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Abstract

The opinions of adolescents about their earlier specialist educational provision in the UK, i.e. language units, have received little attention in the literature. This study examines the views of young people and their parents on language units and also evaluates opinions concerning the young people's language difficulties. One hundred and thirty-nine adolescents with specific language impairment (SLI) aged approximately 16 years, who had all attended a language unit at 7 years of age, were interviewed along with their parents and teachers. A broadly positive experience of language unit attendance was reported by young people and their parents. However, a fifth of adolescents and nearly a third of parents thought there had been too little educational support during schooling. In addition, a fifth of the adolescents felt there were lots of ways in which they could not do things currently due to language difficulties. It was also found that nearly a third of the young people had tried to hide their language difficulties in the past year. Within the context of an overall positive picture of results, young people with SLI may require support during adolescence with regard to their continued language difficulties, their confidence and self-esteem.

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There have been recent debates in England about the role and value of provision for special needs. The Education Act of 1972 gave all children a right to education, regardless of the severity of their disabilities. Inclusive ideology meant that these children had the right to be included in mainstream schools. However, a recent report by Warnock (2005) suggested that rather than the relatively simplistic ideal of including all children 'under the same roof', it may be beneficial to set up small, specialist schools for those whose disabilities prevent them from learning in the environment of a large, mainstream school. Here, children would be known well by their teachers and would not be as vulnerable as they may be in mainstream education.

A 2006 Ofsted report on the provision and outcomes in different settings for pupils with learning difficulties and disabilities (LDD) found that the most important factor in determining the best outcomes was not the type but the quality of provision. Effective provision was distributed equally in the mainstream and special schools visited but there was more good and outstanding provision in resourced mainstream schools than elsewhere. The report also concluded that the co-location of special schools on mainstream sites provided good opportunities for pupils with LDD to mix with their peers in mainstream, but no more so than in resourced schools.

Children with specific language impairment (SLI) enter a range of educational contexts and experience different types of support. In England, this includes language unit provision. Language units are classes, usually attached to mainstream schools, that offer specialist language environments for children. Thus, they represent a halfway house between full inclusion and specialist schools. The ratio in these mixed-aged classes is high at one staff member for approximately 10 students and the staff includes a specialist teacher and a classroom or speech and language therapy assistant as well as regular therapy provided by a qualified speech and language therapist.

The views of young people

The validity of the views of children as service users has been identified (e.g. UN, 1989). There is increasing recognition in work with young people with disabilities that researchers and policymakers need to take into account the perceptions and opinions of young people themselves (e.g. Kelly and Norwich, 2004; Lewis and Lindsay, 2000). A study by Felsenfeld, Broen and McGue (1994) compared the opinions of typically developing adults and those with language-disorders. Participants were questioned about the extent to which they felt they had achieved their educational goals. The authors found that 74% of those with language-disorders and 50% of the typically developing adults were either 'very' or 'fairly' satisfied with their educational outcome, a nonsignificant difference. However, this study did not specifically investigate specialist educational provision, but was more concerned with general education.

Dockrell, Lindsay, Palikara and Cullen (2007) interviewed young people with specific speech and language difficulties (SSLD) and special educational needs

(SEN) as they moved into their first year of post-16 education, training and work. A broadly positive experience of the support they had received at school was reported by 85% of the SSLD group and 53% of the SEN group. Views in both groups ranged from very positive to negative. Only 2% of the SSLD group reported a negative view about the support they had received at school.

In terms of levels of disclosure, Dockrell et al. (2007) found that of those young people with SSLD who accepted they had SEN, the majority (38/51) reported to a researcher that they felt fine about having their SEN identified. However, nearly a quarter reported negative feelings about it, such as feeling worried or upset, frustrated or ashamed. Having, or having had, difficulties with speech and/or language was the most frequent description of SEN given by the group with SSLD (80%). The next most frequently described area was difficulty with basic skills, such as reading writing, spelling and maths.

The views of parents and other relevant adults

The views of parents have been addressed by a limited number of studies. Dockrell et al. (2007) described the views of parents of children with SSLD and SEN as their children completed their first year of post-compulsory education. Parents were asked about the 'next step' for their child. Half of parents mentioned employment and this was found to be a major feature in the parents' hopes for the future. To our knowledge, there are no studies that provide the perspective of other relevant adults such as teachers. Teachers are able to provide another perspective on the behaviour of young people when they are away from parents, i.e. attending school.

The present study

The aims of the present study were to examine the views of young people and parents on specialist educational provision (namely, language units in England) and also to explore opinions concerning language difficulties for young people, their parents and their teachers.

Method

Participants

The participants in this investigation were originally part of a wider study; the Conti-Ramsden Manchester Language Study (Conti-Ramsden and Botting, 1999a, 1999b; Conti-Ramsden, Crutchley and Botting, 1997). Of the original cohort of 242, 139 young people (57.4%) participated in the present stage of the study. They had a mean age of 15;9 (SD 4.7 months) and 69.8% were male. These adolescents who agreed to participate were not found to be different on any early variables of language, behaviour, cognition or SES compared to those who did not participate.

Following language unit placement at 7 years for all participants, the adolescents now attended a variety of educational placements at 16 years. The majority now attended mainstream schools with support (49%), with 24% attending mainstream setting without support, 6% attending language units or schools and 22% attending special units or schools.

Tests and materials

Adolescent questionnaire: The adolescents were interviewed about their experiences and potential impact of going to a specialist language unit when younger as well as their views on their language difficulties as part of a wider battery of interviews and assessments. Seven questions formed the focus of the present study. Four questions related to specialist educational provision (questions 1–4) and three related to language difficulties (questions 5–7).

1. 'How do you feel about having gone to a language unit when younger?' Responses were transcribed and coded as 'overall positive response', 'overall negative response' or 'no opinion'.
2. 'How do you feel about special education and the educational help you have had so far?' Responses were transcribed and coded as 'overall positive response', 'overall negative response' or 'no opinion'.
3. 'Do you feel you got the "right amount", "too much" or "too little" educational support?'
4. 'Do you think language unit attendance made you 'more likely' to get a job than others, 'less likely' to get a job than others or 'about the same' as anyone else?'
5. 'Do you feel that you can't do some things now because of language difficulties?' Responses were coded 'yes in lots of ways', 'yes in some ways', 'yes but only in a few ways' or 'no'. If 'yes', then it was asked 'In what ways do you feel that language is a problem?' If 'no', then it was asked 'Have you ever felt language difficulties stopped you doing something?' Responses coded 'yes in lots of ways', 'yes in some ways', 'yes but only in a few ways' or 'no'.
6. 'If you talk about your language difficulties to others, what sort of things do you say?' Responses were transcribed and coded as 'did' or 'did not' talk to others about their difficulties.
7. 'Have you ever tried to hide your difficulties?' Responses were coded 'yes when younger', 'yes in the last year' or 'no'.

Parental questionnaire: Parents were interviewed as part of a wider questionnaire and the same questions as above (1–7) were put to them about their offspring, with the wording of the questions altered as appropriate.

Teacher questionnaire: Questions 5–7 as above were asked of the teachers concerning the young person in their class, with the wording of the questions altered as appropriate.

Concurrent psycholinguistic battery at 16 years: The adolescents were given a range of cognitive, language and literacy assessments as follows:

Receptive and expressive language. Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Revised – recalling sentences subtest (CELF-rs; Semel, Wiig, and Secord, 1987). Clinical Evaluation of Language Fundamentals-Revised – word classes subtest (CELF-wc; Semel, Wiig, and Secord, 1987).

Reading. WORD single word reading and reading comprehension subtests (WORD; Wechsler, 1993).

Nonverbal ability. Full form of the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children (WISC-III, Wechsler, 1992).

Receptive and expressive language. Test for Reception of Grammar (TROG; Bishop, 1982). Bus Story Test (BS; Renfrew, 1991).

Reading. British Ability Scales – Word Reading subtest (BAS-wr; Elliot, 1983).

Nonverbal ability. Ravens Coloured Matrices (Ravens; Raven, 1986).

Procedure

The adolescents were assessed and interviewed either at home or school in a quiet room with only the participant and a trained researcher present. Parents were interviewed at home within one working month of the adolescent interview. Postal questionnaires were sent out to the current secondary school teachers of the adolescents.

Results

Characteristics of the participants

The psychometric profiles of the participants (at 7 years when they were all attending specialist language units and also concurrently at 16 years) are presented in Table 1. It can be seen that, as a group, their language and literacy scores were depressed across time.

How do adolescents and parents feel about early language unit placements?

Table 2 presents the proportions of adolescents at 16 years and their parents reporting different experiences of language unit placements at 7 years of age.

The majority of adolescents (71%) reported that attending a language unit when they were younger had been a positive experience. It had been a negative experience for only 11% and nearly a fifth (19%) had no strong opinions. Those who did not voice an opinion generally said that they could not remember going or 'it was just something I did when I was younger and I'm not bothered either way'.

The specific reasons given for their positive experiences of language unit placements were varied, but included speech and literacy factors:

'I feel grateful I went there otherwise I wouldn't be speaking now'
'It did help to learn about the basic stuff and to help me read and write'

Table 1 Psycholinguistic profiles of the participants (standard scores) concurrently at age 16 years and earlier at age 7 years

	M	SD
<i>7 years of age</i>		
PIQ (Ravens)	105.9	15.0
Expressive language (Bus Story)	84.1	10.4
Receptive language (TROG)	84.5	11.4
Single word reading (BAS word reading)	86.0	12.0
<i>16 years of age</i>		
PIQ (WISC-III)	84.1	18.8
Expressive language (CELF Exp subtest)	74.1	11.0
Receptive language (CELF Rec subtest)	83.9	16.9
Single word reading (WORD basic reading)	83.4	17.8
Reading comprehension (WORD reading comp)	75.7	14.3

Table 2 Proportions of adolescents and their parents reporting positive and negative experiences of early language unit placements

	Adolescent self-report		Parent report	
	N	%	N	%
Positive experience	98/139	71	128/136	94
Negative experience	15/139	11	7/136	5
No strong opinion	26/139	19	1/136	1

Other adolescents reported positive interpersonal reasons:

'Everyone was the same so made great friends there – still in touch with half of them'

'I didn't have to worry about people taking the mick out of me'

The pace and level of work were also factors:

'It's good because the work matches my skills and they helped me a lot'

'They let you work at your own pace'

The reasons for dissatisfaction with early language unit attendance almost exclusively centred on interpersonal reasons:

'I feel different because you haven't been through the years like everyone else'

'Annoyed that I was different to my mates. I liked being there because people understood me but my old mates thought I was a freak'

Contrasting those reporting a positive experience ($N = 98$) with those reporting a negative experience ($N = 15$), there was found to be no difference in their ability profiles at 7 years (nonverbal IQ $F(1,107) = 2.10$, $p = .151$; TROG $F(1,111) = 0.03$, $p = .871$; Bus Story $F(1,108) = 1.26$, $p = .265$; BAS word reading $F(1,102) = 0.40$, $p = .533$). There was also no difference in concurrent ability profiles at 16 years between the groups (nonverbal IQ $F(1,104) = 0.03$, $p = .856$; WORD basic reading $F(1,106) = 0.19$, $p = .667$; WORD reading comprehension $F(1,105) = 0.02$, $p = .902$; CELF receptive subtest $F(1,107) = 0.18$, $p = .672$; CELF expressive subtest $F(1,106) = 0.92$, $p = .339$). Thus reporting of negative or positive experiences did not appear to be associated with differences in the severity or type of language difficulty in the adolescents.

In terms of parental opinion of their child's early language unit placement, it can be seen from Table 2 that nearly all parents (94%) felt that their child's experience had been a positive one. Only 5% had felt their offspring's experience had been a negative one and 1% had no strong opinion either way. Positive parental comments included:

'It was the best place for him.'

'It was the best thing that could have happened. It increased his vocab, conversational skills, understanding and comprehension.'

Negative parental comments included:

'It helped him but segregated him. He needed it but there is always stigma in it.'

'It made him different to the kids around the neighbourhood, the segregation is a problem'

How do adolescents and their parents feel about the quality and level of educational support throughout schooling?

The opinions of the adolescents and parents about the quality of special education and support they had received so far throughout schooling are presented in Table 3.

Three quarters (76%) of adolescents reported that they were positive about it overall and 10% were negative about it overall. Fourteen percent had no strong opinions about the quality of special education and support they had received so far. Adolescents tended to give general, non-specific answers to this question such as 'it was good', 'it was helpful'.

A similar positive response was reported by three quarters (74%) of the parents of the adolescents, with a quarter (24%) feeling negative about the quality of special education and educational help received by their child and 1% having no strong opinion on the subject. Positive parental comments included:

'Everything was brilliant. It really helped him and us'

'I've got no argument with it. If he hadn't had it he would have had problems today'

Table 3 Proportions of adolescents and their parents reporting positive and negative experiences of quality and amount of special education and support throughout schooling

	Adolescent self-report		Parent report	
	N	%	N	%
<i>Quality of special education and support</i>				
Positive experience	106/139	76	103/139	74
Negative experience	14/139	10	32/136	24
No strong opinion	19/139	14	1/136	1
<i>Amount of special education and support</i>				
Right amount	97/138	70	193/135	69
Too little	28/138	20	40/135	30
Too much	13/138	9	2/135	1

Negative comments from parents included references to difficulty getting the support they thought was needed for their child:

'It was very difficult to obtain support in the first place, a battle every step of the way'

'Very happy with the education he has had but when he was younger trying to get special education was so much of a fight'

Negative comments by parents also included a lack of support for the parents themselves:

'Very negative, they never looked after her needs. There was no support for parents, no guidelines'

Some parents reported too much of a focus on academic subjects in the education provided for their offspring:

'Should have had more things like road safety and social skills – there was too much of an academic focus. She should have had more speech therapy'

Contrasting those adolescents reporting a positive experience ($N = 102$) with those reporting a negative experience ($N = 14$), there was found to be no difference in their ability profiles at 7 years in nonverbal IQ $F(1,114) = 0.84, p = .363$, Bus Story $F(1,114) = 1.89, p = .172$ or BAS word reading $F(1,104) = 0.04, p = .845$. However, there was a difference in TROG score between groups ($F(1,118) = 5.12, p = .026$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$). Those reporting a positive experience in quality of special education and support had a lower language comprehension score at age 7 years ($M = 84.2, SD = 11.0$) than those reporting a negative experience ($M = 91.5, SD = 13.1$). There was no difference in concurrent ability profiles at 16 years between the groups in nonverbal IQ $F(1,113) = 2.50, p = .117$, CELF receptive subtest $F(1,114) = 1.79, p = .183$ or CELF expressive subtest $F(1,114) = 2.30, p = .132$. However, those reporting a positive experience in quality of special education and support had lower single word reading scores ($M = 82.7, SD = 17.7$) than those reporting a negative experience ($M = 94.9, SD = 14.9$), $F(1,113) = 6.12, p = .015$, partial $\eta^2 = .05$. This was also true of WORD reading comprehension (positive experience $M = 75.0, SD = 13.9$; negative experience $M = 83.4, SD = 16.2$, $F(1,112) = 4.38, p = .039$, partial $\eta^2 = .04$).

In terms of amount of educational support received (see Table 3), the majority of the adolescents (70%) indicated that they thought they had had the right amount of educational support so far throughout their education. A fifth of the sample thought that the amount of educational support had been too little and 9% thought it had been too much. This was largely reflected in the opinions of parents (right amount 69%; too little 30%; too much 1%) although it needs to be noted that nearly one third of parents felt their child had too little educational support.

Adolescents tended not to give specific reasons for their answers to this question. Parents who considered their child had the right amount of support said:

'It's brilliant what they have done with him. The school was very patient with him and when he played up they gave him plenty of chances'

Those who said there had been too little support said:

'I wish he had been able to go at secondary age. Mainstream placement wasn't suited to him academically or socially.'

'After 11 the majority of her lessons were in mainstream school and she didn't cope with that very well. She hasn't improved much since then'

Those parents who said that their child had too much educational support said:

‘She had too much. I fought to get her a lot of support but then she would sit and not listen in class, she relied on the assistant. She ‘learned helplessness’. It was too easy for her to be reliant on the help’

How do adolescents and their parents feel language unit attendance will affect future employment?

In terms of future employment, 106/133 (80%) of adolescents with SLI thought that having attended a language unit made them just as likely as anyone else to be able to get a job, whilst 12/133 (9%) thought more likely and 15/133 (11%) thought less likely. The opinions of the parents of the adolescents were slightly different on this issue (just as likely 79/130, 61%; more likely 39/130, 30%; less likely 12/130, 9%). Adolescents tended not to give specific reasons for their answers to this question.

Those parents who thought just as likely said:

‘The language unit gave her the start she needed, it’s not particularly relevant to a job’

‘It’s not him going there that will affect his chances of a job, it is the way he is now’

Those parents who thought it was more likely that their offspring would get a job said:

‘More likely because it taught her confidence and coping skills’

‘Her opportunities are better for having gone to the language unit’

Those parents who thought language unit attendance made it less likely that their offspring would get a job said:

‘It holds you back because he missed out on valuable education and it makes you different. It was good for his speech but he lost ground with the curriculum’

‘I don’t think it is a good thing to have on his CV – he will stand out as different’

What is the perceived impact of language difficulties on the lives of the adolescents now?

It is of interest to examine the perceived current impact of language difficulties on the lives of the adolescents. This information is presented in Table 4 and perspectives were available from the adolescents themselves, their parents and their teachers. As the teacher questionnaire was completed and returned by post, there tended not to be specific reasons given by the teachers for their answers. Around half the adolescents were reported by each method to be currently unaffected in their lives by language difficulties (self-report 55%, parent-report 49%, teacher-report 57%) but more adolescents reported that they felt there were ‘lots of ways’ in which they could not do things currently

Table 4 Proportions of adolescents who can/cannot do things currently because of language difficulties as a function of self-, parent and teacher report

	Adolescent self-report	Parent report	Teacher report
Nothing adolescent cannot do	76/139 55%	66/136 49%	63/110 57%
Can't do things in a few ways	5/139 4%	28/136 21%	24/110 22%
Can't do things in some ways	28/139 20%	27/136 20%	20/110 18%
Can't do things in lots of ways	30/139 22%	15/136 11%	3/110 3%

due to language difficulties (self-report 22%, parent-report 11%, teacher-report 3%).

The adolescents who reported that they are currently affected cited reasons to do with speech and expression:

'Speaking to others and saying things wrong'

'I can't get the point across of what I am trying to say'

Comprehension difficulties were also mentioned as a factor:

'When I'm talking to people, I can't keep up with conversation. People think I am deaf. They get fed up with repeating things'

'I don't understand questions – people speak too quickly and am left behind'

Some adolescents said that problems with memory skills were a way in which their lives were currently affected by language difficulties:

'I have trouble remembering things'

'In exams I'm trying to concentrate. I can't remember what I'm supposed to do'

Literacy difficulties were also cited by the adolescents:

'When I am reading aloud sometimes I start laughing at myself because I don't want other people to laugh at me'

'My spelling is a problem and I can't write very well – lots of problems with sentence structure'

Some adolescents said that interpersonal and social difficulties were a way in which their lives were affected:

'I'm not very good at being sociable. It stopped me making friends'

'I think I can't tell when someone's joking'

Finally, the adolescents said that practical difficulties had an impact on their lives:

'Have problems answering the phone'

'When I'm in shops and ask how much things are I feel a bit scared – I don't know what's going on'

In terms of the parental perspective, speech and expressive language were cited as factors that had a current impact on the lives of their children:

'People can't understand him and he gets upset. He can't put things right because he comes across rude and it gets him upset'

'He is self-conscious about language difficulties and doesn't speak up often. He is worried people won't understand him'

Interpersonal factors were cited by parents as a way in which their offspring's lives were affected:

'He doubts himself sometimes'

'She is frightened of new things'

Parents also mentioned social factors:

'She doesn't go out. She only goes to school. She hasn't been out for three years because she knows she can't socialise'

'She won't talk to strangers or new people'

Finally, parents thought that literacy factors had an impact on their offspring's lives:

'He is frustrated that he can't read what he needs to read e.g. for filling in forms'

The adolescent self-reported variables were collapsed to create a binary variable of 'no impact' on lives currently ($N = 76$) versus 'some impact' (lots of ways, some ways and a few ways combined, $N = 63$). It was found that there was no difference in the concurrent psycholinguistic profiles of these two groups (nonverbal IQ $F(1,130) = 0.52$, $p = .474$; WORD basic reading $F(1,132) = 0.03$, $p = .874$; WORD reading comprehension $F(1,131) = 0.02$, $p = .876$; CELF receptive subtest $F(1,133) = 0.53$, $p = .467$; CELF expressive subtest $F(1,132) = 2.21$, $p = .139$).

Do the adolescents talk about language difficulties with others and do they try to hide their difficulties?

Information about the level of disclosure and hiding of difficulties is presented in Table 5. It was found that, according to self-report, a third (33%) of the adolescents with SLI talked about their difficulties with others. According to parent-report, nearly a fifth (19%) of adolescents talked about their difficulties

Table 5 Proportions of adolescents who talk to others about difficulties and hide difficulties from others as a function of self-, parent and teacher report

	Adolescent self-report	Parent report	Teacher report
<i>Talk to others about difficulties</i>	42/139 (33%)	25/134 (19%)	19/52 (37%)
<i>Ever tried to hide difficulties</i>			
No	85/138 (61%)	91/133 (68%)	88/109 (81%)
Yes in last year	42/138 (30%)	30/133 (23%)	13/109 (12%)
Yes when younger	11/138 (8%)	12/133 (9%)	8/108 (7%)

and this figure was over a third (37%) for teacher-report. However, the high incidence of missing teacher data for this question reflects how difficult teachers found it to answer.

Parents who reported their adolescents talked about difficulties said:

'When he talks about it he is very emotional. He says "because of my problems I can't do things" compared to his 15 year old stepsister'

'She says she wishes she didn't have the problem'

Parents who said their adolescent did not talk about difficulties said:

'He doesn't talk to anyone about it. He is embarrassed by it, he feels thick'

'No - he is very cross that I told the man in charge of the shop for his work experience about his language difficulties, which I was surprised about'

It was found that 30% of adolescents had tried to hide their difficulties in the last year and 8% when they were younger. Parents reported that they thought 23% had tried to hide their difficulties in the last year and 9% when younger. These figures were 12% and 7% respectively for teacher-report.

The adolescent self-reported variables were collapsed to create a binary variable of 'no hiding of difficulties' ($N = 85$) versus 'hiding of difficulties' in the last year ($N = 42$). It was found that there was no difference in the current psychometric profiles of these two groups in nonverbal IQ $F(1,118) = 0.47$, $p = .494$, WORD basic reading $F(1,120) = 0.64$, $p = .424$, CELF receptive subtest $F(1,121) = 1.70$, $p = .195$. There was a trend towards those who reported that they tried to hide their difficulties to have lower CELF expressive language skills ($M = 70.9$, $SD = 9.2$) than those who did not try to hide their difficulties ($M = 74.6$, $SD = 11.0$), $F(1,120) = 3.19$, $p = .076$). There was also a trend towards those who reported that they tried to hide their difficulties to have lower WORD reading comprehension skills ($M = 71.9$, $SD = 13.5$) than those who did not try to hide their difficulties ($M = 77.4$, $SD = 14.8$), $F(1,119) = 3.90$, $p = .051$).

Discussion

How do adolescents view their experience in a language unit?

An encouraging finding of the present study was that the majority (71%) of 16-year-old adolescents who had attended a primary language unit reported that it had been a positive experience overall. Around a fifth had no strong opinions and it was a negative experience for only 11%. These adolescents generally cited negative interpersonal reasons for their dissatisfaction. Those with no strong opinions generally could not remember the experience of attending a language unit, suggesting that sampling opinions at an earlier age, closer to the time of attendance, may be beneficial. A lack of differences were found in the language and literacy profiles of adolescents reporting positive and negative experience both at the time of language unit attendance at 7 years and also at the time of the interview at 16 years of age. This suggests that reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction may be multi-faceted, relating to a number of variables including individual experiences with teachers and the specific characteristics of language units attended. This is in line with the finding that the most important factor in determining outcome for pupils is not type but quality of provision (Ofsted, 2006). Variables that ascertain quality of provision were not measured by the present study but no doubt should form part of future research with young people with SLI.

Reporting of a positive experience of language unit attendance was echoed in the voices of the parents with nearly all (94%) reporting that their child's experience had been a positive one. Thus mainly positive experiences reported by the young people were in the context of almost entirely positive experiences reported by their parents, suggesting that there may be some influence of parental viewpoint on their offspring's opinion. The few negative comments by parents also generally centred on interpersonal reasons. It is important to acknowledge the relevance of differing (but undoubtedly interrelated) perceptions of the impact of specialist provision as voiced by both young people and their parents. This relates to the wider debate about inclusive education and the role of specialist provision, as the overall positive opinions voiced give support to the policy of educating children with speech and language difficulties within language units attached to mainstream schools.

The generally positive findings are further reflected in the fact that three quarters of adolescents and parents were positive about the quality and level of special education and support received so far throughout schooling. This can be compared with the findings of Dockrell et al. (2007) who report that 85% of the young people in their sample were either 'very positive' or 'positive' about the support they had received at school. However, a fifth of the adolescents in the present study thought that the amount of educational support they received had been too little and this was true of nearly a third of parents. Parents cited a lack of support during secondary education (between 11 and 16 years) as an area of particular concern. Over the course of the last decade, Lindsay et al. (2002) suggest that services for children with speech and language needs in England have been unstable and there is variation in the extent of services delivered. A number of contributing factors include major systemic pressures arising from government policies, structural changes in the organisation of services, and developments in professional practices among speech and language therapists. This may, in part, explain differences in the experiences reported by parents across England.

Interestingly, those adolescents reporting a positive experience in quality of special education and support were found to have lower language comprehension at age 7 years than those reporting a negative experience. At 16 years of age, those reporting a positive experience were found to have lower literacy skills than those reporting a negative experience.

In terms of future employment, another encouraging finding was that 80% of young people thought that language unit attendance made them just as likely as anyone else to be able to get a job and 9% thought it more likely. The opinions of the parents of the adolescents were slightly more positive on this issue with 61% reporting just as likely and nearly a third thinking it more likely. Dockrell et al. (2007) found that employment was a major feature in the parents' hopes for the future. The results of the present study suggest that parents view language unit attendance as a key factor in the future employability of their offspring. This is one of the many long-term implications of satisfaction with schooling, which include the attainment of educational qualifications, post-compulsory education and ultimately adult employment.

What is the perceived impact of language difficulties on the lives of the adolescents now and are they open about their difficulties?

Around half the adolescents were reported by themselves, parents and teachers to be currently unaffected in their lives by language difficulties but more adolescents reported that they felt there were 'lots of ways' in which they could not do things currently due to language difficulties. Reasons given included speech and expression, comprehension, memory skills, literacy, interpersonal/social factors and practical aspects. This is broadly comparable with the findings of Dockrell et al. (2007) who suggest that difficulties with speech and/or language and basic skills such as reading, writing, spelling and maths are the most frequently described areas of difficulty for their SSLD group, with memory and concentration also mentioned.

Interestingly, it was found that there was no difference in the concurrent language and literacy profiles of those who reported that they were and were not affected by language difficulties. Thus, perception of the presence or absence of language difficulties on the lives of the adolescents does not appear directly related to their actual current level of skills.

Finally, it was found that nearly a third of the adolescents with SLI talked about their difficulties with others. However, nearly a third had tried to hide their difficulties in the last year and 8% when they were younger and these proportions were corroborated by parent report (and to a large extent teacher report). This suggests that the degree of hiding may increase with development, resulting in attempts to conceal difficulties becoming more evident during adolescence. These data are in line with Dockrell et al. (2007) who found that nearly a quarter of their sample reported negative feelings about their SEN, such as feeling worried or upset, frustrated or ashamed. Interestingly, the language and literacy profiles of the adolescents in our sample did appear to be related to whether they hid their difficulties or not.

Those who hid their difficulties were more likely to have more severe problems with language expression and reading comprehension than those who did not hide their difficulties. Within the context of an overall positive picture of results, the latter finding suggests that young people with a history of SLI may require support during adolescence with regard to their self-confidence and self-esteem, given that a considerable proportion feel the need to hide their difficulties and report feelings of frustration, fear and withdrawal from social interaction.

One potential limitation of this investigation is the use of self-report interview. Given the fact that a proportion of the sample indicated that they had current difficulties in understanding things said to them and expressing themselves, how appropriate is this interview technique? There are certainly challenges faced by researchers in trying to elicit valid and authentic views due to possible difficulties of generating language responses. However, an advantage of this methodology was that the experienced researchers could be asked for clarification during the interview. The researcher could ascertain whether the question had been understood and then also query the adolescent over their response. Another consideration is how we interpret comments that the young people could not remember their language unit experience. Certainly there are difficulties with long-term recall and young people such as this characteristically have short-term memory difficulties.

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