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7 May 2008

Speech in the Scottish Parliament

Alternative and Augmentative Communication

I too congratulate Nanette Milne on securing the debate and on her groundbreaking use of a communication aid in the chamber.

Not all communication aids are as high-tech as the DynaVox.

Widespread use is made of picture boards, for example.

I am still undecided about whether it might be preferable for some of our colleagues—present company excepted, of course—to use such aids to enliven and augment their speeches.

Broadcasting and official report staff might also appreciate such innovations more often.

Today, I was delighted to join other MSPs in meeting pupils from Crossford primary school, some of whom are lucky enough to use such special communication aids.

As Nanette Milne said, the pupils were also joined by Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Kathleen Marshall, who is a powerful advocate of fair services for children.

She talked enthusiastically about the right of every child to have a voice—their own voice.

As a member of the Equal Opportunities Committee, I believe that everyone should have the opportunity to lead as full a life as possible. However, that means different things to different people.

The promotion of equal opportunities is a founding principle of our Parliament, and we are rightly proud of the progress that has been made across all the equality strands in Scotland.

However, we should consider the statistics that have been provided by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists.

It seems to me from those figures that equality of opportunities must seem an empty-sounding concept.

None of us can accept that meeting the needs of only 16 per cent of people is remotely adequate.

I am therefore pleased to join the cross-party call for a framework and a national standard of specialist speech and language therapy provision.

Wherever people live in Scotland, they need to have access to adequate, properly funded and timely provision.

I welcome the minister's intention to meet the campaign group, but I also urge that action be taken Scotland-wide to end the postcode lottery of services.

Services should not depend merely on where a person happens to live or on how old they are. Young people are assessed at school and, under the Education (Additional Support for Learning) (Scotland) Act 2004, they ought to have a co-ordinated support plan that includes provision for communication.

That plan should be in place for pupils in schools, but I worry that, with the national priorities action fund being rolled up in the general settlement, there will be no specific money for additional support for learning.

I hope that the minister will address that point in summing up.

I remember being delighted as a support for learning teacher by the input of a speech and language therapist who was engaged for a pupil with particular communication difficulties

The therapist made a wonderful difference not only for that pupil but for the whole peer group that was included in the group work.

Indeed, the therapist's input was motivational for teachers and classroom assistants alike.

We need to renew the focus on basic skills for all children, including communication, in order to provide the building-blocks to assist every child to get the best start in their education.

I am pleased that the Labour Party's consultation on children regards that as a key principle.

It is probable that all of us have direct knowledge of older people who have had communication difficulties following a stroke or because of a debilitating disease.

Their needs must also be met and not dismissed on the ground of age.

We should not rely solely on charitable funding, welcome though it is.

Groups such as the Parkinson's Disease Society provide huge support for sufferers and their carers, but we are planning for a great change in the demographics of Scotland.

That is another aspect that must be addressed, and I look forward to what the minister says about that. People have the right to communicate and the right to a voice—their own voice—wherever they live and whatever their age.

Members must join together to ensure that we are strong advocates of their cause.

WEBSITE LINKS

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