

How effective is the use of personalised webinars to support the development of shared understanding of communication interventions for learners with both complex learning needs and parents who have a limited command of English during a period of remote learning?

Emma Harvey

Abstract

This project was intended to explore the impact of personalised webinars to support the development of a shared understanding of communication interventions for learners with both complex learning needs and parents who have a limited command of English during a period of anticipated remote learning. Unfortunately there were a number of unforeseen complications, meaning that definitive conclusions cannot be drawn. This report details these issues and provides a summary of planned future action.

Introduction

This project was conceived in the wake of an unprecedented countrywide lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, which had lasted from April 2020 until the end of the summer term. The expectation was that from August 2020 the pupils in our complex learning needs school would be expected to learn from home part of the week, as part of a programme of 'blended learning', something that we had never experienced. I initially intended to carry out small scale classroom-based research into the efficacy of personalised webinars to support the cooperative use of communication supports at home and in school for our pupils but upon discussing this issue with parents, I realised that there was a significant gap in knowledge between parents with native level English and those with a limited command of English, the language of instruction in our setting. As a consequence, I narrowed the focus of the study to look solely at the impact of personalised webinars to support pupils both with a complex learning need and parents with a limited command of English. Unfortunately, the research hit a number of stumbling points, all of which significantly impacted the impact of the interventions and ultimately the data collection. These issues are outlined below, along with the limited conclusions that can be drawn and suggestions for moving forwards.

Background: The Policy Context and Review of the Literature

The idea for the main focus of this study came about after a number of anecdotal comments from both parents of EAL pupils and colleagues, all of which suggested that pupils' with complex learning needs whose parents have a limited command of English may be particularly disadvantaged by their parents' difficulties in accessing resources to support their children's learning at home. Further discussion recognised the fact that while we have long acknowledged parents as the primary educators of their own children (Easen, Kendall, Shaw, 2007), it is particularly difficult for parents with English as an additional language to share their knowledge of their child with school staff outside the confines of formal meetings.

For the purpose of this study, I identified three pupils, all of whom have significant communication impairments and, through interpreted telephone conversations with the parents of these pupils at review meetings, discovered that their knowledge of communication supports used in school was indeed very limited. All were also experiencing difficulties with distressed and distressing behaviours in the home setting and struggling to manage these. The anticipated large scale school closures meant that this was of particular concern with regards to a possible widening of the attainment gap (Ellis and Sosu, 2014) for these learners. The completely unforeseen element of moving to remote or blended learning meant that there was no existing policy context for remote learning to fall back on and even less literature relating to the impact of remote learning on pupils with complex additional support needs. In a report published in November of 2020, the OECD identified that pupils were especially vulnerable if they had either “special needs” or “parents [who] have limited command of the language of instruction”, however there is little discussion about pupils for whom both is true (OECD, 2020). Additionally, the report focuses primarily on translated materials as the recommended way to overcome this barrier, which is something difficult to replicate in an ASN setting as most of the work completed is not written and requires significant verbal explanation and modelling. Similarly, although Education Scotland (2021) published advice relating to home learning for parents and families throughout the pandemic period, much of this was mainstream focused and there was no mention of how best to support parents with both a limited command of the language of instruction and a child with complex learning needs with home learning. This is also echoed in a Public Health Scotland report, which highlights the need to support parents and carers through this period (Public Health, Scotland, 2021, p.11), as well as the vulnerabilities of “young people with chronic medical conditions, for whom important support and therapies may have been reduced or cancelled” and “children and adolescents with learning disabilities, who may struggle to understand the pandemic and the necessity for the restrictions, with consequent increases in anxiety and agitation” (ibid, p75) without recognising the difficulties involved in this where the situation is compounded by a parental lack of understanding of the language of instruction. This combination of factors was something I was increasingly seeing across our setting and as the use of webinars to support teachers in developing their remote learning pedagogy became more and more prevalent, I began to consider whether this was something that could be adapted to create a tool to support this parent group. That idea then formed the basis of this study.

Research Design

Three pupils were identified as the most at risk of the attainment gap being widened due to their parents’ limited command of English. The parents of all three had indicated a desire to be able to better support their child’s communication needs at home, seeing this as the most important element of their child’s education and the most at risk due to an extended period out of school, and consented to their participation in the project.

The first stage of the project involved gaining consent and filming the pupils engaging in activities in the classroom designed to develop their expressive and receptive communication skills. Anonymity was guaranteed and it was agreed that the personalised

videos would be posted to a closed virtual learning environment (VLE), accessible only for parents with a unique password. The activities filmed were designed to be easily replicated at home and resources to support this were produced for use at home. Although I had intended to do this in consultation with specialist speech and language therapists from The Scottish Centre of Technology for the Communication Impaired (SCTCI), this was not possible due to the significant reduction in services resulting from Covid.

The second stage involved the production of short webinars demonstrating individual pupils engaged in activities, providing context and ideas for adapting these approaches to the home setting. Contact details for myself were provided at the end of each webinar should there be any questions. The webinars were designed to feature as little spoken language as possible and to 'show rather than tell' in order to obtain maximum accessibility.

The third stage of this project was to upload the webinars to the private VLE, where they could be viewed by the parents of the pupils involved in the project. The three webinars released in the first batch focused on the use of our VLE to support communication, the use of the TACPAC resource and the use of Boardmaker symbols. The initial plan had been to progress to cover specific communication systems such as PODD, Objects Of Reference and Makaton after the mid-point interviews with participating parents, however this was curtailed due to issues with participation.

The fourth stage was intended to be detailed interviews with the parents drilling into how effective the webinars were at helping to support their children's communication needs at home and how the materials could be adapted to be more effective. However, as stated in the introduction, the unpredictable nature of the pandemic resulted in significant challenges, both in terms of conducting this research and for the families we support. These issues are outlined in more detail in the 'Findings and Analysis' section, however the consequence of this was that all three parents were no longer in a position to participate in the project due to a combination of circumstances. At this point, there was little option for our class team but to focus solely on supporting the children and their families through the stresses of the lockdown situation and to rethink how to support parents with home based learning more effectively next session, hopefully with significantly less constraints in terms of Covid restrictions.

Findings and Analysis

As stated throughout, the unpredictable nature of the pandemic resulted in significant unplanned changes to this study, the consequence of which is that it finishes with significantly less data to be analysed than intended at its inception. Firstly, the planned 'blended learning' period supposed to commence in August 2020 did not occur, meaning that all three pupils were in school full time until December 2020. This allowed more time to prepare for remote learning but significantly delayed the implementation phase of this project. Secondly, when the second period of remote learning did occur in January of 2021, all three of the pupils identified at the start of the study were unable to maintain home

based placements and were therefore accommodated in school on a full-time basis. This meant that their learning was not as disrupted as feared but also meant that they did not engage in remote learning as anticipated. Thirdly, the pandemic meant that in-person interviews with an interpreter were not possible and there were significant difficulties in obtaining interpreters by telephone for this project. This combination of factors significantly impacted the scope of this study, as the result was that two out of three of the parents disengaged from the virtual learning environment entirely. Continued efforts to reengage were unsuccessful for a variety of reasons. The third parent reached out to explain that they were not in a position during the pandemic to be able to consider home learning and that they therefore would not be viewing the webinars. It is ultimately not possible to make any conclusions about the efficacy of personalised webinars for learners who have both complex learning needs and parents with a limited command of English due to this combination of factors. Broad generalisations could be drawn from the fact that none of the three pupils identified were able to sustain home based learning for a period of any longer than three weeks, however this was borne out from a combination of factors and would require significant further study to ascertain the extent to which their parents' lack of knowledge regarding ways to support their child's communication needs at home for an extended period with significantly decreased support from other services may have contributed to this.

Over the course of this project, I have come to the conclusion that supporting parents of children with complex learning needs whose parents also have a limited command of English is an area which requires more investment from myself as a practitioner and our school community as a whole. We have outlined a number of options in order to do this more effectively as of the start of the next school session, however several of these depend on the Covid restrictions in place at that point.

Firstly, I have obtained permission to hold weekly Makaton sessions for both staff and parents. Makaton is a communication system comprised of signs and symbols, accompanied by speech and is used by many of our learners. The vocabulary is based around a common core of functional concepts and designed to be learned in stages. (Grove and Walker, 1990) It is hoped that these sessions will be more attractive as they will both allow parents and carers to develop their Makaton vocabulary, as well as allow them to socialise and discuss any issues of concern with staff in a more informal session. Including an option to watch online at a time of convenience will hopefully also increase accessibility. In addition, due to the design of the Makaton communication system, the sessions will make use of symbols in order to allow parents with a limited command of English to participate more fully.

Secondly, I have gained permission to begin a programme of 1:1 sessions with identified pupils and a designated staff member in order to improve the consistency of the use of their preferred method of communication. The three pupils identified at the start of this project will be included in this programme. These sessions will be targeted interventions, first establishing a baseline, setting communication specific goals for each pupil across the curriculum, reflecting on these and resetting new targets as these are achieved. If consent is obtained, sessions will be filmed and parents invited in to observe.

Thirdly, now that the coronavirus restrictions have been eased, we have been able to again work in partnership with the SCTCI and are looking at ways to adapt the existing webinars, so that they can be delivered in person in the new session, alongside the planned interventions.

Overall, it is hoped that these interventions will begin to increase the levels of cooperation between home and school for pupils who have both complex learning needs and whose parents have a limited command of English and allow us to be able to better support these parents to support their children's communication needs at home.

Conclusions

From a personal standpoint, this project has been both enlightening and frustrating. Despite a lack of definitive data, I have gained further appreciation for the challenges faced by parents of children with complex learning needs for whom a lack of English proficiency appears to be a significant barrier in obtaining knowledge and accessing resources relating to their child's education. This inequality of access is an area that, as a school, we will continue to explore and I believe merits further consideration by both the ASN sector and profession as a whole. I personally have decided to undertake Masters level study in this area, commencing an MSc in Language and Communication impairment in children with a focus on EAL learners with complex learning needs and hope that my personal practice will be further informed by this. With regards to policy implications for the EIS, I believe that this is an area where further discussion could be had within the ASN network, in order to share examples of effective practice in supporting and engaging this group of parents and carers, ultimately working to produce materials to support parents, carers and practitioners.

References

Easen, P., Kendall, P. and Shaw, J. (2007). Parents and Educators: Dialogue and Development Through Partnership. *Children & Society*, 6(4), pp.282-296. Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1099-0860.1992.tb00395.x>

Education Scotland. (2021). Be at the heart of your child's learning during COVID-19. Available at: <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/learning-at-home/covid19/be-at-the-heart-of-your-child-s-learning-during-covid-19/>

Ellis, S., and Sosu, E. (2014). Closing the Attainment Gap in Scottish Education. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation. Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/education-attainment-scotland-full.pdf>

Grove, N., and Walker, M. (1990) The Makaton Vocabulary: Using manual signs and graphic symbols to develop interpersonal communication, *Augmentative and Alternative Communication*, 6:1, 15-28. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07434619012331275284>

OECD (2020), "The impact of COVID-19 on student equity and inclusion: Supporting vulnerable students during school closures and school re-openings", OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19), OECD Publishing, Paris. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1787/d593b5c8-en>.

Public Health Scotland. (2021) The impact of COVID-19 on children and young people in Scotland: 10 to 17-years-olds. Edinburgh: Public Health Scotland. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/report-covid-19-children-young-people-families-october-2020-evidence-summary/>