

Makaton in Early Years

Introduction

Baby signing with typically developing, hearing infants has increased significantly in popularity in the last decade (Fisher, 2016). Signing systems such as Makaton (Makaton Charity, 2017) are widely used in mainstream Early Years settings and promoted to parents. A lack of conclusive research has opened debate on the impact of signing on children's communication and language development and questions whether the perceived short-term gains justify the use of sign against the deficiency of confirmed long-term benefits (Johnston, Durieux-Smith and Bloom, 2005). This qualitative study aims to capture first hand experiences of parents and practitioners using sign with children under two, to explore their observations of sign and their perceptions of its value. The research question is:

'What is the value of signing with under-tuos in supporting communication in an Early Years setting?'

Literature Review

With the increase in popularity of signing, many benefits are claimed; however, it is argued that much of the proposed evidence to support this is anecdotal rather than based on scientific research (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2014, Doherty-Sneddon, 2008). Doherty-Sneddon (2008) conducted a review of the research behind this trend and found flaws in the methodology that she felt limited its validity and called for more research with a systematic and positivist approach.

Self-Regulation

Studies have suggested that the use of gesture by young children may lead to greater use of socio-emotional concepts at age three (Vallotton and Ayoub, 2009) and that these symbolic skills can be used as tools for thinking (Vallotton and Ayoub, 2011). These findings reflect Vygotsky's theory of language used as a tool for thinking within the social context (*cited in* Smith, Cowie and Blades, 2011). Vallotton and Ayoub (2011) also conclude that sign and gesture can also help children to recognise and manage their own emotions. Dowling (2013) comments that a close adult can use these signs and gestures as an insight into what the child is thinking.

Zientek's (2013) study was conducted in a nursey using high levels of sign with children. The children in the study also showed more sign during times of distress, suggesting that they regressed in their ability to use words in these moments. Zientek (2013) also concluded that sign was used in

proactive communication more than spoken language, which helps children to regulate their emotions as it allows them to express themselves. Reduction in frustration is often reported as one of the main effects of sign on managing feelings and behaviour for young children (Clare, 2016; Dowling, 2013; Brock and Rankin, 2008). Often children will try to develop their own strategies to communicate through sounds or gesture to alleviate their frustrations (Clare, 2016). The use of baby sign is seen as a positive tool which children can use to help make themselves understood when used consistently by familiar adults. Enabling children to communicate and understand others effectively is key to relieving frustration and behavioural difficulties (Clare, 2016; Fisher, 2016).

Language Development

As early as 1979 studies suggest a link between the use of sign and the onset of first words in infants (Volterra et al., 1979). However, many studies do not stand up to the scrutiny of literature reviews such as Paling (2007) as they lack scientific methods and do not consider other variables. In a study in 1993, Goodwyn and Acredolo (1993) use systematic methods to conclude that baby sign increased the onset of first words by 0.69 months. Acredolo, Goodwyn and Brown (2000) provided more scientific methods by introducing two control groups, alongside the test group of infants taking part in a baby sign programme. This helps to refute criticism that natural development or programmes focused on language in general could account for the progress in the onset of first words.

Most of the literature reviews note that the current evidence of the long-lasting advantage of baby sign is inconclusive (Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2014; Doherty-Sneddon, 2008). Yet critics will not suggest that baby sign has any negative effects on children (Zientek, 2013; Whitebread and Basilio, 2011; Vallotton and Ayoub, 2009). Brock and Rankin (2008) argue that baby sign can make children more eager to speak as they have had experience of active communication. Crystal (2007) and Dowling (2013) also support this by acknowledging the communication skills children learn before their first words such as, listening, understanding and shared communication, that can be promoted through sign.

Interactions

The Fitzpatrick *et al.* (2014) literature review questions whether the positive correlation of advanced language skills in signing infants could be due to the increased interactions and parental responsiveness. The study by Góngora and Farkas (2009) of 10 mother and child pairs taking part in a baby sign programme found an increase in synchronic interactions between mother and child. Paling (2007) also recognises impact that adult interactions have on children's language acquisition. This is also the basis for the interactionist theory of language acquisition propagated by Burner (1961) who

thought that the foundations of language were set in interactions with adults (*cited in*, Brock and Rankin, 2008) Dowling (2013) suggests that focused attention by close adults stimulate young children's thinking and deepen learning. The Kirk, Howlett, Pine and Fletcher (2012) study concluded no significant advance in development in the signing group but suggested the signing programme had encouraged the infants to be more independently active due to increased parental responsiveness.

Methodology

An interpretivist approach was used for this research as it allowed the participants to express their perceptions, attitudes and judgements (Lin, 2016). It incorporated a mixed approach consisting of qualitative and quantitative data, which were necessary to discuss the research question. The quantitative data allowed for direct comparisons using multiple choice questions, the data were then analysed to identify patterns and associations (Thomas, 2017; Ma, 2016; Newby, 2014). The qualitative aspects of the study were suited to a smaller scale project and allowed for greater depth, recognising individual perceptions of reality (O'Leary, 2017; Mukherji and Albon, 2015; Bell and Waters, 2014). The study included twelve participants split between two baby rooms in a large, inner-city, community run children's centre. To increase reliability and validity the participants included six practitioners and six parents of children attending the baby rooms, providing different viewpoints (O'Leary, 2017).

The consideration of ethics in research go beyond right and wrong but require an examination of the theoretical and practical conduct of the researcher to expose hidden dangers to participant, community or society (Thomas, 2017). British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2011) set out a code of conduct for educational research to guide the considerations and research design. My first step was to gain ethical consent from the College and setting to carry out this workplace-based research project. I then gained informed consent from the participants through consent letters detailing the study, confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw at any time.

The first data collection method was a questionnaire, differentiated between the parents and practitioners. The questionnaires comprised of mostly open-ended questions to produce qualitative responses that were interpreted and analysed by comparing the data and noting themes and patterns; a method Thomas (2017) names Theme Mapping. The questionnaire also offered some quantitative questions using multiple choice options, which allowed for direct comparisons between participants. These methods of data collection captured experience in a way that used the mixed method approach to allow qualitative and quantitative data to be synthesised into integrated

themes (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). One practitioner was then invited to take part in a semi-structure interview which allowed the participant to elaborate where they felt appropriate. This type of interview was in keeping with the interpretivist paradigm and allowed for in-depth answers, without the need to be standardised (Bryman, 2016). This was then transcribed and analysed using Theme Mapping to identify common or contrasting themes and areas of specific depth. These themes were discussed using all three data collection points and analysed against the information from the literature review. The small scale of the project means elements of the findings and recommendations are not generalisable to a wider field (Thomas, 2017). Although efforts were made to increase the reliability and validity of the data through triangulation of information between viewpoints, there remain several variables at play within the sample that could have influenced the data.

Findings and Analysis

Self-regulation

Neither parent or practitioner participants recognised children signing to label their own emotions, which could be linked to Zientek's (2013) suggestion that children's communication skills regress in times of emotional distress. However, all the practitioner participants observed children signing to label other children's emotions, which could symbolise children internalising the concepts of emotions. Vallotton and Ayoub (2011) also suggest that being able to label emotions in others could help children to recognise and manage their own. This will, therefore, promote self-regulation as children learn about emotions displayed by others and begin to relate them to their own feelings and experience when labelled in the same way by sensitive adults.

All twelve questionnaire participants noted the impact of sign in reducing children's frustration in communication, with half commenting that sign helped children to understand and be understood. This finding is supported Dowling's (2013) comment that sign will help to reduce children's frustration when learning to communicate. Clare (2016) and Zientek (2013) suggest that the most impact of sign will come with consistent and high-level use by adults. The questionnaire participants also commented that children would benefit from a greater consistency in the setting's approach to sign.

Language development

All participants recognised the value of signing with under twos, noting factors such as slowing speech down, depicting meanings to words and encouraging focus and attention, supported by Crystal (2007). Four practitioner participants noted the potential for sign to hinder children's communication if they were to rely on it rather than attempting verbal language. Dowling (2013) and

Brock and Rankin (2008) argue that sign gives children experience of partaking in communication with adults, which can motivate them to transition to verbal speech. Goodwyn and Acredolo (1993) concluded a small but consistent advantage of signing on verbal language acquisition. The interviewee also comments that allowing children experience and practice in non-verbal communication skills is going to make children more confident in attempting verbal speech. Many studies have noted a lack of evidence to suggest that sign had any negative effects on children's communication and language development (Zientek, 2013; Whitebread and Basilio, 2011; Vallotton and Ayoub, 2009). Clare (2016) and Dowling (2013) both agree that sign is most effective in close and responsive relationships, these are likely to be more pronounced in the home and could therefore explain why the parent participants found less potential for negative effects of sign.

Interactions

Research by Fitzpatrick *et. al.* (2014), Paling (2007) and Góngora and Farkas (2009) have all highlighted the role of sign in increasing synchronisation and responsiveness of adults and its impact on children's communication. The interviewee also notes the benefit of sign in focusing the adults to give their 'full attention' to the child. Dowling (2013) recognises the impact of adult interactions in stimulating the children's minds and therefore deepening learning. Zientek (2013) suggests that children are more proactive in communication when using sign and this can be supported by the participants observations that children used sign most to request. Kirk *et al.* (2012) suggest this correlation maybe due to the increased responsiveness of adults using sign. Parents participants used phrases such as 'he was empowered', 'she had her own voice' and 'she had autonomy in her interactions' to describe the confidence signing had given their children to be proactive in communication.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In this project, I have investigated the value of sign with under-tuos in supporting communication in an Early Years setting. It adds to the debate on the impact of sign on children and suggests a short-term positive correlation. Uncovering practitioners' and parents' opinions displayed a belief that sign allowed young children to communicate more effectively before the use of words and highlighted the impact of this in reducing children's frustration. Signing is revealed as a catalyst for responsive and synchronised relationships, which in return, increases the impact of sign on children's communication skills. Allowing young children to gain positive experience of purposeful communication encourages them to build confidence and practice language skills that form the foundation of verbal speech. From the insight of adults living and working with young children, this project concludes that there is a notable benefit of signing with this age group.

This project has developed my understanding of the importance of the relationships between the child and adult. I am more aware of the pre-verbal language skills promoted by sign and its impact on personal and social development. It has illustrated that having chance to be heard and develop confidence in these skills may have a greater impact on children's lives than the occurrence of first words. Due to the small scale of the project, the findings cannot be generalised to a wider field but can be used to influence practice in the setting. The following recommendations are drawn:

- To build on practitioner understanding and awareness of sign in the setting by sharing the findings of this research and supporting studies on the debate into the value of signing with young children. This can also promote the use of sign in building strong relationships and aiding the transitions between rooms.
- To encourage signing use in the setting through the implementation of a Makaton Day. During this day all practitioners and parents should be encouraged to use sign in each interaction. Challenging practitioners to use sign to the height of their capacity will bring Makaton to the foreground of the provision. Makaton Day will highlight areas of vocabulary or structure that practitioners struggle with and need support in. The concept should be shared with all the parents to raise awareness of the value of sign as seen by the setting.
- Makaton sharing sessions should be held for parents who would like to increase their use and knowledge of sign. These should outline some of the benefits and share core signs that may be useful in the home. This should include popular signs used in the setting to promote consistency between the home and setting environments.

These recommendations will promote the use of Makaton sign at home and in the setting by increasing understanding and prominence of sign in practice. The challenge lies in growing Makaton use from specific routine-based signing to a holistic approach that integrates all aspects of provision. By investing in understanding of the multifaceted benefits of sign, parents and practitioners may be motivated to increase their use of sign with young children.