

Communication & Language

On reflection

How one nursery improved their support of children's communication and language skills as seen through the lens of the new Ofsted judgement 'Quality of education'. By Julie Kent, Caroline Farley and Sue Hobson

The introduction of a 'Quality of education' judgement in the new Education Inspection Framework (EIF) marks an encouraging move away from data-driven judgements towards to a more professional dialogue on inspection day and a focus on a setting's curriculum and quality of teaching.

Subdivided into three parts, the new judgement comprises Intent (principally curriculum), Implementation (curriculum delivery and pedagogy) and Impact (evaluation of outcomes).

For high-quality settings with strong reflective leadership, the new framework changes nothing. 'Best practice', underpinned by the principles of the EYFS, remains intact, while the new EIF provides reassurances that all elements of good practice in teaching and learning across the early years will continue to be recognised.

Weaker or less confident settings, however, will have to reflect on and improve their practice, and some key questions that will help them with that process are:

Intent What are your curriculum priorities specific to the needs of the children in your setting and how are you going to address them?

Implementation What strategies will you use to address your curriculum priorities and how will you ensure each practitioner understands and supports the intended learning approaches?

Impact How have the teaching and learning approaches in your setting improved the experiences and learning of children, within the environment and of staff?

What this process might look like in practice can be seen through the steady progress made in supporting the Communication and Language (C&L) skills of children at Loughborough Campus Nursery – an 102-place setting run by the University's Students' Union.

Progress of the team in this area has been tracked over several years and it is possible to see in their improvements, clear intent, consistent and careful implementation and a robust and reflective evaluation of impact. The nursery's focus on C&L is relevant for all settings as it is a priority area of learning within the new EIF. So too are the setting's approaches to leadership and training in identifying and embedding good practice strategies. As the new Ofsted early years handbook makes clear leaders are expected to: *'ensure that they and practitioners receive focused and highly effective professional development. Practitioners' subject, pedagogical content and knowledge consistently builds and develops over time, and this consistently translates into improvements in the teaching of the curriculum'* (page 41). **In their examination of effective setting leadership, Male and Palaiologou (2015) note the importance of the value setting leaders place on the learning and development of staff in order for good practice strategies to become embedded.**

INTENT

At the Loughborough Campus Nursery, leaders started the process of change by reflecting on their setting and identified C&L as being central to improving the nursery offer and outcomes, given the high numbers of children attending with EAL and/or identified communication needs. They found that their support of children's C&L skills was implemented and monitored inconsistently and was highly dependent on the individual practitioner, rather than being part of a strong nursery-wide approach.

To embed good communicative practice across the nursery, the leaders opted for a whole-setting approach, rather than the didactic, 'top-down' method employed in previous training sessions. This collegial style, where managers, practitioners and the trainer are learners together, irrespective of experience, seniority, prior learning and skill levels, has been identified as effective in delivering effective and ongoing change (Hobson and Farley in Kent and Moran 2019). Delivering change required the nursery to reflect not just on 'what we do' but also 'who we are'. To promote staff self-awareness and understanding, the nursery supported practitioners through:

- individualised approaches to teaching and learning
- ongoing training and mentoring, with the help of a specialist trainer/mentor, to reflect on their own communication and what communication means for children,
working collaboratively to develop their own and others practice, using non-confrontational strategies to support appreciation of other's, and their own skills, and
- peer assessment – a learning tool advocated by many influential early years practitioners (Nutbrown 2012). In this instance, the nursery used a format devised by the setting leadership and a specialist trainer.

The result has been a change of practitioner mindset and new ways of thinking, which are reflected practitioners' comments:

'We...talked about what communication meant to us. That was interesting what different people brought to that – that made quite an impact'

'Some staff approach me and say, I'm a bit unsure, can you advise me. They haven't been embarrassed – they're not afraid to talk to you now about it'

'At first people are a bit uncomfortable about being observed but once we've got across that we're not there to judge them we're there to teach them for the benefit of the children and for their learning.... they settle down'.

IMPLEMENTATION

Key communication strategies

Together the nursery team developed a series of strategies through which to improve their practice, principally to:

- Recognise good practice and be able to say why it's good
- Understand how to develop children's language for thinking
- Understand how to plan for and assess the development of children's language
- Know that learning English as an additional language differs from learning a single language and be able to support children with EAL
- Create a whole-setting environment that supports communication
- Create and use a bank of objects and visual prompts consistently with all children throughout the session
- Use a visual timetable in each room
- Create a bank of objects and visual prompts to support group singing and story times
- Participate in Positive Peer Observations effectively

Baseline

Before implementing change, it is important to establish how to judge progress and measure any impact. To establish a baseline of staff competency, the leaders and a specialist trainer/mentor first audited staff levels of engagement, practice and understanding of C&L against a range of indicators including:

- use of specific communication strategies
- level of adult language
- signing and

- symbol use

This exercise helped the team to recognise that learners:

- have different starting points, and
- may be unaware of their own level of competency and skills.

Group training sessions encouraged practitioners to value everyone's contribution to the setting and to celebrate existing good practice.

Individual support, with the trainer going at the practitioner's own pace, was used to identify, model and reinforce strategies for scaffolding children's C&L.

Alongside, the practice of peer observation has evolved slowly, starting with the appointment of a communication lead for the setting and for each room. However, all staff are now confident in carrying out and giving feedback on observations, which are carried out regularly and moderated by the communication leads.

Ongoing peer observations as part of a whole-setting approach:

- * has encouraged staff to prioritise C&L through the development of a 'communication-rich' environment for children
- * enables good practice to be shared and supported, and
- * ensures ongoing monitoring and assessment of staff, who hold each other to account when it came implementing the key communication strategies.

Talking about their improved levels of competence, staff noted:

'I feel a lot more confident talking to children. I feel as if I'm more equipped with the skills to help them'

'The song basket it's such a simple concept but it has so much impact....just to have the picture prompts and the prop involves the children and they get so excited'

'We're all working on it together'

'It's a whole-setting move forward – that's the difference'

IMPACT

It is vital to provide an evidence base for any ongoing changes to ways of working which is why it was a privilege to be able to support the setting to reflect on the changes to their practice. **The evidence from this case study research project clearly identifies changes to practice which have supported improvements in staff practice in C&L.**

We set up a focus group which helped the team to move beyond a 'checklist' of results to a more reflective approach to judging impact (see box).

A thematic analysis (Clarke and Braun 2017) of the focus group discussion identified a number of central themes which provided evidence of quality improvement across **the environment, relationships and practice.**

The qualitative findings show improvements in:

The C&L environment

'The lanyards especially – the other day a little girl was going through them on the carpet doing the actions – a little girl that I didn't expect it from'

'We get feedback from the parents about what the children have learnt, especially the songs'

'As soon as we get out the song basket the babies go straight to the blanket'

'Definitely for the children with additional needs – the pictures for coat on and coat off have helped and using first this and then that...they can accept what you're saying and understand it'

Relationships

'The repetition makes them feel comfortable'

'Last week we had a breakthrough with a child.... I got so emotional – it's really good'

*'A little girl with EAL. She still keeps her coat on 'cos that's her security blanket but last week in the friendship song she held hands'
'The skills have really helped me connect with the children more'*

Ways of working/practice

'Doing it in little stages gives you the time to get each bit embedded before you move to the others... and then reflecting on which bit worked. If we hadn't had time to reflect and trial things it would have been quite demoralising – if you think you've got a long way to go but we did a little bit and people started to embrace it'

IMPLICATIONS

The process of change at Loughborough Campus Nursery provides some important learning points for settings currently reflecting on Ofsted's expectations under the new framework:

- Teaching and learning approaches that work for children also work for adults and that the themes and principles of the EYFS could be applied to the CPD of the staff team.

A pedagogical approach (**Coughlin and Baird 2013**) understands the need for active learning, persistence and engagement as well as critical thinking which interrogates practice and informs capacity building within the workforce.

- Self-awareness of all staff and self-assessment are key for benchmarking and providing an insight into assessing progress and impact.
- Peer assessment, **accountability** and collegiality are vital for continuous improvement and ongoing challenge to implementation.
- Anning and Edwards' (2006) view is that 'Children learn to love learning through being with adults who also love to learn' (p145). As a result of careful reflection on learning and practice, it is possible to see how this setting continues to address the quality of the education within the nursery through intentional implementation and monitoring of approaches and strategies which support the enabling communication environment with a clear impact on staff and children alike.

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Box

C&L PRACTICE: BEFORE AND AFTER

Practice was inconsistent but now follows the same patterns in every room, allowing staff and children to transition easily between rooms and ensuring good practice across the nursery.

Practitioner language tended to be overcomplicated in structure, limited in range of vocabulary and used questioning most of the time. Now it is more thoughtful, involving comments far more than questions and employing a wider range of vocabulary appropriate to children's needs using strategies taught.

Planning for C&L was patchy and did not involve all staff. Now C&L is a strong and consistent thread throughout planning which is based on the 'Plan Do Review' model.

Communication between staff was limited and tended to focus on the practicalities of the daily routines rather than on the children's learning. Now it is much improved. Having communication leads in each room ensures practitioners discuss ideas, new learning, successes and challenges.

Team relationships were hampered by staff being protective of their own skills, and there was no process in place for sharing thoughts and ideas, creating a strong but unspoken sense of hierarchy in each room. There are now systems in place to share good practice and develop new ideas. The atmosphere is more open and appreciative of the skills of others and, in turn, children are more readily able to share their own successes and enthusiasms.

Visual prompts were not in evidence and the labelling of rooms was inconsistent or inappropriate. All staff are expected to wear and use lanyards of symbols to support language development and children's communication. Song baskets, objects of reference, choice boards and 'First and Then' boards are used appropriately.

Observations were handwritten, generally descriptive and lacked in-depth reflection on the individual child's communication needs. They are now online, shared regularly with parents and demonstrate an understanding of each child as well as a keen awareness and appreciation of how children learn and communicate. Planning is based on these observations and tailored to the child.

Staff confidence in their practice and interactions with children was lacking. Now they speak to the children confidently and listen to them attentively. In turn, children are happy to talk and communicate their own ideas with adults and other children.