

Greater than the sum of its parts

Speech & Language Therapy in Practice editor Avril Nicoll reflects on the I CAN conference 'Working together to get it right for every child: Transdisciplinary working for children and young people with a communication disability', 21 September 2007.

This was I CAN's first conference in Scotland, and an appropriate point to launch the Scottish edition of its paper 'The Cost to the Nation of Children's Poor Communication' (Mary Hartshorne, 2007, available at www.ican.org.uk). This includes referenced gems such as "A survey of Scottish employers showed that communication was rated high as an essential skill when recruiting staff, and yet in a more recent survey this was shown to be what was most frequently lacking in new recruits. Interestingly, young people themselves view communication and interpersonal skills as the most important and essential life-skills" (p.6).

This kind of paper is one of the reasons I CAN has grown in influence over the past few years. It understands the vital importance of engaging with the political process – responding to consultations, framing papers in the language of government priorities and concerns, talking to key people and widening relevance to include all children. The involvement of Mike Gibson as keynote speaker and chair is an example of this strategy in action, and it was encouraging to see him listening and taking notes throughout the day.

Mike is a former educational psychologist who now heads the Scottish Government's Support for Learning Directorate (www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/Doc/923/0052945.pdf). He set the policy context for the day, including reiteration of the political commitment to community based, integrated and preventative care delivered by teams with clients and carers as partners. In considering how we invest in early intervention and prevention to give children the best possible start in life, he asked delegates to think what the key performance targets should be, emphasising this was "not just about inputs". He also promised that statistics are "going to get better".

Mike said he was "open to suggestions" about whether speech and language difficulties should be included as an Area of Professional Interest for the Scottish teachers' Professional Recognition process. The list currently includes autism, dyslexia and hearing impairment. (www.gtcs.org.uk/ProfessionalDevelopment/ProfessionalRecognition/Areas_of_Professional_Interest.asp)

I CAN conferences provide formal and informal opportunities for speech and language therapists and those teachers with an interest in supporting children with communication needs to work towards a greater understanding of how their roles complement each other. The programme, joint presentations, the kind of questions that are asked and conversations over lunch all add to our awareness of where there is shared ground and where there are tensions. To address the tensions, we need to understand why they have arisen. Talking with a group of teachers over lunch, I was reminded of the way that our developmental perspective

gives us a different understanding of the things that children do, and therefore a different slant on how they can be supported.

In their report for Afasic on a project to study collaborative conversations between teachers and speech and language therapists, workshop presenters Helen Farmer and Jennifer Reid give some more clues through a summary of the roles and responsibilities of each profession (www.afasicscotland.org.uk/Effective%20Collaboration.pdf, p.11):

Teachers	Speech and language therapists
Teachers are expected to teach the curriculum.	Therapists are expected to identify disorders of speech, language, communication and swallowing, and to offer interventions that alleviate or lessen their impact.
They are responsible for assessment and planning for all pupils in their class(es).	They select those children who will respond to specific interventions.
They work on the expectation that children will develop and learn in an ongoing progression step by step. They recognise that there are different learning styles and present structured learning situations or lessons that will enable all children to learn.	They deliver intervention on the basis of on-going assessment and review of progress as measured against agreed outcomes.
They measure progress and report to parents/carers.	There is an expectation that intervention goals will be discussed and agreed with the client/carer.
Initial professional education for teachers has developed from a social science model.	Initial professional education for SLTs has developed from a medical model.
They are usually employed by Local Authority.	They are usually employed by the NHS.

Jennifer and Helen's project looked at five teacher / speech and language therapist partnerships planning for pupils with additional support needs. Twelve scheduled conversations were videotaped over one year and coded as: sharing information; negotiating targets or routines; reviewing to check; reviewing to reflect.

The coding process struck me as having potential for undergraduate education and conversation partner schemes, complementary to other approaches such as parent child interaction therapy (www.speechmag.com/content/files/Microsoft_Word_Video.pdf) and VIG (www.cpdeducation.co.uk/veroc/) which make extensive use of video as a reflective tool.

From looking at patterns across the different types of talk, Helen and Jennifer recommend:

1. To set joint targets, we need to spend time sharing information so we have common understanding

2. We need to discuss and reflect on problems
3. We need to negotiate specific targets and strategies
4. Spending time talking in this way sets the scene for a more fully collaborative approach.

The ‘SLT factor’

Speech and language therapist Marysia Nash unpicked the collaborative relationship further. Covering three secondary schools on a part-time basis she emphasised the need to identify the ‘SLT factor’ in support. She suggested we ask ourselves, “What do we know that is different, complementary and enhances learning?” Marysia has worked with English teacher Emma Easton to broaden the vocabulary of pupils with language impairment through structured, systematic teaching of independent word learning strategies. Marysia and Emma also described a ‘writing lab’ approach to supporting writing within a small group. Information technology is a key part of the strategy and, as a result of their collaboration, Emma’s lessons now make more use of IT and are more interactive. She believes a wider range of pupils are benefiting, including those with English as an Additional Language or behavioural issues. Emma recommends that teachers should observe speech and language therapists and familiarise themselves with the IT available in their school. Marysia mentioned a number of helpful resources which will hopefully feature in a future issue of *Speech & Language Therapy in Practice*.

Each of the two workshop slots had three options and I suspect that whatever ones I had chosen I would have come away inspired by the presenters’ enthusiasm for a collaborative approach. The importance of commitment to the process by both partners is always evident – and that it makes a huge difference if they actually ‘get on’ at a personal level. As Elspeth McCartney observed in her keynote presentation, “You can insist on people behaving in a professional manner but not on people liking each other!”

In typically forthright fashion, Elspeth challenged the assumption of the conference title – that ‘transdisciplinary’ working is ‘best’. She cautioned, “Most of the literature on co-working describes the process, from professionals celebrating the achievement of closer working relationships in terms of professional satisfaction. However, there is very little research on any benefit of closer working relationships for clients, despite a common (and common-sense) assumption that they exist.”

Elspeth explored a variety of models of co-working, each with their associated costs, benefits and challenges. She suggested that being specific about the model we are using helps us work out what is effective in particular circumstances. Features which make models different include:

1. Who works with the client
2. The egalitarianism of relationships
3. Who agrees the targets
4. The supportiveness of relationships
5. Agency structure / level of integration.

Observing that co-working at its most developed level tends to occur in specialist settings with a stable team of staff who work well together, she concluded that one size can't fit all. We need to work in a number of ways depending on the circumstances.

Marie Gascoigne seemed to draw all the day's themes together as she explored how we can ensure that the whole of transdisciplinary working is greater than the sum of its parts. We need to change our mindset, improving our costing of services and thinking in a way that will influence commissioners. The Hackney service model for packages of support www.rcslt.org/docs/free-pub/Supporting_children-website.pdf (p.15) seemed a particularly useful tool to help managers put the case for a flexible and wide-ranging service and to assist therapists, parents and colleagues in deciding the most appropriate provision for a particular client. Marie emphasised it is not that the packages in themselves are new, but the way the mode of presentation lends itself to constructive discussion.

Contribution

I liked Marie's emphasis on the importance of us being idealistic and having aspirations, to pull the profession forward further than we may have gone. I also liked her use of the word 'contribution' as a way of getting managers and therapists to think of themselves as part of a whole team to meet a child's needs. Remembering Marysia's term the 'SLT factor', it was interesting to hear Marie talking about a continuum of competences to make us think about what is uniquely within our remit, what can – and should – be handed on, and what will vary depending on circumstances.

I came away from this conference with the sense that it was one of the best I had been to, a really good mix of vision, strategy, evidence and practical ideas. While I don't recommend taking 6 months to write up an event(!) it's interesting that in doing so my opinion hasn't changed.

You can view Elspeth McCartney's PowerPoint presentation here:

www.ican.org.uk/upload/conferences/scotland%202007/emccartney.pdf

And Marie Gascoigne's here:

www.ican.org.uk/upload/conferences/scotland%202007/mgascoigne.pdf

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