



Educational opportunities available to children and young people from working class backgrounds Baroness Morris of Yardley debate – 5 March 2020

Executive summary

- Speech, language and communication skills are central to educational attainment.
- Over 10% of children and young people in the UK have some form of long-term communication need which impacts on their daily life.¹
- In areas of social disadvantage around 50% of children start school with delayed language and other identified communication needs.^{2,3}
- Left unidentified and unsupported these communication needs can have a significant negative impact on children and young people's educational opportunities, including of those from working class backgrounds.
- Children from poorer backgrounds with communication needs can be impacted in the earliest years, in school and in higher education and employment.
- Improving early intervention, supporting children with long-term communication needs, promoting the professional development of the education workforce and incentivising schools to prioritise speech, language and communication would help to improve the educational opportunities of children and young people with communication needs, with potential to impact most on those from working class backgrounds.

Speech, language and communication and educational attainment

- The recently published *Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On* highlighted that 'strong communication and language skills in the early years are linked with success in education, higher levels of qualifications, higher wages and better health.'⁴
- Research by Save the Children has revealed:
 - 1 in 4 children who struggled with language at age 5 did not reach the expected standard in English at the end of primary school compared with 1 in 25 children who had good language skills at the same age.⁵
 - 1 in 5 children who struggled with language at age 5 did not reach the expected standard in maths at the end of primary school compared with 1 in 50 children who had good language skills at the same age.⁶

Speech, language and communication and poorer children

- An analysis of Department for Education figures by Save the Children found that:
 - 1 child in 5 starts primary school in England without the language skills they need to succeed, a figure that rises to 1 in 3 of the poorest children.⁷
- Children who are entitled to free school meals and live in deprived neighbourhoods are more than twice as likely to have identified speech, language and communication needs.⁸

In the earliest years

The 'word gap' opens up in the early years:

- Studies have found that at age three children in the lowest income group had language skills on average 17.4 months behind children in the highest income group. By the age of five, the gap is 19 months. This gap is larger in the UK than in other developed countries.⁹

In school

Without support, children from poorer backgrounds who are behind in language are less likely than their peers to catch up over time:

- Children living in poverty who experience delayed language at age three are significantly more likely to be behind in literacy at age 11 than children in better-off families who also experienced delayed language.¹⁰

In higher education and employment

One key factor in the over-representation of children educated in the private sector in elite universities and in white-collar professions is their more developed and confident communication skills:

- In a survey of 900 teachers across the UK, teachers in independent schools reported fewer barriers to initiating talk-based activities than those in state schools.¹¹

There is also strong evidence that poor language in childhood predicts poor employment prospects:

- Five year olds with poor language skills are twice as likely to be unemployed in their thirties.¹²
- A study of unemployed young men found that 88% had some level of language difficulty.¹³

Improving educational opportunities for children and young people from working-class backgrounds

Ensuring that children and young people's communication needs are identified and supported is essential to improving their educational opportunities, particularly for those from working-class background given that around half of children starting school in areas of social disadvantage have delayed language or other identified communication needs.

Early intervention

To improve early intervention, the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) recommends that:

- leaders across education and health should prioritise and jointly commission early years speech, language and communication services, in line with the upcoming Public Health England guidance.
- to ensure the guidance is followed across the country, the Government should require all areas to have a joint strategic plan in place which assesses the level of speech, language and communication needs in their area, and outlines the joint commissioning plans to meet that need.

Children and young people with long-term needs

To ensure that children and young people with long-term needs, including those from working-class backgrounds, receive the support they need, the RCSLT recommends:

- the Government should develop an evidence-based integrated pathway for children and young people with SLCN aged 0-25, building on the guidance Public Health England is due to publish on speech, language and communication services for children aged 0-5.

Professional development and incentivising schools

In the *Bercow: Ten Years On – 1st Anniversary Update*¹⁴, I CAN, the children's communication charity, and the RCSLT recommended:

- **professional development of education workforce** – teachers need to be able to identify children and young people who may have communication needs as early as possible and support them effectively. This should be addressed both through the early career framework for new teachers, as well as through providing national programmes of training for all education staff.
- **incentivising schools** - with increasing pressures on their time and budgets, it's essential that schools are encouraged from the top to give speech, language and communication the priority it deserves. This should include providing guidance to schools on how they can use their pupil premium funding to develop language skills.

References

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- 14 For more on Bercow: Ten Years on see: <https://www.bercow10yearson.com/>