

The Social Well-being of Children with Specific Language Impairment (SLI): what goes with what?

Submitted by Karen Josephine Robinson to the University of Exeter as a thesis
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Abstract

Specific language impairment (SLI) describes a form of language acquisition difficulty that is not secondary to other developmental conditions. Researchers have identified a number of social and emotional difficulties in children and young people with SLI. However, less is known about the influences upon these difficulties, particularly at times of major change.

This longitudinal study therefore examines the social well-being of children with receptive SLI during their transition from primary to secondary schooling. It focuses on peer social position and social anxiety and considers whether the severity of receptive language impairment, along with other factors, has particular importance for these markers. The markers are explored in terms of their definition, interrelationship and the degree to which they present singularly in children with SLI. The study uses a mixed method design to address six related research questions.

The quantitative results showed that the participants with SLI had higher social anxiety than typical comparisons at both Time 1 and Time 2, but lower self-rated social acceptance at Time 2 only. However, teachers at Time 1 rated their social acceptance lower than they rated typical comparisons. There were no significant changes in self-rated measures from Time 1 to Time 2. A moderately strong and longitudinally robust association was found between social acceptance and social anxiety and between social acceptance and verbal/non-verbal discrepancy. Furthermore, social acceptance predicted social anxiety.

The qualitative findings indicated that a number of factors singly and ecologically influenced the social well-being of children with SLI following secondary transition. Of these, receptive language level, pragmatic development and parental support were found to be particularly important. There was considerable variation in levels of social well-being, but they were generally lower than in a group of children with specific learning difficulties (SpLD).

Overall, the study suggested that some children with SLI face greater social challenges than their peers at this life stage. However, secondary transition did not invariably result in greater difficulties. The study raised questions about policy, provision and practice in relation to children with SLI and identified areas for future research.

Key words: specific language impairment (SLI); special educational needs (SEN); specific learning difficulties (SpLD); peer social position; social anxiety; ecological relationships

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LIST OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION	18
1.1 Overview of the topic	18
1.2 Relevance, motivation and timeliness	23
1.3 Objectives of the research	24
1.4 Structure of the thesis	25
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE	26
2.1 Introduction to the chapter	26
2.1.1 Structure of the literature review	26
2.1.2 Review procedures and sources	26
2.2 SLI: history, definitions and diagnosis	27
2.2.1 Introduction	27
2.2.2 Historical context	28
2.2.3 Definitions, diagnosis and SLI sub-types	29
2.2.3.1 <i>The exclusionary definition</i>	
2.2.3.2 <i>The discrepancy model definition</i>	
2.2.3.3 <i>Health and educational service terminology and definitions</i>	
2.2.3.4 <i>Diagnostic issues</i>	
2.2.3.5 <i>Interpretation of the diagnostic criteria</i>	
2.2.3.6 <i>Usefulness of SLI sub-type categories</i>	
2.2.4 Theories of SLI: influences and underlying mechanisms	36
2.2.4.1 <i>Structure of the sub-section</i>	
2.2.4.2 <i>The role of genetics</i>	
2.2.4.3 <i>The role of neurobiology</i>	

2.2.4.4	<i>The role of the environment</i>	
2.2.4.5	<i>Linguistic theories of SLI</i>	
2.2.4.6	<i>Cognitive theories of SLI</i>	
2.2.4.7	<i>Integrative theories of SLI</i>	
2.2.4.8	<i>Cognitive comparisons with other SEN groups</i>	
2.2.5	Conclusions on using SLI definitions and diagnostic criteria	46
2.2.6	Interim summary	48
2.3	Social well-being	49
2.3.1	Introduction	49
2.3.2	Conceptual models of social position	49
2.3.3	Terminology within social position	51
2.3.4	Social position and general populations	52
2.3.5	Social position and children with SEN	56
2.3.5.1	<i>Mild, moderate and severe learning difficulties</i>	
2.3.5.2	<i>Behaviour difficulties and autism</i>	
2.3.5.3	<i>Diverse SEN categories and children with overlapping needs</i>	
2.3.5.4	<i>Issues specific to friendship</i>	
2.3.5.5	<i>Associations with social position in children with SEN</i>	
2.3.5.6	<i>Specific forms of learning difficulty</i>	
2.3.5.7	<i>Evidence as a whole</i>	
2.3.6	Social position and children with SLI	67
2.3.6.1	<i>Overview</i>	
2.3.6.2	<i>Links with social cognition and language</i>	
2.3.6.3	<i>Evidence as a whole</i>	
2.3.7	Interim summary	73
2.4	Social anxiety	74
2.4.1	Background	74

2.4.2 Definition	75
2.4.3 Social anxiety and general populations	77
2.4.4 Social anxiety and SEN	78
2.4.4.1 General learning difficulties and poor scholastic achievement	
2.4.4.2 Dyslexia	
2.4.4.3 Complex and diverse forms of SEN	
2.4.4.4 Evidence as a whole	
2.4.5 Social anxiety and SLI	82
2.4.5.1 Introduction	
2.4.5.2 Social anxiety, SLI and the links with other factors	
2.4.6 Interim summary	86
2.5 Social position and social anxiety: what are the links?	86
2.5.1 The links for general populations	86
2.5.2 The links for children and young people with SLI	89
2.5.3 Interim summary	90
2.6 Social well-being: what influences the outcomes?	91
2.6.1 Introduction	91
2.6.2 Ecological accounts of human development	91
2.6.3 Ecological influences: SEN and SLI	93
2.7 Chapter summary: evidence and gaps	94
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	96
3.1 Introduction to the chapter	96
3.2 Theoretical position	96
3.3 Methodological approach	98
3.3.1 Mixed methods: the issues	98
3.3.2 Methodology: terms and taxonomies for the study	100

3.3.3 Overview of methods: choice and purpose	102
3.4 Research design (1): quantitative study	104
3.4.1 Research questions addressed by this design	104
3.4.2 Hypotheses and their links with the research questions	105
3.4.3 Methods and tools	105
3.4.3.1 <i>Self-Perception Profile for Children: description and rationale for use</i>	
3.4.3.2 <i>Revised Social Anxiety Scales for Children and Adolescents: description and rationale for use</i>	
3.4.4 Reliability, validity and recognition of bias	110
3.4.4.1 <i>Self-Perception Profile for Children: reliability and validity</i>	
3.4.4.2 <i>Revised Social Anxiety Scales for Children: reliability and validity</i>	
3.4.5 Participants	114
3.4.5.1 <i>Descriptive statistics</i>	
3.4.5.2 <i>Expansion of the tables</i>	
3.4.6 Sampling	119
3.4.6.1 <i>Sampling strategies</i>	
3.4.6.2 <i>Purpose of the sampling strategy used</i>	
3.4.6.3 <i>Sampling criteria</i>	
3.4.6.4 <i>Sampling procedures</i>	
3.4.6.5 <i>Issues arising from sampling</i>	
3.4.6.6 <i>Considerations for analysis</i>	
3.4.7 Operational procedures	131
3.4.7.1 <i>Preliminary procedures</i>	
3.4.7.2 <i>Pilot study</i>	
3.4.7.3 <i>Main study</i>	
3.4.7.4 <i>Addressing threats to reliability and validity</i>	

3.5 Ethics (1): quantitative study	137
3.5.1 General considerations	137
3.5.2 Considerations for specific groups	137
3.5.3 Ethical procedures undertaken	137
3.5.3.1 <i>Voluntary informed consent</i>	
3.5.3.2 <i>Confidentiality and anonymity</i>	
3.5.4 Issues arising from the procedures	139
3.5.4.1 <i>Anticipated issues</i>	
3.5.4.2 <i>Unanticipated issues</i>	
3.5.5 Interim summary	140
3.6 Research design (2): qualitative study	141
3.6.1 Strategy, methods and tools	141
3.6.1.1 <i>Case study: description and rationale</i>	
3.6.1.2 <i>Pupil and parent interviews</i>	
3.6.1.3 <i>Classroom observations</i>	
3.6.1.4 <i>Interview questionnaires</i>	
3.6.2 Trustworthiness	148
3.6.2.1 <i>Trustworthiness of methods and tools</i>	
3.6.2.2 <i>Acknowledgement and reduction of bias</i>	
3.6.3 Case study participants	152
3.6.4 Sampling	152
3.6.4.1 <i>Sampling strategies</i>	
3.6.4.2 <i>Purpose of the sampling strategy</i>	
3.6.4.3 <i>Sampling procedures</i>	
3.6.4.4 <i>Issues arising from sampling</i>	
3.6.5 Operational procedures	155

3.6.5.1	<i>Preparatory procedures</i>	
3.6.5.2	<i>Pilot study</i>	
3.6.5.3	<i>Main study</i>	
3.6.6	<i>Preparation for analysis</i>	168
3.6.7	<i>Framework for analysis</i>	169
3.6.8	<i>Data display</i>	169
3.6.8.1	<i>Function and display types</i>	
3.7	Ethics (2): qualitative study	171
3.7.1	<i>General considerations</i>	171
3.7.2	<i>Considerations for specific groups</i>	171
3.7.3	<i>Ethical procedures undertaken</i>	171
3.7.3.1	<i>Voluntary informed consent</i>	
3.7.3.2	<i>Confidentiality and anonymity</i>	
3.7.4	<i>Issues arising from the procedures</i>	172
3.7.4.1	<i>Anticipated issues</i>	
3.7.4.2	<i>Unanticipated issues</i>	
3.7.5	<i>Summary of ethical matters</i>	174
3.8	Chapter summary	174
 CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS		176
4.1	Introduction to the chapter	176
4.2	Data analysis (1): quantitative study	176
4.2.1	<i>Introduction to the quantitative analysis</i>	176
4.2.2	<i>The use of samples and sub-samples</i>	176
4.2.3	<i>Preparation for analysis: matching of groups on non-verbal standardised scores and data normality checks</i>	177
4.2.3.1	<i>Time 1</i>	

4.2.3.2	<i>Time 2</i>	
4.2.4	Results	180
4.2.5	Linking results to the hypotheses	189
4.2.6	Linking findings to the research questions	191
4.2.7	Summary of findings	193
4.3	Data analysis (2): qualitative study	194
4.3.1	Introduction to the qualitative analysis	194
4.3.2	Data reduction	194
4.3.2.1	<i>Network displays</i>	
4.3.2.2	<i>Matrix displays</i>	
4.3.2.3	<i>Analytic function of the displays</i>	
4.3.3	Thematic analysis	199
4.3.3.1	<i>Introduction</i>	
4.3.3.2	<i>Individual factors in SLI</i>	
4.3.3.3	<i>Factor interrelationships in SLI</i>	
4.3.3.4	<i>Individual factors in SpLD</i>	
4.3.3.5	<i>Factor interrelationships in SpLD</i>	
4.3.4	Summary of findings	255
4.4	Chapter summary	259
CHAPTER 5:	DISCUSSION	261
5.1	Introduction to the chapter	261
5.2	Quantitative phase	261
5.2.1	Critique of the findings	261
5.2.1.1	<i>Social acceptance: self and teacher ratings</i>	
5.2.1.2	<i>Social anxiety ratings</i>	
5.2.1.3	<i>Associations between receptive SLI, social anxiety and social</i>	

acceptance

5.2.1.4 Absence of change in SLI measures from Year 6 to Year 7

5.2.1.5 Prediction of social anxiety from self-rated social acceptance, athletic competence and scholastic competence

5.2.2 How key findings relate to the literature 266

5.2.2.1 SLI and TD: comparison of social acceptance self-ratings

5.2.2.2 SLI and TD: comparison of social acceptance teacher ratings

5.2.2.3 SLI and TD: comparison of social anxiety ratings

5.2.2.4 Relationships between self-rated social acceptance and other domains of self-perception in children with SLI

5.2.2.5 SLI social acceptance self-ratings: lack of change from Year 6 to Year 7

5.2.2.6 SLI social anxiety: lack of change from Year 6 to Year 7

5.2.2.7 The severity of receptive SLI: associations with social acceptance self-ratings and social anxiety

5.2.2.8 Relationships between social anxiety and social acceptance in SLI

5.2.3 Critique of the quantitative methodology 273

5.2.3.1 Strengths

5.2.3.2 Limitations

5.3 Qualitative phase 275

5.3.1 Critique of the findings 275

5.3.1.1 The role of pragmatics

5.3.1.2 The role of family support

5.3.1.3 The impact of subject setting and school placement type on friendship with TD peers

5.3.2 How key findings relate to the literature 278

5.3.2.1 Pragmatics and receptive language

5.3.2.2 Family, neighbourhood and the social lives of participants with

SLI	
5.3.2.3 <i>Subject setting and social participation: SLI</i>	
5.3.2.4 <i>Placement type and the social acceptance and friendships of participants with SLI</i>	
5.3.2.5 <i>Scholastic difficulties and the social anxiety, social acceptance and friendships of participants with SpLD</i>	
5.3.3 Critique of the qualitative methodology	284
5.3.3.1 <i>Strengths</i>	
5.3.3.2 <i>Limitations</i>	
5.4 Reflections on the study as a whole	286
5.4.1 How the overall study addressed the research questions and hypotheses	286
5.4.2 Strengths of the mixed method design	288
5.4.3 Limitations of the mixed method design	289
5.4.4 Overall inference quality	289
5.5 Original contribution to knowledge	291
5.6 Implications for policy, provision, practice and future research	292
5.6.1 Policy and provision	292
5.6.2 Practice in schools	294
5.6.2.1 <i>Classroom strategies and the deployment of TAs</i>	
5.6.2.2 <i>Lesson modes</i>	
5.6.2.3 <i>School clubs</i>	
5.6.3 Future research	298
5.6.3.1 <i>Replication and modification</i>	
5.6.3.2 <i>Extension</i>	
5.7 Conceptualisation of SLI and the discrepancy model revisited	300
5.8 Chapter summary	303

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	304
Appendices 1-16	306
Bibliography	326
Additional materials: oversized tables	344

LIST OF TABLES AND FIGURES

Tables

Table 3.1 Summary of design classifications	100
Table 3.2 Hypotheses, variables and statistical tests	106
Table 3.3 Time 1 demographic data by group and combined	114
Table 3.4 Time 2 demographic data by group and combined	115
Table 3.5 Participant schools, local authorities (LAs) and pupils	116
Table 3.6 Mean verbal and non-verbal standardised scores and chronological age with standard deviations (SD), by group and combined	116
Table 3.7 Frequencies and percentages of pupils with SLI attending each school placement type at Time 1 and Time 2	117
Table 3.8 Frequencies and percentages of pupils at each National Curriculum (NC) level, by group and combined	118
Table 3.9 Criteria and rationale for SLI sampling	121
Table 3.10 Verbal and non-verbal assessments used in SLI full sample, with number of cases assessed by each	125
Table 3.11 Framework summary for interviews	144
Table 3.12 Framework summary for observations	146
Table 3.13 Gender frequencies and percentages, mean chronological age and mean non-verbal standardised scores of case study participants, by group and combined	153
Table 3.14 Learning environment checklist	159
Table 4.1 Comparison of group social measures at Time 1 and Time 2	180
Table 4.2 Time 1 correlation coefficients between social anxiety composite and self-rated social acceptance, by group	181
Table 4.3 Time 1 and Time 2 correlation coefficients between verbal/non-verbal discrepancy, social anxiety composite and sub-scales	182

and self-rated social acceptance (SLI)

Table 4.4 Group changes in self-rated social acceptance and composite social anxiety	184
Table 4.5 Prediction of composite social anxiety at Time 1 and Time 2 from combined scholastic, social and athletic measures (SLI)	185
Table 4.6 Prediction of self-rated social acceptance at Time 1 from combined verbal/non-verbal discrepancy and two social anxiety sub-scale measures (SLI)	187
Table 4.7 Prediction of self-rated social acceptance at Time 2 from combined verbal/non-verbal discrepancy and three social anxiety sub-scale measures (SLI)	188
Table 4.8 First stage themes	195
Table 4.9 Second stage themes	196
Table 4.10 Cross-case matrix (SLI): summary of personal and environmental factors in social well-being in Year 7	204
Table 4.11 Cross-case matrix (SpLD): summary of personal and environmental factors in social well-being in Year 7	206
Table 4.12 Cross-case matrix (SLI): social well-being in discrete domains across transition, with role perspective and data type (<i>in Additional materials</i>)	345
Table 4.13 Cross-case matrix (SpLD): social well-being in discrete domains across transition, with role perspective and data type (<i>in Additional materials</i>)	349
Table 4.14 Cross-case matrix (SLI): categorised factors from Table 4.10, with composite social well-being in Year 7	208
Table 4.15 Cross-case matrix (SpLD): categorised factors from Table 4.11, with composite social well-being in Year 7	209
Table 4.16 Cross-case matrix (SLI and SpLD): comparison of factor balance across three social well-being levels	210
Table 4.17 A sample of utterances and functions in the P-SLI	218
Table 4.18 A sample of utterances and functions in the P-SpLD	241

Table 4.19 Friendship patterns of P-SLI with number of cases	248
Table 4.20 Friendship patterns of P-SpLD with number of cases	248

Figures

Figure 3.1 Sequence of method implementation	102
Figure 3.2 Structure of the case study strategy	143
Figure 3.3 A model of social participation in the learning environment	160
Figure 4.1 Factors associated with social well-being in Year 7 pupils with receptive SLI or SpLD	198
Figure 4.2 Personal and environmental factors as potential social enablers and barriers	200
Figure 4.3 Linking role perspectives and data sources with discrete social well-being domains across the transition	201
Figure 4.4 Factor interrelationships and composite social well-being in Year 7, by case (SLI)	202
Figure 4.5 Factor interrelationships and composite social well-being in Year 7, by case (SpLD)	203
Figure 4.6 Three patterns of factor interrelationships	238
Figure 4.7 Outlier cases and their key features	257