Advantages & Disadvantages of Attending a Language Unit as an Educational Placement

Leanne Williams, Newcastle University

Aim:
To discuss the provision of a language unit (LU) as an educational placement for children with specific language impairment (SLI). (N.B. – The term SLI will be used to remain consistent with all studies referred to throughout the poster)

Introduction:
Children with SLI require the National Curriculum to be delivered in a multi-sensory way, and in way that is individual to specific needs. A range of educational placements are available for children with SLI. These range from full-time special school placements to the provision of support in mainstream settings. LUS located in mainstream schools are the most common provision made for children with SLI. LUS are language-based classrooms and aim to provide specialist language support. Entry into a LU requires a statement of Special Educational Needs and the language disorder is regarded as the child’s primary difficulty. This poster will investigate advantages/disadvantages of a LU as an educational placement by considering:
- View points of adolescents and their parents on specialist provision
- The impact of LU attendance on self-esteem
- Outcomes of children with SLI
- Transition to a mainstream setting
- Professional opinion

Disadvantages:

1. Transition to mainstream: often no opportunity for professionals to follow-up a child. Teachers/SLTs feel dissatisfied with the existing system of transition. Professional contentment with placement type is correlated with language outcomes. Parents have voiced concerns relating to the transition from primary to secondary school.

2. Negative parent comment:
   - 1/5 of parents (reflected in the views of adolescents) felt educational support was limited, parents felt it was initially difficult to get support, and that there was not support for parents themselves.

3. Outcomes:
   - Children who did not enter mainstream settings were more likely to have remained in a LU suggesting initial placement can predict future placement type. Children with SLI who are identified by the school as not likely to achieve well at early Key Stage are more likely to not be entered for later examinations, therefore, SLI children may be disadvantaged by the system.

Evidence base:
A meta-analysis of studies found that language impairments (expressive and receptive) respond well to a more indirect therapeutic environment such as those seen in LUS.

Advantages:

1. Positive adolescent/parent experience: high percentages of overall positive experience of LUS is reported. Adolescent comments include ‘the work matched my skills and they helped me a lot’, parental comments include ‘it was the best place for him’.

2. Specialist provision: direct input from SLTs, increased teacher pupil ratio, children receive specialist provision in order to progress academically. Teachers in mainstream settings report feeling under-skilled for the integration of children with SLI, making it a challenge to ensure that individual educational needs are met.

3. Enhanced self-esteem opportunities: children with SLI are at risk of low self-esteem. LUS provide the opportunity to interact with peers at a similar academic level. This can support enhanced self-esteem/peer relationships. This is reflected in the comments made by a group of adolescents: ‘everyone was the same so made great friends’ and ‘I didn’t have to worry about people taking the mic out of me’.

4. Outcomes: Early intervention/resolution of SLI can be a positive indicator of academic achievement. Literacy/language skills have significant effects on academic attains. The number of qualifications gained by children with SLI is increasing. Regardless of performing lower than typically developing (TD) peers on national qualifications, SLI children are satisfied with their educational outcomes. Resolved SLI children have been reported to achieve results in line with TD peers.

5. Evidence base:
   - A meta-analysis of studies found that language impairments (expressive and receptive) respond well to a more indirect therapeutic environment such as those seen in LUS.

Some critique of the evidence base:
- Limited sample sizes/subjective comments, findings cannot be generalised.
- Thorough method of the search of literature included, with specific inclusion criteria, some low quality studies used e.g. independent/single case studies. Limited number of RCTs included.
- No information regarding who carried out the testing and how. Unclear if and how researchers controlled for bias.

Conclusions:
- Evidence base = positive & negative aspects of attending LUS
- LUs provide specialist provision for language development/support social and emotional development
- Adolescents are happy with educational outcomes/the number of qualifications obtained by children with SLI is on the raise
- Overall positive experience of LUs reported by adolescents and parents
- No direct effect of follow-on placement in mainstream settings compared to remaining in a LU was found, this implies that the focus should not necessarily be on ‘placement type’ but on the ‘appropriateness and quality’ of the placement
- Professional opinion on appropriateness of placement should not be overlooked, this can impact later outcomes

Implications for clinical practice:
- Children with SLI require support with continued language difficulties, confidence and self-esteem
- Overall positive opinions give support to the policy of educating SLI within LUS
- SLTs should be aware of the variation in the extent of services delivered (government policies/structural changes)
- Professional opinion is key when determining placement type, flexibility within school policy needs to allow for professional input to ensure suitable educational placements are made
- EBP: outcome measures should be employed to evaluate placement effectiveness
- Issues relating to placement ‘type’ vs. the ‘quality & appropriateness’ of placement must always be considered and evaluated
- SLTs should ensure that parents are supported in the transition between placements and throughout secondary education

References: