50 months). The assessment used was the PLS-4 UK, a widely known and recognised speech and language assessment published by Pearson Assessment. The results were charted against the UK standard sample and can be viewed in the graph below.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>PLS-4 UK collected data on a total of 800 children. Children in the sample were selected in order to ensure that age, gender, geographic location, ethnicity and parental education level were represented in accordance with data from the 2001 UK census. However, there were significant differences between the PLS-4UK sample and



#### What the chart tells us:

- The average score for children based on the UK standard sample is 100 and any score falling between 85 and 115 would be considered within the normal range
- The average total language score for the children attending Baguley Hall and Benchill was 82.1; this is therefore below the normal range and a cause for concern
- Nationally only 2.5% of children would be expected to score less than 70. However, within the TOTT sample 26% fell in this range
- In many areas children scoring less than 70 would qualify for a statement of special education needs (SEN); using this criteria 27 children in Baguley Hall and Benchill would be eligible for a statement
- In total over ¼ of the reception population, have these significant language needs and in many areas would qualify for a statement of SEN
- A further 29 children scored in the range 70-85 which is also below the normal range
- Therefore over half of the children assessed were at a level that in other areas would be deemed in need of extra support
- In the UK standard sample 16% of children scored **above** the normal range (a score of over 115). In the TOTT sample only 3 children achieved a score over 115 which equates to just 2.9%

#### Age equivalent scores and what this means:

- 30 children had an age equivalent score of 12 months or more **below** their actual age

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*the 2001 census data in terms of parental education level. Parents with university degrees were overrepresented in the PLS-4 UK sample, whilst parents with a low education level were underrepresented.*

<sup>2</sup> PLS-4 UK; Zimmerman, Irla Lee., Steiner, Violette G., and Evatt Pond, Roberta, Preschool Language Scale, Fourth Edition UK, London: Pearson Clinical and Talent Assessment.

- The youngest age at which a child would normally be admitted to a nursery class is 36 months. 47 children across the two schools had an age equivalent score of less than 36 months. 11 of these children were at a language level less than 24 months
- This means that these children will have difficulty understanding what teachers are saying to them and will struggle to understand many of the basic words, concepts and ideas that would normally be used with children of this age
- Examples of the words and ideas that these children **would not** understand include;
  - These children will not be able to follow simple two-step instructions such as “Get your coat and put on your shoes”
  - Understanding words that explain where things are such as ‘in’, ‘off’ and ‘out of’
  - Understanding words that describe the objects around them, such as ‘big’ and ‘little’
  - They will not understand some of the small words that relate to ourselves such as ‘me’, ‘my’ and ‘your’
  - They will have difficulty understanding words that describe our actions such ‘eating’, ‘washing’ and ‘sleeping’ as well as words to describe what objects are used for, for example “what do you use to eat dinner?”

**This lack of basic understanding has huge and significant consequences for children at nursery school.**

- It means they will not understand key elements of what teachers are explaining, so will struggle to learn new ideas needed to get ready for school
- They may not have enough words to understand what other children are saying, so can struggle to make friends
- Also, listening to lots of talk with this level of understanding can be really difficult, resulting in poor listening and concentration

**The spoken language of these children is also very limited. When children do not understand words and sentences, they cannot use them to talk.**

- The children were struggling to combine words into the types of sentences expected of children this age. Some were not able to combine words into simple sentences and were only able to use a y limited range of single words
- With these levels of language, these children will have difficulty expressing their needs verbally, learning and making friends

**In summary;**

- 26% of children across the nurseries have such poor speech, language and communication skills that in many areas they would qualify for a statement of SEN
- In total over 50% would be deemed in need of extra support
- Only 3 children out of 105 had above average speech, language and communication skills

There is often the notion that despite entering school with poor language children will “catch up” with their peers without additional targeted support. However, this is not the case. Children who come into school with delayed language need support to develop their language skills. One of the challenges in supporting these children is ensuring they are accurately identified as early as possible.

We know that accurately identifying children with SLCN can be challenging for education staff and challenges of a fast moving curriculum can leave little capacity for supporting language.

In order to determine how effectively staff across the federation were identifying children, further analysis took place in key stages 1, 2 and 3. Despite the commitment and good practice of staff in the federation, our findings show that children and young people across the Federation continue to have high levels of SLCN.

**4. Speech, language and communication needs from Key Stage 1 upwards**

**The Talk of the Town identification process**

The language skills of a sample of students in the two primary schools and Newall Green High School (NGHS) were assessed. Prior to the formal assessment teaching staff were asked to “RAG rate” the students according to their language ability. This meant that teachers identified children as being in one of three groups as follows:

- **Red** – these were students who were considered as having long term speech, language or communication needs who needed specialist support
- **Amber** - these were students whose language skills were considered to be delayed for their age, but who could potentially catch up with their peers with a targeted programme of intervention. Their difficulties were not considered long term
- **Green** - these were students whose language skills were considered to be within normal limits for their age who did not need any additional support

Once RAG rating was completed, students were selected for assessment across key stage 1, 2 and 3: 3 x Green, 3 x Amber, 1 x Red were randomly selected in each year group across the primary and within each class in Year 8 at NGHS.

**Speech, language and communication needs at KS1**

The Renfrew Action Picture Test and Renfrew Bus Story were used to assess the language skills of the randomly selected children in reception, year 1 and year 2.

	Renfrew Action Picture Test		Renfrew Bus Story Narrative Information	
	Sentence Information Delayed <sup>3</sup>	Sentence Grammar Delayed	Delayed	Severely delayed <sup>4</sup>
UK Expected	16%	16%	16%	2.5%
TOTT sample	17%	27%	54%	27%

<sup>3</sup> Below 1 standard deviation

<sup>4</sup> Below 2 standard deviations

NB. As no dates of birth were recorded the scores of each child were compared to the mean score for the lowest age bracket for their age. E.g. a child of 5 was compared to the mean score of children aged 5;0 - 5;05 even though they may have been older than this, for example 5;10. This means that the percentages falling below the norm for their age may in fact be slightly higher than these figures suggest.

### Speech, language and communication needs at KS2

The ACE assessment, Assessment of Comprehension and Expression 6-11, was used to identify children with language delays or impairments across key stage 2. Results of the selected cohort can be seen in the below table in relation to a UK standard sample.

Subtest	Score (1-6)	Score (7-8)	Score (9-11)	Score (12-13)	Score (over 14)
UK standard	<b>2.5%</b>	<b>13.5%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>13.5%</b>	<b>2.5%</b>
<b>Talk of the town sample</b>					
Sentence Comprehension	32%	16%	44%	4%	4%
Inferential Comprehension	14%	22%	34%	10%	20%
Naming	46%	24%	24%	6%	0

The scores for inferential comprehension are spread very widely with a higher than expected percentage scoring both above normal and below normal. This appears to be an area of relative strength and reflects the good practice in this area within the schools.

#### What the table tell us:

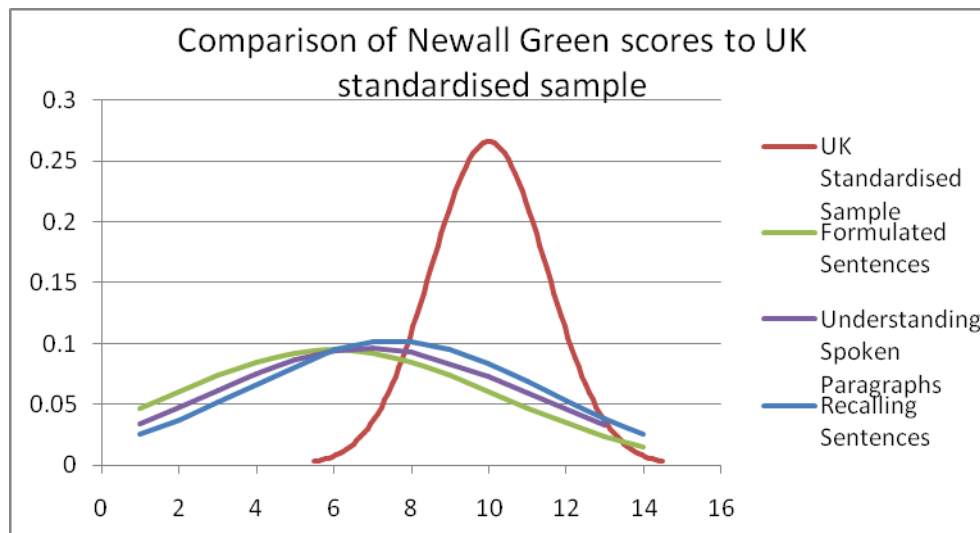
- The average score in a standard UK sample is 10. Scores falling below 9 would normally be considered below the normal range
- Across both schools around half of the pupils scored below 9, meaning they would need additional support to develop their language skills
- In one area of expressive language (a naming task) 23 children across the primaries scored 6 or below. This means that 23 of 50 (46%) of the children assessed have significant difficulties with this area of language
- The outcome of the language assessments show depressed language levels of children across the piece

**The particularly low scores in the naming task for so many of the children is of particular concern. Vocabulary is key for learning in school. A good vocabulary at 5 years of age is one of the indicators for those children living in areas of social deprivation who “buck the trend” and go on to be more successful in examinations and job prospects.**

Despite staff being aware of SLC, they under identified children across both waves 2 and 3 by 29% in sentence comprehension and by as much as 45% in the naming subtest. This means that a considerable number of children at KS2 are not having their needs accurately identified.

## Speech, language and communication needs at KS3

Specific subtests of the CELF 4 assessment were used to assess a total of 29 students in KS3 (year 8, aged 12- 13) and again results were compared to the standard UK sample used by CELF4. The below chart shows NGHS against the UK standard sample:



### What the chart tells us:

- Any score below 9 would be deemed below the normal range
- The average score of the pupils at NGHS fell below the normal range in all areas
- At NGHS over half of the students assessed fell into this lowest category in formulating sentences and understanding spoken paragraphs
- Based on how we sampled the children, we would have expected 1 out of 7 children to score at a level that would make them eligible for a statement of SEN. Based on the language levels of the children assessed, more than half the children assessed would qualify for a statement of SEN
- Whilst the majority of students (around 68%) would normally be expected to obtain scores within the normal range, at Newall Green less than a quarter of students fell into this category. In fact in one subtest over two thirds fell in to the range below normal

### In Summary:

- From the random cohort assessed we can see that a high incidence of SLCN remains across the primary and secondary phases of the Federation
- Despite excellent practice from staff, over 50% of children at 13 are still experiencing delayed language or more specific and long term SLCN
- Most importantly, though staff have good awareness of the issue, there is significant under identification of children with SLCN

- Results show that the prevalence of SLCN in fact increases further up into the high school

## 5. Staff confidence in identifying SLCN

From the above findings it is evident that the 'typical' SLCN distribution curve does not apply to the Manchester Federation of schools involved in the Talk of the Town project.

To support baseline measures the TOTT project also looked at the level of confidence amongst staff to identify children and young people with SLCN. As discussed earlier in this paper staff were asked to RAG rate all children across the Federation. This process uncovered areas of weakness in staff confidence to identify children and young people's SLCN:

- If identification of SLCN was accurate, any student falling below the normal range should be rated either as red or amber.
  - In each of the three areas of language assessed at NGHS, 9 of the 15 students (60%) that were rated by the school as having typical SLC skills (green, wave1) achieved scores that indicate a rating of red or amber. Overall, the school RAG rating at NGHS under-identified SLCN by 52% in the formulating sentences subtest, 48% in understanding spoken paragraphs and 38% in recalling sentences
  - Across the two primaries at KS2 the percentage of under-identification of SLCN ranges from 17% in inferential comprehension to 45% in the naming subtest

### In Summary

- Across the Federation these results suggest that there may be a significant number of students with SLCN that are not being identified
- It also shows that there are discrepancies between the school RAG rating and the students' language skills as shown in assessment results. The information can be used to help support more accurate identification of SLCN in school

### Report summary and next steps

This report highlights the concerning level of SLCN amongst children and young people from a Federation of schools in Wythenshawe. We know this prevalence is indicative of other areas of social deprivation as highlighted by The Stoke Speaks Out Project in Stoke on Trent where up to 68% of children were entering nursery with delayed language as recorded in 2007 (insert footnote).<sup>5</sup> There are also studies identifying high numbers of children in inner city schools with SLCN (75%).

One of the most concerning outcomes is not only the number of children with SLCN, but the significantly depressed language levels of these children, which have and will continue to have a huge impact on their learning, social interaction, self esteem and ultimately long term life chances.

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<sup>5</sup> Stoke Speaks Out, [www.stokespeaksout.org/home/About%20Us](http://www.stokespeaksout.org/home/About%20Us)

This report highlights that despite good practice from staff across the Federation, a significant number of children with SLCN are not being accurately identified. TOTT has begun to embed a programme of work to support staff to identify SLCN as early as possible through targeted workforce development, coaching and mentoring. The TOTT project has also put in place provision to support those children across the Federation who have delayed language or a more specific SLCN. The aim of the project is to build expertise within the school and wider community to support development in the fundamental communication skills all children should possess. However, it is clear that such a significant issue across the community needs a sustainable and long term approach to really make a difference to these children and young people.