Introduction

The Irish Association of Speech and Language Therapists (IASLT) is the recognised professional body for speech and language therapists (SLTs) in Ireland. IASLT welcomes this report and the opportunity to engage in consultation. The practice of speech and language therapy includes the assessment, diagnosis, identification, prevention, and rehabilitation of individuals presenting with communication and swallowing disorders. SLTs are experts in speech and language acquisition and welcome the opportunity to work with teachers and early educators, as well as the policy makers to implement this plan.

We welcome the focus on literacy in its widest sense, including the importance of oral language, and the functional importance of literacy and numeracy. Numeracy is inextricably linked with literacy, as language concepts, such as time, distance and size, are essential to use of numeracy in problem solving.

Improving teachers’ and ECCE practitioners’ professional practice

We agree that the initial training programme and on-going CPD are essential to this plan. Value could be added by having joint training modules with other professionals such as SLTs. In addition, SLTs have conducted extensive research and practised in the areas of language acquisition, speech, language delays and disorders in childhood and the links with literacy. SLTs could offer both pre- and post-registration modules for teachers in these areas. There are many evidence-based training programmes available1.

Giving priority to language skills, literacy and numeracy in early childhood, primary and post-primary education

Whilst we welcome the need to give priority to these skills, it is important that these skills are incorporated into all other subjects, particularly in the post-primary education. New skills are best learned when they are applied in a range of situations. SLTs working with pre-school children place an important focus on early listening skills, oral language development and early phonemic awareness skills as well as phonological awareness skills which are essential for early literacy development. They also focus on early concepts which are essential for numeracy. SLTs also work with children in primary and post-primary education and have experience in integrating language goals within the curriculum. Any assessments and interventions being developed to examine these competencies should draw on the expertise of SLTs.

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Targeting available additional resources on learners at risk of failure to achieve adequate levels of literacy and numeracy

It is estimated that up to one in ten children have some level of speech, language or communication difficulty and this is increased in areas of social deprivation. International literature highlights the long-term consequences of poor early language development on children’s educational attainment including behaviour and emotional difficulties, low self-esteem and lack of confidence, educational under-achievement resulting in early school leaving and poor employability. It is essential therefore that all children are given appropriate support to develop literacy and numeracy. Resources need to be targeted to the ‘at risk’ population. There is evidence that joint collaboration between SLTs and teachers produces measurable improvements\(^2\). Some practical suggestions for how this could be targeted are listed below:

- SLTs assigned to “at risk” pre-schools/national schools where literacy is deemed to be an issue, and where the focus is on prevention of literacy difficulties and early intervention
- Collaboration between teachers and SLTs around literacy promotion, e.g. national literacy awareness campaigns, seminars and courses for parents in “disadvantaged” areas.
- Most parents are not aware that literacy development begins from very early years with a focus on shared “reading” in the home, development of language and an exposure to books. IASLT have recently been involved in a media campaign to highlight the issue of introducing books from when the child is very young, and the importance of having an environment which promotes a life long love of literacy.

Speech and language therapists are experts in the assessment and management of speech, language and communication difficulties and should be consulted in any plans to implement strategies to overcome these difficulties. IASLT recommend that DOHC and DES should work together to ensure that resources for children at risk of literacy and numeracy difficulties are co-ordinated and targeted appropriately.

Enabling parents and communities to support children’s literacy and numeracy development

Children develop their communicative competence from their interactions with parents and caregivers. It is essential that parents are supported to provide language stimulating environments for their children. The best way to do this is a multi-disciplinary, multi-agency approach. Education of parents should ideally start at the ante-natal stage to encourage parents to talk to and interact with their babies from birth. This can then be expanded on at parent-toddler groups etc, encouraging parents in appropriate ways of developing their child’s communication. This can then be built on by schools building links with parents and local communities.

Summary

The successful implementation of this plan requires a multi-professional, multi-agency approach. IASLT should be included as part of such a group, particularly with\(^2\) HSE/Cork City Partnership (2009) Review of the Glen Early Language and Learning Pilot Project.
their expertise in relation to early speech and language development, both in relation to prevention and identification and management of difficulties.

IASLT recommend the formation of a collaborative strategic planning group including all the main stakeholders, i.e. DES, DOHC, HSE, IASLT, NCSE. This working group could look at issues for the child and their family, and could develop a plan for systematically targeting ‘at risk’ families from early childhood. All professionals involved with children and families in their communities, including public health nurses and senior medical officers, should be involved in literacy promotion from early years, and highlight children for whom literacy may be an issue. IASLT feel early identification and a collaborative approach to literacy and numeracy development are essential for improving national standards in literacy and numeracy.