

**Using Symbol Communication to support Pre-school
Children with English as an Additional Language**

by

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APRIL 2005

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Acknowledgements

This report was written as a part fulfilment of the degree of BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies of the University of Warwick, under the supervision of Professor Carol Aubrey. Thanks are given to the Sure Start Coventry North programme, particularly the Speech and Language Therapist and Programme Manager and a former Early Years worker. Also, to the local Primary School who allowed the part of the research to take place on their premises, and the Nursery Teacher and Nursery Nurse who accommodated the researcher and gave an interview.

The research was undertaken as part of the evaluation of Sure Start Coventry and was funded by the four Sure Start Programmes in Coventry. Principal investigators were Chris Coe and Nick Spencer, with Maria Stuttaford as a named researcher. Carol Aubrey was a co-investigator, with Sarah Dahl as a researcher on the project. The study would not have been possible without the co-operation of the many respondents who agreed to participate.

Abstract

The aim of this research is to identify practical and beneficial ways in which symbols can be used to support communication with children with English as an additional language (EAL) in pre-school settings. Suggestions are then to be made regarding the best methods by which to disseminate this information to other practitioners. This study follows the implementation of symbol communication by Sure Start staff at a pre-school setting and the desire to have the activity evaluated.

Semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were used to obtain data from those involved with the Sure Start implementation and a Pre-school Teaching Assistant and a representative of an ethnic minority achievement service from areas unconnected with the implementation. Observations were carried out at a 'stay and play' group and observation data, a video and questionnaires were provided for analysis by Sure Start.

The report concludes that symbol communication benefits a diverse range of children, not only those with EAL. It also has the potential to impact significantly upon communication between practitioners and parents with EAL. Symbols were initially used for visual timetables, choosing activities and to support simple instructions. Benefits identified included: reduced frustration and improved behaviour due to understanding of setting routines; better attention levels; providing a means by which children can initiate communication and also make choices and support for language acquisition. These benefits were not proven to be due entirely to symbol communication.

Practitioners identified the need for training in the form of visits to settings already using symbol communication, formal training sessions and on-going support and encouragement. Key issues that need to be addressed include the identification of a lead body to take symbol communication forward to the widest audience and the provision of funding.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Children with little or no English are arriving in pre-school settings around the country and finding it difficult to settle because they cannot understand what is happening around them. They struggle to interact with their environment because English is the predominant language in these settings and they have no knowledge of it. Practitioners are faced with the challenge of communicating with a child who cannot understand their spoken language and who is often frightened and distressed. In some cases these children will have survived upheaval and tragedy to arrive in these settings.

Bilingual and multilingual co-workers may be on hand to support the children and practitioners in these situations, but their help is limited due to the demand for their services. In their absence the practitioner and child are left together and it is for the practitioner to find the best solution to help the child to make sense of their new world.

One solution is the use of symbols and pictures to transfer information and hence aid communication. Traditionally, symbols were used to support people with communication difficulties such as speech and language disorders, however, the use of symbols is gradually becoming more widespread as childcare workers realise the benefits they can have for all young children.

This method of communication involves the use of a visual symbol to aid understanding. The symbol may be representative of an object or action (see Appendix A) and is shown to another person as a visual cue where communication is hindered for some reason. Whilst this research focuses mainly on symbols, pictures such as photographs also have a role to play and will be discussed briefly.

One Sure Start centre decided to introduce the use of a symbol timetable (see Appendix B) to support children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) in a pre-school setting and felt that there were identifiable benefits. By using symbols, children were able to understand the day's sequence of events and make choices about their activities. Following this, symbols

were also introduced in a 'stay and play' group for the benefit of both children and adults with EAL.

This study came about as a result of the above work and the desire of those involved to evaluate the activity, find out more from literature and promote the benefits of and best practice in using symbols to other pre-school settings.

As a paediatric Speech and Language Therapy Assistant, the researcher has a particular interest in the use of symbols for communication and is familiar with how to use them with children with speech and language difficulties. The software packages available and the wide variety of resources that can be created to assist children are also well understood. With this background, it is easy for the researcher to understand the enthusiasm of the professionals implementing symbol communication and their deep desire to see the system spread to benefit as many children as possible.

With the above in mind, the first question to be examined by this research is:

1. In what practical and beneficial ways can symbols be used as a means of communication between English-speaking practitioners in pre-school settings and children and their parents/carers, where English is an additional language?

Having looked at the actual use of symbols in the setting and what information can be gained from the literature, a further requirement of this research is to suggest ways in which this information and best practice can be disseminated. The second research question is therefore:

2. How can best practice in the use of symbols be quickly and effectively disseminated to practitioners in other pre-school settings?

The aims and objectives of this research are:

- To identify how pictures are used in the pre-school classroom in order to improve communication between practitioners who only speak English and children and their parents/carers who are unable to speak any English.
- Where possible to identify the benefits brought about by the use of pictures.
- To identify what might be considered best practice in the use of pictures with children

with EAL and their parents/carers.

- To ascertain ways in which this best practice might be disseminated with consideration given to, for example, time, cost, human resources and software availability.
- To produce a report that will be sufficiently persuasive so as to move the use of pictures forward, thereby affording more children the opportunity to make sense of the world around them.

A number of issues have arisen during the course of this research:

1. It has proved difficult to find and make contact with pre-school settings using symbol communication with children with EAL. Conducting a case study in the time available within a pre-school setting was not therefore feasible. However, two visits were arranged to a 'stay and play' group.
2. Literature appears to be divided between that which examines the use of augmentative communication for children with speech and language difficulties and that which looks at communication in the classroom with children who have English as their first language, or at least some English language. The researcher was unable to locate literature examining the use of symbols in mainstream settings.

In order to gather as much data as possible in the time available, use has been made of existing observations, questionnaire responses and video evidence made by Sure Start staff; interviews have been conducted with those involved in the implementation of the visual timetable namely Sure Start Management and staff; pre-school staff and professionals from other areas who have experience of using visual timetables.

This report examines current literature relating to symbol communication and language development; provides a critique of the data gathering methods used and details, analyses and discusses the findings. Finally, the literature and evidence are discussed in relation to the research questions and aims.

Chapter 2:

Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction

The right of children not to be discriminated against on the grounds of language is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989 Article 2(1) and is also reflected in the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2001.

Children need a strong foundation and confidence in their home language and culture in order to feel confident exploring the language and culture of others (Siraj-Blatchford, cited in Nutbrown, 1996). The Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (2001) recommends different ways in which practitioners can support and value the home languages of the children in their care. These include opportunities to use, hear and see the home language and the provision of bilingual support.

Bilingual support services are developing and settings can request the assistance of a bilingual early years worker. These practitioners visit settings to, for example, support children in their first language, provide a translation service to facilitate the building of relationships between settings and families and share religious, cultural and linguistic information (www.blss.portsmouth.sch.uk/early years). Whilst this support is valuable, it is not always available and practitioners must rely on other means of communicating with children in their care. Visual forms of communication can overcome differences in language and are available to the literate and illiterate alike (Sless, 1981).

This literature review focuses on how symbols can be used as an aid to communication in situations where two parties do not share a common language. Whilst the initial purpose for using symbols is to provide a basis for shared understanding and shared meaning between parties, the literature may also indicate whether there are supplementary benefits to symbol communication in the form of language acquisition. Before examining these elements, however, it is necessary to consider how language develops.

2.2 Theories of language development

Language is essential in children's learning. It provides them with the means to make sense of the world around them through thought and discussion (Fisher, 1996). Various theories exist as to the ways in which children acquire language. Behaviourists suggest that language is learned through imitation, a theory supported by the fact that we learn the same language with the same accent as those around us. The nativist view is that people are born with an innate ability to develop language and that the sequence of language acquisition is the same for everyone, irrespective of which language is spoken (Smith, Cowie, Blades, 2003; Bancroft cited in Lee and Das Gupta, 1995).

Piaget suggested that children's language development is related to their cognitive development. As they develop schema to explain the world around them they also develop language. In order to understand language, Piaget believed that children need to understand the concept of object permanence; that something abstract such as a word can be used to represent an object (Smith *et al*, 2003). He also suggested that children's ability to think in abstract terms is limited. However Donaldson's research (1978, cited in Anning, Edwards, 1999) identified that children can understand abstract ideas when they are set in a familiar context. For example, if they are represented in a form that children understand such as pictures and explained in terms familiar to children (Anning, Edwards, 1999). A meaningful context is identified as important in the development of language. Children need to hear language being used and to use it themselves in situations that make sense to them (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 2001; Fisher, 1996).

The social interactionist view of language development places the emphasis on the use of language within a social and cultural context (Bancroft cited in Lee and Das Gupta, 1995). Joint attention, taking turns and communication through shared understanding are felt to be of key importance, being pre-cursors to early language development. Children make sounds and gestures and are encouraged to make further attempts by positive feedback from adults (Smith *et al*, 2003).

2.3 Using symbols as an aid to communication

2.3.1 How symbols work

Communication involves the systematic use of symbols of some description such as sounds

or images. These symbols are generally arbitrary such as words, i.e. they do not resemble the referent. However, this is not the case when iconic symbols (pictures) are used. These do resemble the referent (Bancroft cited in Lee and Das Gupta, 1995) to a greater or lesser degree and can therefore aid communication.

The discussion of language development helps to understand how symbols can be used to aid communication. Communication occurs where two people share a common language, whatever form this may take (Bancroft cited in Lee and Das Gupta, 1995). In the case of symbol communication the form will be symbolic representations of referents. According to Piaget, children who understand the concept of object permanence will recognise representations of objects or actions. The development of cognitive ability will determine whether these representations need to be very similar to the original object such as a photograph, more abstract such as a general symbol or the completely arbitrary word.

Piaget's theory is supported by Sless (1981) who identified that in order to interpret pictures, children must understand the 'stand-for' rule where one object can 'stand-for' another. In order to apply this rule, there is a pre-requisite that children have developed the concept of pictures. Like Donaldson (1978, cited in Anning, Edwards, 1999), Sless highlighted the importance of context to aid understanding. Since pictures are developed within a context, the process of interpretation involves a child using their existing knowledge of their environment to interpret what the picture stands for (MacDonald cited in Wilson, 2003; Sless, 1981). If this knowledge is limited, their understanding of the picture will also be limited. Research suggests that the difficulty with symbols does not lie in the recognition of the symbol itself, but in its interpretation (Sless, 1981).

Symbols must therefore be used in ways that add meaning and aid understanding. For example a symbol for washing hands may be shown to children and initially be accompanied by leading the children to the basin and demonstrating hand washing. As understanding develops, children will be shown the symbol and associate it with the action required.

Symbols are not used in isolation. They are accompanied by, for example, gesture, spoken language, body language and facial expression (Detheridge, cited in Wilson, 2003). It is suggested that people can understand more of a language than they are able to vocalise, if such supports are used (Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage, 2001). Each of

these must be appropriate and verbal instructions must be kept simple, avoiding complicated sentences (McLaughlin, 1995). Livingstone (2005) believes that communication using signs and gestures is important for all young children and that the use of gesture can speed up the acquisition of language.

As discussed, behaviourist theory indicates that children learn through imitation, whilst the social interactionist opinion is that language is used for a purpose within social situations. These views suggest that children will copy adults and use the symbols themselves to communicate their needs, desires and emotions within the setting. Demonstration, modelling and repetition by adults are therefore important and encourage children to develop skills in turn-taking and joint attention. Symbols should be used by everyone within a setting in order for this form of communication to be accepted as valid (Fisher and Cornwallis cited in Wilson, 2003).

2.3.2 Symbol selection

It is suggested that an environment in which language will flourish is one where the level of language matches the children's level of understanding (Smith et al, 2003). The importance of this is highlighted if communication is broken down into its constituent parts, i.e. sender, message and recipient (Sless, 1981). In order for communication to be effective, the recipient needs to receive the message as it was intended by the sender. A number of issues impact upon each element in this process. For example, the sender must know the audience, their level of knowledge in relation to the proposed content of the message; the culture in which it will be received and the ability of the recipient to interpret the information. The content of the message must be in a format recognised by the recipient. In turn, the recipient makes certain assumptions about the sender that may or may not be accurate (Sless, 1981).

This process makes certain demands upon practitioners to know each child, their background and their stage of development (Bancroft cited in Lee and Das Gupta, 1995) and has practical implications when deciding upon the visual form of communication to use. Some children may need a representation that closely resembles the referent such as a specific photograph to aid their understanding, whilst others will be able to make sense of more abstract symbols. The form visual representations take change as children develop (Jans and Sherrit cited in Wilson, 2003).

Symbols must meet the needs of groups, individuals or both. In addition to the various ages and stages of the children, symbols may need to accommodate different cultural requirements. For example the use of colours such as red and green are generally accepted as stop and go in the UK, however this may not be the case elsewhere. Interpretation of some symbols therefore requires a certain level of prior knowledge and/or experience. For example, symbols to represent 'hot' can be pictorially detailed and set in a specific context, such as a cup with steam coming from it or a face that is hot. It may be necessary to teach children more abstract symbols in order for the communication to be effective (MacDonald cited in Wilson, 2003).

It is possible that children will respond in an unexpected way when asked, for example, to stand in front of others to make a choice on a symbol board. Cultural values may prevent a child from speaking in front of others (McLaughlin, 1995) and similarly they may be reluctant to be the centre of attention when using symbols.

In implementing a symbol communication system, it is important to start on a small scale and build up (Donnelly and Kirkaldy cited in Wilson, 2003). This allows time for both children and adults to become familiar with the symbols, how they are used and to feel confident with them. To achieve this, Fisher and Cornwallis (cited in Wilson, 2003) suggest introducing them into well-known daily routines, for example, through a visual timetable of the day. Other ways in which symbols may be used to enhance understanding include activity boards to enable children to understand what is available and make choices, classroom rules and simple instructions in symbol format (Donnelly and Kirkaldy cited in Wilson, 2003).

Symbols can be a helpful tool in communicating with families and other adults where there is little or no English. For example the use of a home/school diary is advocated (Millar cited in Wilson, 2003; Fisher and Cornwallis cited in Wilson, 2003; Stephenson and Richardson cited in Wilson, 2003). Symbols depicting the routine of the day and activities can be created on a sheet. At the end of the session, children colour in those symbols that show what they have taken part in. This is then taken home as a discussion aid.

2.3.3 Developing vocabulary

In the introduction to this section it was suggested that an additional benefit of symbol communication could be the development of English vocabulary. Language development theories support this idea. Children progress from recognising actual objects to understanding representations in picture format to the use of abstract words. It therefore follows that if pictorial representations are accompanied by the appropriate verbal and written vocabulary, children will copy the words and link them with the represented object or action thus developing language.

This being the case, perhaps the overall goal of symbol communication in pre-school settings with children with EAL should be to help children reach the point at which they will be using appropriate vocabulary and no longer need symbolic aids for basic communication purposes. However, symbols can continue to be used as a learning aid, for example, story boards and symbolised books can be used to provide literacy support thus facilitating an increase in self-esteem and self-confidence (Donnelly and Kirkaldy cited in Wilson, 2003; Astin *et al*, 2002).

2.4 Communication Policy

In order to make the most effective use of all forms of communication within a setting it is recommended that a communication policy is developed (Stephenson and Richardson cited in Wilson, 2003; Millar cited in Wilson, 2003). This policy should cover issues of planning, time, resources, consistency in symbol and picture selection and usage, practitioner collaboration (within and external to the setting) and the sharing of information (Donnelly and Kirkaldy cited in Wilson, 2003).

Government guidance (DfES, 2003) suggests that best practice in the early years has the development of expertise to meet the needs of children in terms of, for example, language, cultural diversity and religion at the centre of its plans.

Research has shown that a lack of knowledge about visual communication has led to practitioners seeking alternative strategies, such as signing and gesture, to communicate with children (von Tetzchner, 1997). In von Tetzchner's (1997) study, the practitioners reported their failure to use graphic communication because of unfamiliarity with it and a lack of knowledge about how to implement it. Similarly, Donnelly and Kirkaldy (cited in Wilson, 2003)

found that practitioners were overwhelmed by the prospect of implementing symbol communication. Following training, however, delegates reported that they could focus and plan the implementation and a further follow-up training maintained their enthusiasm. Difficulties have also been identified with taking staff out of settings for training (McConachie and Pennington, 1997).

Research suggests that the policy needs to address practitioner training in terms of both the creation of resources and their practical application for communication (Millar cited in Wilson, 2003). In addition, the policy should articulate any rules relating to training, for example, agreed criteria to qualify for training, time allocated and funding arrangements.

Whilst symbol communication is a simple form of communication, the resources required to implement it should not be underestimated. There are costs involved in the purchase of hardware and software for use within the setting (Millar cited in Wilson, 2003). Companies such as Mayer-Johnson, Makaton and Rebus have developed symbol software, enabling practitioners to produce symbols for communication. The costs may be mitigated to some degree by the sharing of resources both within and between services and settings and by the sharing of information and ideas. Discussion of these issues and proposed solutions should form part of the policy making process.

2.5 Conclusion

Historically symbol communication has fallen within the auspices of speech and language therapy where it has been used to support children and adults with various communication difficulties. This situation is gradually changing and the benefits of using symbol communication within mainstream classrooms are being recognised. However, literature still reflects the use of such communication in situations where people have difficulties of some description and does not yet reflect the possibilities of using symbol communication to enhance learning for all young children.

The discussion of the theories of language development clearly shows the role of pictures in the developing understanding of young children. The nativist view considers the sequence of language development to be the same no matter what language is spoken and hence pictorial representation will play an important role no matter what the nationality of a child.

The literature search included Curriculum guidance for the Foundation Stage which makes recommendations for supporting children with EAL. The literature highlights the importance of bi/multilingual support in developing a child's home language; an area shown to be of importance in the development of subsequent languages. Whilst the guidance outlines the ideal situation, literature does not provide solutions for practitioners in situations where such support is either unavailable or insufficient to cover the wide range of languages and dialects to be found in many pre-school settings.

Chapter 3 describes the methods used in gathering data for this study, the reasons for selecting these methods and difficulties and issues that occurred.

Chapter 3:

Methodology

3.1 Methods of data collection

Qualitative methods of data collection were selected for this research. The information required related to behaviours and was more easily identified through interview and observation than by using quantitative methods. The small number of participants made resource intensive qualitative methods feasible. It was recognised that, being a small scale study, there would be insufficient data to produce meaningful quantitative measures.

Interviews and observations were conducted that enabled data to be gathered from a range of professionals working with children in pre-school settings. In addition, observations, questionnaire responses and a video relating to the initial implementation of symbol communication by Sure Start were made available. The use of different methods of data collection and sources of data (triangulation), ensured a range of views and evidence (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford cited in Mac Naughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001).

3.1.1 Interviews

It is the interviewer's responsibility to make interviews as convenient, comfortable and time efficient for the interviewee as possible (Walliman, 2001). Information must be gathered objectively and in an ethical manner with due regard for the unequal relationship between the interviewer and interviewee (Cannold cited in Mac Naughton et al, 2001).

For the sake of reliability and to enable data to be quantified and compared, it is suggested that each interviewee is asked the same questions in a structured manner (Siraj-Blatchford, Siraj-Blatchford cited in Mac Naughton et al, 2001). An alternative view is that the interviewer has a guide, a list of topics to be covered during the interview (Robson (1998) cited in Siraj-Blatchford, Siraj-Blatchford in Mac Naughton et al, 2001; Cannold cited in Mac Naughton et al, 2001). The use of semi-structured interviews incorporating open questions allows interviewees to provide greater detail in their responses and interviewers have the opportunity to check understanding and probe further in to aspects of interest. This approach does however lack reliability. It would not be possible to say that these results would be replicated

elsewhere (Siraj-Blatchford, Siraj-Blatchford cited in Mac Naughton *et al*, 2001; Cannold cited in Mac Naughton *et al*, 2001; Walliman, 2001). Semi-structured interviews were used in this study because a wide range of information was required including feelings and behaviours.

The researcher used purposive sampling to obtain views of the use of visual timetables that were unrelated to the initial location. Sure Start areas were contacted where it was thought visual timetables may be in use. Telephone interviews were carried out with a Pre-school Teaching Assistant and a representative from an ethnic minority achievement service. Telephone interviews are a convenient way to obtain information, however the interviewer must rely on the quality of the interviewee's voice to judge whether they have understood the questions and whether the answers they are providing are a true reflection of their views (Walliman, 2001).

3.1.2 Observations

Observation is a method for obtaining rich data that usually occurs in the participant's environment and that can be time consuming and difficult due to the amount of information that must be captured (Walliman, 2001; Rolfe in Mac Naughton *et al*, 2001). As with all data collection methods the observer must not allow their perspective to impact upon the observations made (Rolfe in Mac Naughton *et al*, 2001).

It is essential that the observer knows what information is required and how it will be recorded before starting an observation (Walliman, 2001). Recording may take the form of a running record or the focus may be on specific events. This study required both approaches. Observation at the initial visit to the 'stay and play' session focused on how children behaved and responded to instructions without symbols and their parent's/carer's actions when instructions were given. The second visit involved observing behaviour and actions when symbols were used - event sampling. Observations conducted by Sure Start within the pre-school setting over an 8 month period, provided a valuable insight into the initial implementation and corresponding changes in behaviour.

A potential difficulty with all observations is that the participants may behave differently because they are being observed. This may be prevented to some degree by attending sessions prior to the formal observation in order for people to become familiar and

comfortable with your presence. The lack of time available between the implementation of the symbols and the completion date for the report prevented this.

3.1.3 Video evidence and questionnaires

A video of the pre-school setting made some months after the initial implementation of symbols was also made available. Video evidence can be beneficial in that it can be viewed numerous times if required. However, it is time and resource intensive, requiring the correct equipment, often someone to operate it and the time to view and analyse the outcome (Rolfe in Mac Naughton *et al*, 2001).

A questionnaire was distributed to nursery staff by Sure Start after the first 2 months of the implementation. Questionnaires are less resource intensive than interviews and are useful when a large number of people are to be questioned. They provide respondents with the freedom to complete the questionnaire at a time convenient to them (Walliman, 2001).

3.2 Evaluation of the data

A purpose of this research was to evaluate how the children and adults involved responded to the use of the visual timetable. Walliman (2001) describes responsive evaluation as identifying how responsive a programme is to those involved in it and suggests that the data collection should include people directly involved with the programme, programme documents and observation. The data available for this research covers each of these areas.

In relation to the evaluation of the data, Walliman (2001:191) informs us that evaluation involves “making judgements about the quality of objects or events” and that in order to be useful it is important to take the context of the research into account in the evaluation process. The context for this research is specifically the use of symbols with children with EAL in pre-school settings. It is necessary to consider the identified impact upon each group involved, and to judge the relative values of the benefits for the children and their parents/ carers, the workload for staff and cost of resources. The outcome of this judgement will decide whether the ideas and best practice will be recommended to other settings with a similar context.

3.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was received for the Sure Start evaluation project as a whole. In relation to this aspect of the evaluation, the researcher was aware of ethical considerations whilst gathering data. There was no interaction with children so consent from parents was not required. Discussions were about general issues and not specific individuals so no child was named and locations and names of staff involved in the work are not included in this report.

Permission was given by the Speech and Language Therapist to discuss the work undertaken with others in order to find other professionals doing similar things. Also, an aim of this research is to share findings and best practice in an effort to promote wider use of visual timetables with children with EAL. The video remained with Sure Start and was not copied for the purposes of this research.

Participants were made aware of the purpose and proposed outcome of the study and copies of interview transcripts or discussion notes were sent to interviewees (in all but one case where the interviewee moved) in order for them to make any alterations they wished.

Having discussed the methods of data collection used for this study, the following chapters describe the data, together with any issues encountered. The chapters are divided according to the method used for data collection, i.e. interviews, Sure Start video and questionnaire and the researcher's observations.

Chapter 4:

Interviews with Relevant Personnel

4.1 Introduction

All participants other than the Pre-school Teaching Assistant and the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) Representative were involved in the Sure Start symbol communication implementation. The majority of the data therefore relates to this.

Interview data is reported in this chapter and data obtained from video and observation is reported in chapters 5 and 6. Each method of data collection has produced similar results suggesting its reliability.

Whilst it is recognised that it is important to involve children as participants in research (Brooker, cited in Mac Naughton et al, 2001), it was not possible to interview the children involved in this study. This was because the observations made by Sure Start staff were conducted prior to the researcher becoming involved. The time lapse made interviewing such young children about activity many months earlier inappropriate and language barriers would have been an additional constraint. Also, the researcher only observed one 'stay and play' session where symbols were used for the first time. Observation rather than interview was more appropriate in this situation.

4.2 Aims

Interviews were conducted in order to obtain the following information: how symbols were initially received by both children and staff; how they were used; benefits identified from their use; issues encountered and how they could best be introduced to other practitioners in the future.

4.3 Methods

4.3.1 Participants

Interviews were conducted with the Manager, Speech and Language Therapist (SALT), and Early Years Worker from Sure Start; Nursery Teacher and Nursery Nurse at the

implementation site; a Pre-school Teaching Assistant from a Sure Start site unconnected with the implementation and an EMAS representative. The data gathered has been grouped according to interviewees' roles i.e. advisory, practitioner and managerial.

4.3.2 Materials

The semi structured approach was used for all interviews and allowed interviewees to focus on those elements with which they were most involved. An interview guide was used to ensure the collection of the data indicated in section 4.2. This guide is shown as Appendix C.

4.3.3 Procedure

Interviews were conducted in interviewees' settings or by telephone, at times to suit them and in as time efficient manner as possible. Whilst the researcher has an interest in the field of study, every effort was made to ensure objectivity in questioning and the use of a voice recorder ensured the accuracy of data recording.

4.3.4 Analysis

Recorded data was transcribed and sent to participants (other than the Sure Start Manager) for comment. The researcher reviewed the data to identify that which related specifically to the study and within that identified common themes and issues amongst those with similar roles. The data was subsequently collated and reported herewith.

4.4 Results

4.4.1 Advisory roles

The data described in this section was provided by the SALT and Early Years Worker who initiated and directly supported the symbol implementation; the Pre-school Teaching Assistant and EMAS Representative. Each had prior knowledge and experience of symbols. Data provided by the Manager, Sure Start has also been included where it relates directly to evidence given by the Advisors.

Section 3.1.2 referred to observations conducted by the SALT. The data obtained from these reflected information provided by Sure Start staff and is therefore incorporated in this section.

4.4.1.1 Benefits of symbol use

The focus of the Sure Start implementation was a pre-school setting in a deprived locality. Children aged from 3 years 6 months to 3 years 11 months were assessed in relation to their speech and language abilities. The assessment was completed in English and of the 52% of children with EAL many were unable to produce 50 words in English. The Sure Start Manager pointed out that this assessment did not indicate what a child may be able to do in their first language and may cause their first language to be viewed in a negative way.

As part of their service, EMAS supports children in developing their first language; encourages settings to think about the language environment and provides interpreters who support communication with parents. This service is valuable however it was suggested by the Manager, Sure Start that the support is expensive and settings need more than they receive and can afford. For example, the implementation setting reported having 12 languages to provide for and receiving bilingual support for 3. In a situation where parents and children are unable to communicate in English and practitioners are unable to communicate in any other language, ways must be identified and explored to rectify the situation, break down barriers and enable communication to take place. Sure Start staff implemented the use of symbol communication in order to start this process.

Symbols can be used to support any language, however, from a practical point of view English was used for the implementation. This was the common language within the setting. It would have been ineffective and confusing to use symbols with a number of different languages at once and difficult for English speaking practitioners.

Advisors identified a number of benefits for symbol users, including support for both language comprehension and expressive language; providing the opportunity for children to make choices and a means by which children can make sense of the routine of the setting. Children were also less fidgety and more attentive during group sessions. It was felt that the ability to express needs and better understand their environment reduced levels of frustration and hence improved behaviour. Practitioners at the implementation site reported that behaviour was not a big issue.

Advisors believed that the use of symbol communication was beneficial for all children and particularly those with EAL or language delays. The Pre-school Teaching Assistant reported

that bilingual children appeared to be particularly interested in the symbols and bilingual children with language difficulties, whilst not always speaking, showed a positive interest in the symbols.

The Pre-school Teaching Assistant reported that parents with EAL in 'stay and play' sessions also found symbols helped their understanding of the sequence of events and activities and enabled them to support their children.

4.4.1.2 The effective use of symbol communication

Symbol communication is not intended to be a substitute for spoken language. By accompanying each symbol with the appropriate vocabulary, the SALT advised that symbols supported the development of language.

The SALT suggested that the most beneficial way to use timetables was to return to them after each activity and at the end of the session so that children could see symbols being taken away as activities were completed and to allow the opportunity to reiterate what the children had done and reinforce vocabulary. Children should be able to refer to the timetable at any stage and practitioners should take opportunities to refer to it. Such repetition and reinforcement was felt to aid learning which in turn built confidence and self-esteem and children felt more a part of the class.

The SALT's observations indicated that timetables were used to develop sequencing skills, however whilst the more capable children could re-order the symbols correctly, others became confused.

Advisors and Practitioners felt that the choice of symbols was important in facilitating children's understanding. It was necessary for children to recognise the connection between the symbol and activity or event. In some cases, for example, the sandpit, doll's house and water play, specific photographs were found to be necessary to aid understanding. Advisors felt however, that symbolic representations were preferable as they provided a generic representation that could be used to represent different versions of the same thing, for example, the symbol for tricycle can represent any tricycle whereas a photograph narrows the focus to a specific tricycle. Over time children learn the symbol meanings and link them to the

different activities. In the experience of the Pre-school Teaching Assistant photographs require time to produce and can be difficult to obtain. Colour symbols were used successfully although it was noted that children on the Autistic Spectrum may prefer black and white. Resources were reported to be time consuming to make however, the Early Years Worker felt that they were not hugely expensive.

Symbol communication was introduced following a year in which there had been difficulties in children settling in to the pre-school routines due to lack of understanding thought to be as a result of language difficulties. Gaining and maintaining attention had proved difficult. The symbols were, however, introduced at the start of the next academic year with a smaller group of different children who were functioning at a higher level than the previous year. This makes it impossible to state that the benefits witnessed in this particular setting came about as a result of the symbols. Other factors, in particular, the starting point of the children influenced the outcome.

4.4.1.3 Disseminating best practice to other settings

Advisors recognised that introducing something new can be frightening, difficult and time consuming and that it is sometimes easier not to do it, however, Practitioners reported that symbols were simple to use. Confidence played an important role.

Both Advisors and Practitioners, agreed that the most helpful way to initiate symbol use was to visit one or more settings already using symbols. Practitioners were able to discuss all aspects of symbol use and learn from colleagues' experiences. Return visits were identified as a means to provide support and maintain motivation. Practitioners suggested that a video was an acceptable alternative if a visit was not feasible. They suggested that it would be easy to get 'bogged down' in trying to implement the system and to see it in action would help.

Advisors suggested that the benefits of symbol communication are difficult to convey and that training in its use and in the language levels needed is important. Demonstrations in the use of visual timetables, together with information about how it can be used for planning and curriculum were found to be useful. Written guidelines were provided for the implementation, but data did not indicate their value.

The Pre-school Teaching Assistant identified the importance of responsive staff, able to recognise and respond to children's needs as key to successful implementation. Working in conjunction with setting management was also identified as a necessity.

On-going support was known to be important however, the SALT and Early Years Worker were unable to provide the level of support they believed was needed due to lack of time. It was felt that two or three visits per week was the optimum level of support and necessary to maintain motivation and encourage practitioners.

The implementation was resource intensive. It involved meetings to agree the implementation and decide upon symbols, followed by a visit to a setting using symbols. Informal training took place during a lunch hour although it was felt that a twilight session may have been more beneficial.

4.4.2 Practitioner roles

The data described in this section were provided by the Nursery Teacher and Nursery Nurse who implemented symbol communication in a pre-school setting with children with EAL. They were supported by the Sure Start team. They had no previous experience of using symbols.

Section 3.1.3 referred to questionnaires distributed by Sure Start after the first 2 months of symbol use. Two of the five questionnaires were completed and returned. The questions covered the use of symbols, frequency of use, benefits identified and whether symbol communication would continue to be used (Appendix D). The data contained therein corresponds with data obtained during interview and is therefore incorporated in this section.

4.4.2.1 Benefits of symbol use

Practitioners found that symbols benefited children with EAL, those with delayed language and additionally children too shy to speak in a group. The main benefits were as an aid to understanding and to facilitate expression. Occasionally a child would take a practitioner by the hand and show them a symbol, thus initiating communication to express desires and needs.

Symbols were used continually to aid understanding of the sequence of events during sessions; signpost places and activities within the setting; facilitate choice in activities and aid understanding of simple instructions, such as, wash hands.

A visual timetable was produced to facilitate children's understanding of the sequence of events. Initially 4 symbols were used representing hello, activity, snack and story. These were pointed to in sequence and talked about using low level language. The SALT's observations indicated that the children focussed on the symbols within a short period and became comfortable with sequencing events.

It was found that over time, symbols encouraged the development of vocabulary and children responded verbally to discussion about the timetable. Gesture was also felt to be important in this process and was used extensively by Practitioners either alone or in support of symbols. Children copied gestures and gradually words replaced them.

Practitioners felt that children with better language skills benefited from appropriate text on the symbols because they could link the spoken word with the written text. However, the Pre-school Teaching Assistant felt that text should be omitted whilst symbols were being used to facilitate communication rather than promote literacy.

A second set of symbols was produced for children to use. When an activity was chosen, children took the appropriate card to the activity where they were able to match it with the symbol signpost. This helped to reinforce the meaning of the symbols and indicated whether children understood the choices they were making. The symbol cards were also used appropriately by children in pretend play.

Whilst symbols were not used with adults in the setting, practitioners could see the benefits of doing so. Home visits and induction days were suggested as possible times when they could be used to aid communication, although it was suggested that different symbols would be required to those used in settings.

4.4.2.2 The effective use of symbol communication

Evidence demonstrated how Practitioners developed the skills required for symbol use. It

was recognised that, before showing a symbol, it was necessary to gain the children's attention, for example, through the use of rhymes. Symbols could then be displayed accompanied by simple language. Practitioners highlighted that long or complicated language hindered understanding. Similarly, when using symbols for instruction purposes it was important that they were used in the correct order, one at a time. To show several at once or in an incorrect sequence could cause confusion. Symbols were seen to encourage children to look, pay attention and reduce noise.

Symbols were used less in the setting as time progressed however, the SALT believed that whilst this was appropriate for more capable children, there would still be those who would benefit from symbol use, particularly those with lower level language ability or new to the setting.

4.4.2.3 Disseminating best practice to other settings

Practitioners were in agreement with Advisors regarding the dissemination of best practice as described in section 4.4.1.3).

Throughout the implementation, guidance, support and resources were provided by Sure Start staff. Practitioners suggested that there would be benefits in being able to access prepared resources. Some were downloaded from the internet.

Difficult circumstances meant that symbols could not be used in the current academic year and changes in staff in key roles impacted upon the use of symbol communication as there was temporarily no support and guidance for Practitioners. Interest was expressed in sharing expertise with other symbol users. This type of support network could be beneficial where official support is unavailable.

Practitioners indicated that they would recommend symbol use to pre-school settings especially those with children with poor language skills.

4.4.3 Managerial role

The following information reflects the more strategic aspects of symbol implementation put forward by the Manager, Sure Start.

Symbol communication crosses boundaries and can benefit a diverse range of people. It was therefore identified as one way in which minority groups can be supported in the wider context, not just within pre-school settings.

Interviewees had little experience of using symbols with adults with EAL but the potential to improve communication between Practitioners and families was felt to be substantial. It was suggested that a parent/pre-school partnership was needed to develop the use of symbols outside purely the pre-school setting. The introduction of this form of communication in to 'stay and play' sessions was a step along this road, making symbols a familiar and acceptable form of communication and hence breaking down barriers and making parents and families feel valued.

A number of experienced professionals used symbol communication with a diverse range of children for this study and found it to be beneficial in various ways. In order for others to benefit from symbol communication, it is recognised that strong and effective leadership is required. To achieve the widest audience and hence benefit as many children as possible, this leadership role needs to be located within an organisation with cohesive links to many early childhood services, the expertise to implement a large scale roll-out and with a broad agenda requiring action for the benefit of all. The Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) is in a position to fulfil this role effectively thus benefiting the maximum number of children within its boundaries.

An alternative suggestion was a large scale implementation of symbol communication by Sure Start which is recognised as being at the forefront of innovation and development. The Senior Sponsor Group has representatives from different influential organisations and would also be strategically placed to support such an initiative.

It was felt that symbol communication is of such significance that it should be discussed within a broad forum, for example, an early years conference, providing a range of people with the opportunity to contribute, question and take forward as they feel appropriate.

4.5 Discussion

The evidence demonstrated benefits for all symbol users, for example, by increasing

understanding and hence improving attention and noise levels. Whilst there is the belief that symbols can additionally benefit adults with EAL, little evidence was available to this effect.

The practical application of symbols involved the initial use of timetables, instructions and signposts. As children progressed the need for symbols to be used in this way reduced, however the opportunity was not taken to then develop symbols to be used as learning tools for example to develop literacy skills. This was due mainly to a lack of time on the part of those in supporting roles and Practitioners' lack of knowledge of the extended use of symbols.

Choice of symbols was identified as an important issue, with Practitioners preferring photographs in some situations as opposed to the more general symbols preferred by those in advisory roles. Each has their benefits and drawbacks and each situation should be considered individually to get the right solution for the children at a particular point in time.

Training is a key issue and there is agreement as to how this should be addressed i.e. site visits and training sessions. Issues of time and funding were raised however these should be weighed against the potential benefits of using symbols. If there is commitment to achieve the best for the children concerned, these issues should be addressed in order to move forward.

A final issue is that of leadership. As discussed in section 4.4.3, it is necessary to have a lead body in order for any large scale implementation of symbol communication to take place.

4.6 Conclusions

The evidence provided confirmation that symbol use is beneficial for communication between English speaking Practitioners and children with EAL and should be introduced widely.

In order to achieve maximum benefit, Practitioners require training and support in implementing, sustaining and extending symbol communication. This will only be achieved with the involvement of a motivated lead body.

Chapter 5:

Analysis of Video Recording

5.1 Introduction

The video provided the researcher with the only visual evidence of how symbols were used in the classroom by both staff and children towards the end of the implementation period. No recording of the class prior to the implementation was available and so a visual comparison of the initial and subsequent situations was not possible.

5.2 Aim

The aim of the video was to provide visual evidence of the practical use of symbols in a setting.

5.3 Methods

5.3.1 Participants

The participants involved in the video recording were the staff and children at the implementation setting and the Sure Start staff who filmed the activity.

5.3.2 Materials

One video tape was provided by Sure Start.

5.3.3 Procedure

The video was filmed by Sure Start staff during a session at the implementation setting. The researcher was provided with the tape to view in order to add to the data obtained through interviews.

5.3.4 Analysis

The researcher viewed the video tape several times, initially making and subsequently adjusting notes regarding what was observed. The focus was the way in which symbols were used and presented and the visible responses of the children to them.

5.4 The results

Children were seen being offered a choice of activities. These were represented by symbols shown to children and accompanied by the appropriate vocabulary. Children made choices vocally or by pointing to the symbol with fingers or eyes. Any form of communication was accepted, although it was usual for children to be encouraged to verbalise their choice and where this was not forthcoming, the children were offered a choice of two words from which to choose. Most children responded appropriately. In some instances the language used was too long and complicated for the child concerned. Gesture was used to facilitate understanding. It was noted that in one case a child returned to the board to indicate a change in their chosen activity.

5.5 Discussion

Whilst the video demonstrated the basic use of symbols, it did not fully demonstrate the best practice described in interviews. For example, there was some confusion where children selected activities, for which there was no symbol, or activities were offered but no symbol was shown. The evidence showed that in one case a child pointed to an inappropriate symbol and then went to the desired activity. This may have been caused by the initial need to introduce symbols to represent just four activities when children were aware that more were available.

During interviews it was indicated that having made their choice, children were given a symbol card that they then took to their chosen activity to match to the signpost. The video suggests that this action was not consistently applied, although this may be explained by the fact that it became unnecessary with the more able children.

It is apparent from the evidence that the use of symbols changes over time as children become more confident, competent and vocal.

5.6 Conclusion

Whilst the use of symbols will not always be perfect, the video demonstrated that it does not have to be. Whilst best practice was not always evident, the children still understood and were in a better position than they would have been without the symbols.

Chapter 6:

Observation of ‘Stay and Play’ Sessions

6.1 Introduction

Observations were conducted at two ‘stay and play’ sessions 7 weeks apart.

6.2 Aim

The aim was to observe any changes in the behaviour of both adults and children following the implementation of symbols.

6.3 Methods

6.3.1 Participants

The participants were the Leaders and the attendees of the ‘Stay and Play’ sessions.

6.3.2 Materials

The researcher used the interview questions as a guide to the data to be observed. Written notes were made during the sessions.

6.3.3 Procedure

On each occasion, the researcher was introduced to the participants prior to the start of the session and invited to join the group. Whilst this was beneficial in terms of making participants comfortable with the observations, it did prove difficult on occasion to separate from the group and observe activities. On the second occasion, the researcher did take care to move out of the group in order to observe the relevant elements of the session.

6.3.4 Analysis

Notes made during the observations were examined to identify the specific data required and any common themes and issues arising from the sessions.

6.4 The results

6.4.1 Observation 1

Six children and their mothers attended the session. They were either English-speaking or bilingual and language was not therefore an issue. Mothers spoke to their children in either English or their first language and guided them throughout the activities.

It proved difficult to gain and maintain the children's attention during activities. For example, songs were sung but the children did not fully attend and noise levels were high. There was little understanding of sequences of events, for example for snack time, causing frustration for some. Balloons decorating the hall proved a distraction towards the end of the session.

6.4.2 Observation 2

This took place 7 weeks later and symbols were used for the first time. Three children attended with their bilingual mothers. The children were quiet and settled well.

The symbol for 'wash hands' was used in conjunction with the words with one child who attended but did not respond. The symbol was removed and he was led to the cloakroom by his mother. At the end of the session the symbol for 'goodbye' was introduced. One child responded instantly by waving. The Leader appeared unsure about using symbols and decided to wait until she felt more confident before introducing more.

6.5 Discussion

The evidence suggests timing is crucial in the introduction of symbols. Initially the children were difficult to settle and their attention and understanding was poor. Evidence suggests that symbols would have been beneficial at this session. Later the children were settled and more familiar with the routines. Whilst still useful, symbols did not have the impact they would have had initially.

It is also evident that training and support for practitioners is crucial in order to raise their understanding of how and when to use symbols and to increase their confidence. They need to be competent in symbol use prior to starting a new group or working with a new class because this is the time when symbols will be most beneficial and effective in supporting children's understanding.

6.6 Conclusion

Whilst these observations gave an indication of some of the issues involved in implementing symbols, it was insufficient to collect significant data. In order to assess the situation before and after symbol implementation, long term observations should be conducted in addition to interviews with key staff.

Chapter 7:

Conclusions

7.1 Research question 1

The initial reason for implementing symbol communication was to encourage and improve communication between parties with no common language. The belief that this initiative had the potential to benefit many children led to the decision to evaluate the implementation with a view to disseminating the findings. To this end, the first research question was:

In what practical and beneficial ways can symbols be used as a means of communication between English-speaking practitioners in pre-school settings and children and their parents/carers, where English is an additional language?

Literature supports the use of symbols to aid communication. Theories of language development suggest that children learn language through, for example, imitation, repetition and turn-taking; all skills used in symbol communication, which in turn aids language acquisition. Literature also supports the idea that understanding can be enhanced by the use of for example, gesture, simple language, facial expression and body language. The evidence demonstrated the use of simple language and gesture in particular.

The evidence suggests that the use of timetables to sequence and make sense of the session for children, the facility for children to make choices and the use of symbols to give instructions have benefits in terms of positive changes in behaviour, attention, confidence and self-esteem. It is also evident that in this study, these benefits were not restricted to children with EAL, but had an impact upon all children in the setting. It is clear that these benefits cross cultural boundaries and benefit children of any nationality and language. It is a tool to support diversity and its use has the potential to make people feel valued and part of the larger group.

It should be noted that there were other factors influencing the children during the period of symbol use, for example, bilingual support workers, families and literature. These influences were not isolated or examined for this study. From the data collected it is not possible to

prove that the benefits identified above are a result solely of symbol communication. However, those questioned believed that the benefits were due to symbol use.

The findings provided an indication of best practice in the use of symbols, some known at the outset, such as language levels and use of language with symbols and some discovered through experience, such as which symbols to use in which circumstances.

Practitioners identified situations where symbols were no longer felt to be useful with more able children. However, literature shows that symbols have the potential to be extended in many ways such as vocabulary development, sequencing, sentence structure and to support the learning of other subjects.

It is recognised that this was a small study and it cannot be assumed that the benefits identified would be replicated elsewhere, although literature, particularly in the field of Speech and Language Therapy, suggests that they would.

Behavioural difficulties were initially recognised as an issue with a group of children during the academic year 2002/03. Symbols were introduced in the same setting but with a smaller, higher functioning group in 2003/04. It is not possible to state that the difficulties experienced in the first year would have been replicated the following year if symbols had not been introduced. Such a comparison would be inappropriate. A final concern is that, for good reason, views were not sought from the children with whom symbols were used.

If a child is unable to communicate due to language difficulties and a system is available to improve the situation but is not implemented, it could be argued that these children are being denied their rights a) not to be discriminated against on the grounds of language and b) to have their voice heard in matters affecting them (UNCRC, 1989). This would be unacceptable and it is therefore essential that early years professionals are informed of initiatives that could improve the way children struggling with language in pre-school settings are supported.

Further large scale research should be conducted in respect of the role and benefits of symbols in learning for all young children, with a view to offering support for practitioners in the implementation and development of symbol communication in the early years classroom.

There are issues regarding the amount of bilingual support available to settings. It is increasingly difficult for support services to provide support for every language and dialect currently encountered in settings. The example of 12 languages in one setting and support for just 3 of those languages was given. This situation cannot be easily resolved by minority group support services and so practitioners must take up the challenge and create other means of communication.

It was hoped that conclusive evidence would be found regarding the benefits of symbol use with adults with EAL. Experience outside the implementation setting demonstrated benefits for parents in terms of understanding sessions and being able to support their children. Elsewhere bilingual parents made symbols seem less necessary for the benefit of adults, however, they were still of value for their children.

There is a desire to introduce symbols to 'stay and play' sessions, use them to support the home/pre-school partnership and to make them an accepted form of communication. The current situation of practitioners being unable to communicate with children and their parents/carers was felt to be unacceptable and symbol communication is seen as a possible means to start breaking down barriers, getting to know children, making families feel valued and encouraging them in to the setting, thus benefiting all involved in the relationship. Literature suggests the use of home/school diaries as one means of communication.

Further research should be undertaken in to the practicalities of supporting children in their home language in pre-school settings with a view to offering practical and realistic support for practitioners.

7.2 Research question 2

How can best practice in the use of symbols be quickly and effectively disseminated to practitioners in other pre-school settings?

Literature identified that a lack of knowledge meant symbol systems not being used, whereas the provision of effective training developed confidence and the ability to implement symbol use. This highlights the importance of training prior to symbol implementation. The evidence suggests that the best means of achieving this is to provide practitioners with:

- visits to settings already using symbols;
- twilight training sessions to cover the following:
 - how symbols work and symbol/picture selection;
 - ways to use symbols in the short and long term;
 - how to help children to understand symbols;
 - making resources;
- on-going support through visits, occasional twilight meetings of symbol users to discuss issues and share best practice and ideas;
- future trainings to cover the extended use of symbols as a learning tool.

The implementation of symbol use requires time, that of practitioners and trainers; the purchase of software and materials to make resources and funding. Whilst the support outlined was felt to be the most effective way to prepare for symbol use, it is recognised that funding is likely to be an issue. Costs can be contained by the use of a video instead of a setting visit, although an actual visit would have a greater impact and provide the opportunity to discuss symbol communication with experienced practitioners.

Ideally training would occur during working hours away from the setting. However, it is recognised that this is not financially practical and that twilight sessions are a more realistic alternative. These may involve overtime payments however they prevent the need to fund replacement staff or pay for training venues.

Whilst a 'user group' would offer consistent support and guidance for symbol users, it would only be viable if practitioners were committed to it. An alternative option may be the production of regular newsletters to address issues and share best practice and ideas. This does require resourcing, however, without continuous input and encouragement it is easy for initiatives to slip when difficult situations arise or practitioners do not have the knowledge to solve particular problems and feel unsupported. From this perspective, support in any form is a necessary expense. It also ensures practitioners receive encouragement when regular visits from those in supporting roles are not possible due to inevitable time constraints.

7.3 Other issues

7.3.1 Funding

If implementation was conducted under the banner of the EYDCP, funding may come from the Local Education Authority, however, if the implementation occurred just within Sure Start then the costs would need to be met from Sure Start budgets. In comparison with other initiatives it is not overly expensive. Software packages cost in the region of £160 but prices vary and depend upon licences purchased. It is also feasible for settings to work together to share costs of software and materials. Training, as discussed, can be developed to meet a budget. Research should be conducted to assess the cost of implementation, available grants and other possible sources of funding.

7.3.2 Policy

The evidence obtained for this study did not provide information regarding the role of management in the implementation of symbols. Literature, however, highlighted the importance of management support and involvement in order to manage resources and maintain momentum and motivation. Literature also identified the need for a communication policy within settings to provide structure, direction and commitment. Whilst data was not collected specifically about the existence or creation of a communication policy, current practice could be used as the basis of a policy. Roles, planning, resources, consistency of symbol use and sharing of information have all been considered as part of the practical implementation.

7.3.3 Leadership

The issue of leadership requires urgent attention. Ideally, a body such as the EYDCP would fulfil this role in order to benefit as many children as possible. It is ideally placed to communicate with a range of practitioners and has the expertise to lead such a project. Government guidance, highlighted in Chapter 2, indicates that part of early years best practice is to ensure practitioners develop the necessary expertise for their roles.

Alternatively Sure Start could initiate a roll-out to its centres. The community that exists within Sure Start may provide the ideal opportunity for discussion to take place regarding symbol use and its value to individual settings and centres. Should practitioners judge it worthwhile, plans could be laid for its implementation. The evidence from this study fits the context of

most Sure Start settings and practitioners would therefore relate more easily to the experiences described.

When discussing the evaluation of the data in Chapter 3, it was noted that the impact of implementing symbols on each group of participants should be evaluated and judged in terms of relative benefits. From the data it can be seen that implementing symbols increases the workload of practitioners and can be stressful initially. Time is needed to become knowledgeable, familiar and confident in their use. However, once the initial hurdles were overcome, practitioners indicated that it was beneficial and that they would recommend it to other settings.

The children also required time to become proficient symbol users, however, the evidence showed that they settled quickly and the benefits, as already discussed, were substantial. The potential benefits for parents with EAL should also be recognised.

Initiators and leaders of the implementation spent a great deal of time preparing resources, training, organising and supporting. However, they have such belief in the system that they want it to be implemented as widely as possible.

The ultimate goal of this study was to persuade others to use symbol communication to benefit the children in their care who struggle to make sense of their surroundings. Whilst this was a small scale study, the belief of practitioners in the benefits of the system and their desire to share it with others is proof of the importance of symbol communication. In evaluating the findings, the researcher does not need to make judgements about the relative costs and benefits to those involved; practitioners have made that judgement already.

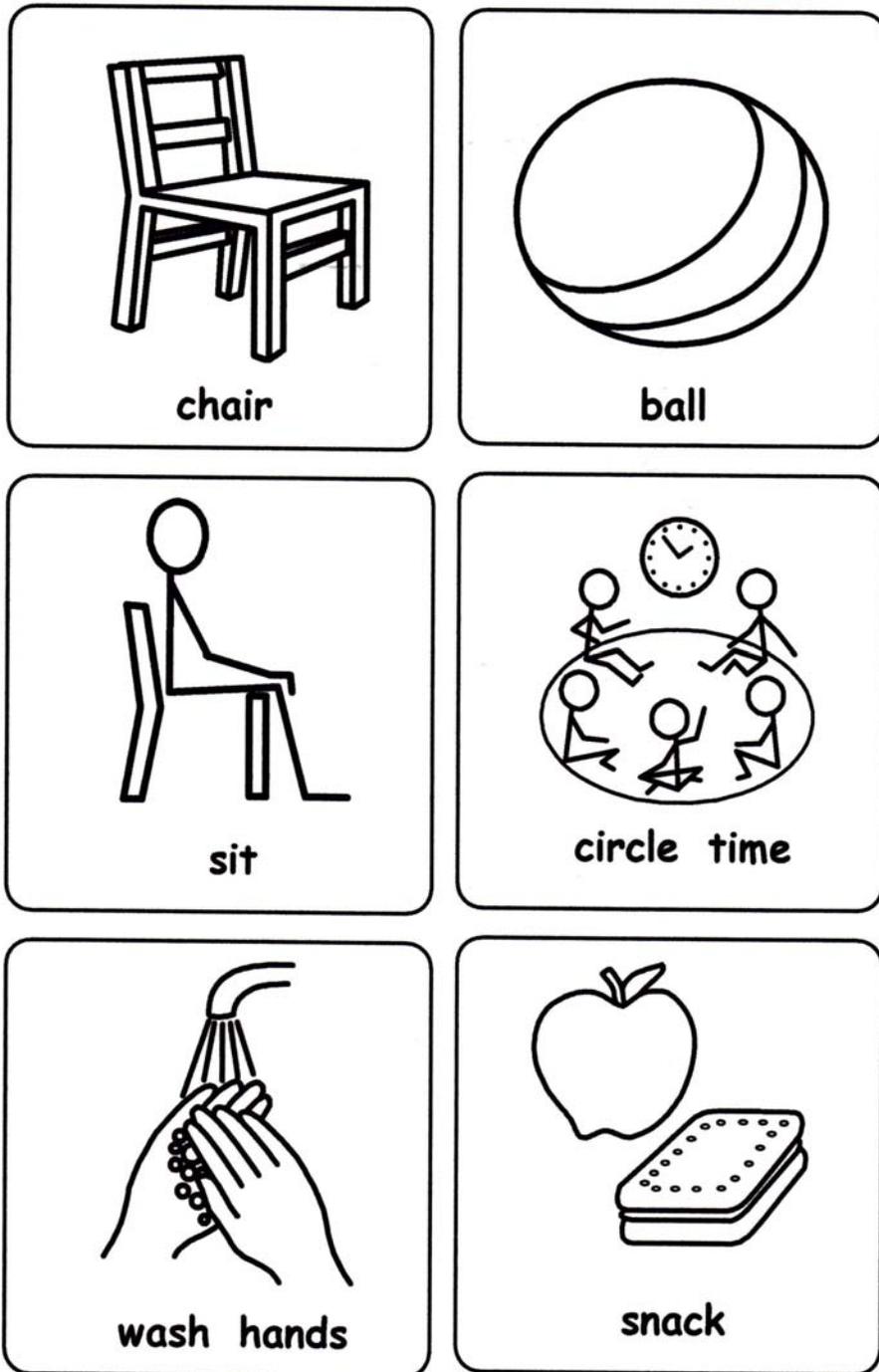
For the sake of the children, this opportunity must not be allowed to pass by.

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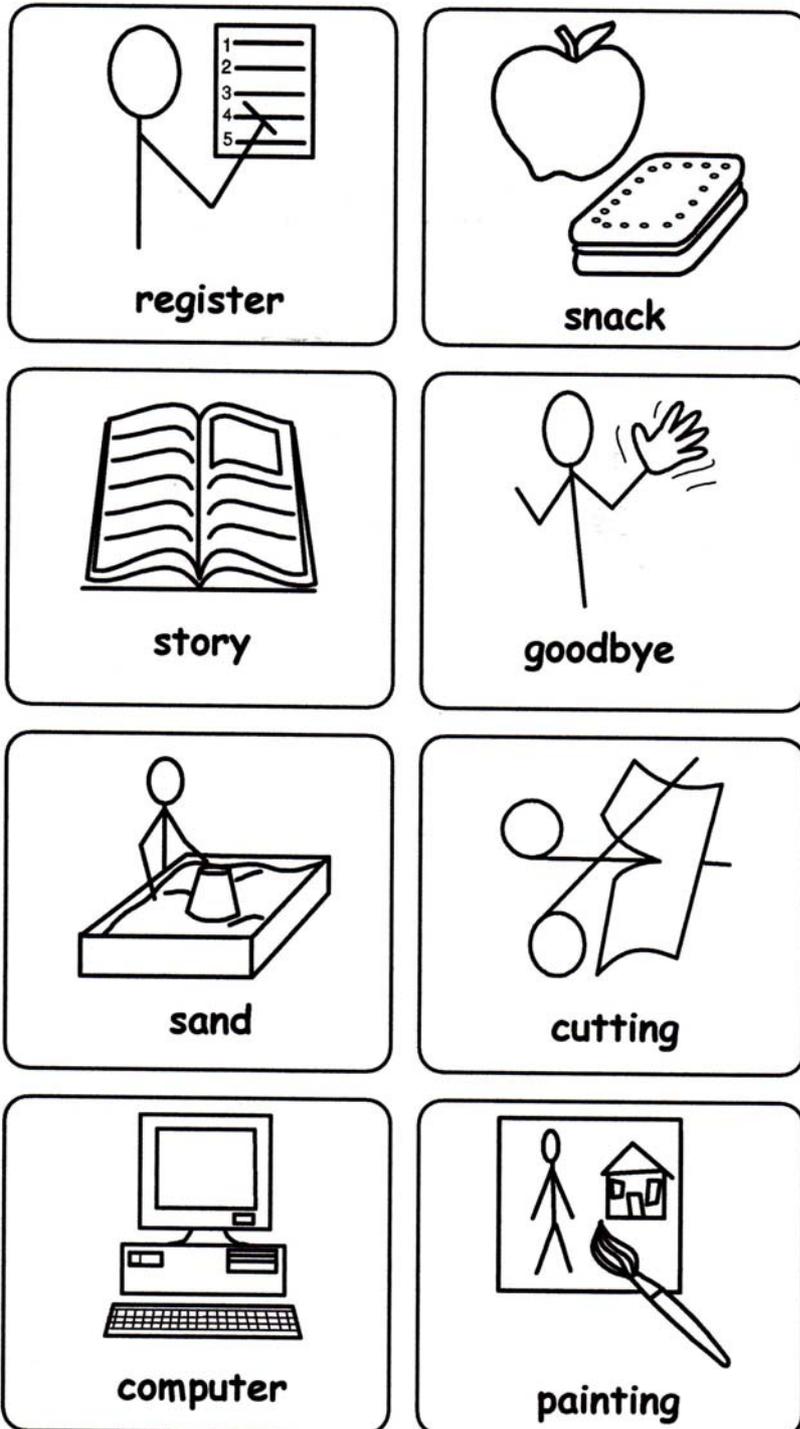
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APPENDIX A: Symbol examples



Symbols taken from 'Communicate in Print', Widgit Software

APPENDIX B: Symbols for timetables



NB: These symbols are not the same size as those used in settings

Symbols taken from 'Communicate in Print', Widgit Software

APPENDIX C: Sample questions asked of interviewees

1. How do you feel the use of picture communication was received within the setting?
2. In what ways have you used the symbols?
3. How did the children respond initially to the pictures? Were they interested; did they take notice of them?
4. How did their behaviour change over the period the pictures were introduced?
5. What benefits did you identify from using picture communication?
6. Did some children benefit more than others – in what ways?
7. Do you feel there are any drawbacks to using picture communication? What are these?
8. What was your aim in using picture communication?
9. Did you achieve what you set out to? If not, why was that?
10. How do you think you will change the ways in which you use picture communication in the future – if at all?
11. Do you feel that picture communication could have a role in communicating with parents/families with little or no English? How do you envisage they could be used?
12. Could you tell me about the role of the bi-lingual co-workers in the setting? How much time do they spend in the setting?
13. It is very difficult to prove the exact benefits of picture communication in an environment where there are so many influences upon the children. Do you feel that changes identified in the behaviour of some/all of the children are attributable to the use of picture

communication?

14. Would you recommend the introduction of picture communication to other pre-school settings?

15. If you were just being introduced to picture communication, how would you like that introduction to happen? (Context: disseminate to other pre-school settings)

16. Will you continue to use picture communication?

17. Would you like ideas of other ways picture communication can be used?

APPENDIX D: Questionnaire designed by Sure Start for completion by Pre-school staff

1. How often are the symbol and timetable being used?
2. How are you using the symbols and timetable in the sessions?
3. How do the children respond to or use the symbols to aid their communication?
4. Although the timetable and symbols are at an early stage, have you noticed any changes in children's behaviour, compared with previous years in nursery?
5. Are there any children in particular who have really benefited from having the visual support of the timetable and symbols?
6. How are children using the symbols themselves to initiate communication or communicate needs?
7. Are the visual supports benefiting you as staff – if yes, how?
8. Do you see yourselves using the visual supports in the future, if so, in what way?
9. Would you recommend to other nurseries that they use similar visual support with their children?
10. Any other comments?