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Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom

Case Studies from Early Years Settings in Plymouth

June 2023

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Introduction

What is SSLiC?

Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) is a knowledge exchange programme[1] that ultimately aims to improve communication and learning outcomes for all children. It seeks to achieve this aim by providing a forum for knowledge exchange between practitioners and researchers. There is a wealth of research in the area of speech, language and communication needs (SLCN), although there are still gaps in our understanding of how to apply this in practice in schools and the best ways to support school practitioners to embed communication in their school's policy and practice. If we, as practitioners and researchers, wish to see greater improvements in outcomes for all children starting in school and beyond, it is critical that we come together, over a sustained period of time, to investigate how the evidence base related to communication and oral language that does exist might be applied to a particular setting and then how this collective knowledge might be used to inform the wider community of 'what works' in schools for children.

To support this process the SSLiC programme has identified five evidence-informed domains around which schools can focus professional development and learning:

- Language Leadership
- Staff Professional Development and Learning
- Communication Supporting Classrooms
- Identifying and Supporting Speech, Language and Communication Needs
- Working with Others.

This report describes the activities, outcomes and learning from 9 early years settings and primary schools in Bristol across the 2022-2023 academic year. Each setting had access to research findings, a school self-assessment audit tool, an evidence-based classroom observation tool and received regular support from a facilitator with research and school practitioner backgrounds. All participants had the opportunity to share and evaluate their findings at the end of the academic year, the results of which have been published as case studies in this report.

Raising attainment for children with language difficulties

Raising attainment for all children is at the heart of education and research has shown how language difficulties may be correlated with future academic performance[2]. When considering academic attainment, research literature has pointed to children with language difficulties attaining less well in national tests than their typically developing peers (TDP), both at the end of Key Stage 2[3] and end of Key Stage 4[4,5]. Moreover, research into skills which are arguably necessary for classroom learning has shown some of the difficulties children with SCLN may have in acquiring those skills. Children with language difficulties, for example, have been shown to have difficulties with acquiring literacy skills[6], writing difficulties[7], difficulties with numeracy[8], working memory[9] and executive functioning skills[10]. Moreover, we know that there is a relationship between language difficulties and problems with behaviour, and the difficulties that children with SLCN experience with their social and emotional skills[11,12,13]. This is pertinent as research suggests that attainment is linked to positive social and emotional wellbeing[14]. The relationship between language and attainment is a complex one. SSLiC aims to foster a good language learning environment, and so provide support for literacy, support for learning and ultimately promote positive academic outcomes. Further, creating effective language learning environments can prepare children for the more challenging demands placed on oral language as they proceed through school, and can reduce the number of children experiencing SLCN.

2   Snowling, M. J., Hulme, C., Bailey, A. M., Stothard, S. E., & Lindsay, G. (2011). Better Communication Research Project: language and literacy attainment of pupils during early years and through KS2: does teacher assessment at five provide a valid measure of children's current and future educational attainments?

3   Conti-Ramsden, G., Botting, N., Knox, E., & Simkin, Z. (2002). Different school placements following language unit attendance: Which factors affect language outcome? International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders, 37(2), 185-195.

4   Dockrell, J., Lindsay, G., & Palikara, O. (2011). Explaining the academic achievement at school leaving for pupils with a history of language impairment: Previous academic achievement and literacy skills. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 27(2), 223-237.

5   Durkin, K., Simkin, Z., Knox, E., & Conti-Ramsden, G. (2009). Specific language impairment and school outcomes. II: Educational context, student satisfaction, and post-compulsory progress. International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders, 44(1), 36-55

6   Stothard, S. E., Snowling, M. J., Bishop, D., Chipchase, B. B., & Kaplan, C. A. (1998). Language-Impaired Preschoolers: A Follow-Up Into Adolescence. Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research, 41(2), 407-418.

7   Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Exploring writing products in students with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders. Learning and Instruction, 32, 81-90.

8   Harrison, L. J., McLeod, S., Berthelsen, D., & Walker, S. (2009). Literacy, numeracy, and learning in school-aged children identified as having speech and language impairment in early childhood. International Journal of Speech and Language Pathology, 11(5), 392-403.

9   Baddeley, A. (2003). Working memory and language: An overview. Journal of Communication Disorders, 36(3), 189-208.

10   Henry, L. A., Messer, D. J., & Nash, G. (2012). Executive functioning in children with specific language impairment. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 53(1), 37-45.

11   Bakopoulou, I., & Dockrell, J. E. (2016). The role of social cognition and prosocial behaviour in relation to the socio-emotional functioning of primary aged children with specific language impairment. Research in Developmental Disabilities, 49, 354-370.

12   Yew, S. G. K., & O'Kearney, R. (2013). Emotional and behavioural outcomes later in childhood and adolescence for children with specific language impairments: meta-analyses of controlled prospective studies. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 54(5), 516-524

13   Conti-Ramsden, G., & Botting, N. (2008). Emotional health in adolescents with and without a history of specific language impairment (SLI). Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 49(5), 516-525

14   Gutman, L. M., & Vorhaus, J. (2012). The impact of pupil behaviour and wellbeing on educational outcomes. Department for Education, London.

Case Studies

Beechwood Nursery

Working collaboratively with speech and language therapy to improve the confidence of early years professionals to support children's oral language

Research team and Setting

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Background

Beechwood Nursery at Beechwood Primary Academy is part of the Discovery Multi Academy Trust. It is based in an underprivileged area of north Plymouth. The school has a two-form entry and, in the academic year 2022-2023, there were 340 children on roll. 16.8% of the pupils at the school are on the Special Educational Needs and Disability register (SEND) with 45% having Communication and Interaction recorded as their primary need, a concern often cited in research as linked to poorer long-term outcomes[15]. 47% of pupils attending Beechwood Primary Academy are on the Pupil Premium register, and 11.9% of pupils speak English as Additional Language (EAL). Research[16,17,18] points to an association between poorer language skills with family socio-economic background, and English language learning[19], although there is variability in development within these populations.

The Nursery provision of the school includes a large indoor space and an outdoor area. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) provision is split between two classrooms which share a large outdoor area. All children have structured learning times and complete adult led activities alongside a continuous provision that supports their learning and development. There are 68 children in the EYFS of the school: 7.3% of children are EAL, and 18% of pupil receive SEN support. There is a high percentage of children who have Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN), and the school buy in support from an independent speech and language therapy company. Beechwood Primary Academy also benefit from professional development and learning opportunities provided by their local Speech and Language Therapy NHS service.

15   Conti-Ramsden, G., Durkin, K., Simkin, Z., & Knox, E. (2009). Specific language impairment and school outcomes. I: Identifying and explaining variability at the end of compulsory education. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 44(1), 15–35.

16   Ginsborg, J. (2006). The effects of socio-economic status on children's language acquisition and use. In J. Clegg. (Eds). *Language and social disadvantage: Theory into practice* (pp. 9–27). Wiley-Blackwell.

17   Hart, B., & Risley, T. R. (2003). The early catastrophe: The 30-million-word gap by age 3. American Educator, 27(1), 4–9.

18   Hoff, E. (2013). Interpreting the early language trajectories of children from low-SES and language minority homes: Implications for closing achievement gaps. Developmental Psychology, 49(1), 4–14.

19   Dockrell, J. E., Stuart, M., & King, D. (2011). Supporting early oral language skills for English language learners in inner city preschool provision. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 80(4), 497-515.

The SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit showed a number of strengths already exist in the setting. Firstly, the setting has a clear school philosophy of language learning as part of their School Improvement Plan. Given the very large number of children on Pupil Premium, the Communication Team wanted to work towards closing the attainment gap for all children. Research has repeatedly pointed to a disproportionate number of children in socially disadvantaged areas experiencing language difficulties, which can be up to 50% at school entry[20]. Research focusing on children entering nursery in socially disadvantaged areas has found similar prevalence despite other cognitive abilities being within the average range[21]. However, it is important to highlight that whilst a disproportionate number of children in socially disadvantaged areas experience language difficulties, there are also large numbers who do not[22].

The Communication Team also identified a need to upskill all staff so they can have an impact on children's learning. Teaching staff at Beechwood Academy have various levels of experience and so they aimed to develop a buddy system in order for new staff to work with more experienced staff. The SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit highlighted that there is a need to focus on professional development in the area of language and communication and a consistent approach to supporting language learning. Recent studies report on teachers feeling unprepared and lacking the skills and confidence in supporting children's language needs[23] and educational guidance[24] highlights the need for a balanced approach when planning and designing professional development opportunities in the early years.

The SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit also revealed that teachers, but not Teaching Assistants, have received training on supporting speech, language and communication needs. Given the close contact Teaching Assistants have daily with children, there was a need to support their professional development, so they feel confident to work with the children. The typical deployment and use of Teaching Assistants in schools has been found ineffective in leading to improvements in academic outcomes, with research pointing to the fact that Teaching Assistants are not adequately prepared for their role in classrooms[25]. However, recent education guidance strongly recommends that Teaching Assistants can effectively be used in delivering structured, evidence-based interventions with children with SEND if adequately supported and provided with professional development. In the same vein, research suggests that there are benefits from joint working between school staff (including class teachers and Teaching Assistants) and speech and language therapists (SaLT)[26] However, there are often constraints on SaLT and teaching staff time[27].

Finally, Beechwood has high numbers of children with identified SLNC who need to be supported within the context of the classroom. Fliss and Kayleigh recognised a need for all staff to feel confident implementing strategies and interventions recommended by the visiting SaLT. Assessment findings by the SaLT indicated a need to focus on vocabulary development for all children in the setting.

20   Law, J., Lindsay, G., Peacey, P., Gascoigne, M., Soloff, N., Radford, J.,Brand, S., and Fitzgerlad, L. (2000) Provision for children's speech and language needs in England and Wales: facilitating communication between education and health services. DfES research report 23.

21   Locke, A., Ginsborg, J., & Peers. I. (2002). Development and disadvantage: implications for the early years and beyond. International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 37 (1), 3-15.

22   Law, J., Todd., Clark, J., Mroz, M., & Carr, J. (2013), *Early Language delays in the UK*. Save the Children, London.

23   Dockrell, J., Ricketts, J., Charman, T., & Lindsay, G. (2014). Exploring writing products in students with language impairments and autism spectrum disorders. Learning and Instruction, 32, 81-90.

24   Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years (2023). Education Endowment Foundation.

25   Sharples, J., Webster, R., & Blatchford, P. (2021). Making Best Use of Teaching Assistants Guidance Report. Education Endowment Foundation.

26   Baxter, S., Brookes, C., Bianchi, K., R. and Hay, F. (2009) Speech and language therapists and teachers working together: Exploring the issues. Child Language Learning and Therapy, 25 (2)

27   Hartas, D. (2004). Teacher and speech-language therapist collaboration: Being equal and achieving a common goal? Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 20(1), 33-54.

What was done?

Beechwood decided to focus their SSLiC Project on the Nursery and EYFS provision of the school and created a Communication Team to share information about the SSLiC Programme amongst the rest of the EYFS teaching team. The Communication Team, with the support of the SSLiC Facilitator, created an Action Plan and aimed to meet fortnightly to monitor and review actions. Initial observations in the classroom were conducted by the Communication Team using the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)[28]. The observations helped to profile the language learning environments and highlighted strengths and areas for development that were then shared with the whole staff team. A number of actions were then considered as part of the Beechwood SSLiC Project:

Working collaboratively with the SaLT to increase staff confidence

The visiting SaLT created individual programmes for Teaching Assistants to follow when working with identified children. The SaLT also identified whole class targets for teaching staff to work on with all children.

In the Autumn Term, Fliss and Kayleigh conducted an initial survey using a rating scale called Staff Journey Measure (developed by Speech and Language UK) based on the Concerns-Based Adoption Model[29]. The instrument provides a conceptual framework for measuring the process of change when learners are asked to adopt and implement new ideas within their teaching practice. The tool was used to assess staff confidence in implementing strategies and interventions recommended by the SaLT. The Staff Journey Measure describes an adult's journey from learning about SLCN through to putting what they have learned into practice to demonstrate changes made in their everyday practice and interactions. The level of confidence reported by members of staff was variable but, overall, a need for further support to develop professional confidence was identified.

With the high number of children needing SLCN support, the team felt it was important for the whole staff team to feel confident in knowing how to support children to provide high-quality language learning opportunities and interactions. Following the survey results, the team organised fortnightly sessions for TAs to meet with the SaLT and to observe her working with children, so they felt confident carrying out highlighted strategies and the recommended interventions. Further professional development and learning needs were identified for some staff and the fortnightly sessions were used to offer a session on speech-sound development and ways to support children with difficulties (run by the setting's Communication Champions).

Developing the use of and understanding of topic vocabulary

The SSLiC Facilitator shared an evidence-based approach to whole class vocabulary learning, called Word Aware[30]. The Communication Team decided on a list of words to share with children when new topics were being introduced. Before starting a new topic, teaching staff baselined children's understanding of the words and repeated that 2 weeks after at the end of the topic. Also, to support children's understanding and learning of new topic words, the class teacher created a mind map with the children of current knowledge, and this was repeated at the end of the topic to assess progress made in children's understanding and knowledge of new vocabulary.

What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

Key findings of the Beechwood SSLiC Project indicated that staff welcomed the opportunity to work with the SaLT and to access regular professional development and learning opportunities. A Year 1 TA is now completing all the SaLT interventions on a one-to-one basis with the children in Reception class. She now has regular, planned opportunities to work collaboratively with the SaLT and reports

28   Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool.

29   Hord, S. M., Rutherford, W. L., Huling, L., & Hall, G. E. (2006; revised PDF version uploaded on Lulu.com, 2014). Taking charge of change. Austin, TX: SEDL. Available from http://www.sedl.org/pubs/catalog/items/cha22.html

30   Word Aware: http://thinkingtalking.co.uk/word-aware/word-aware-2/

more confident in her ability to support language learning needs. Due to the success of the project, Fliss and Kayleigh now plan for TAs to continue to have dedicated time for professional development and observations of the SaLT and they have protected a weekly session for this.

Using the Staff Journey Measure, staff were asked to assess their level of confidence in understanding SLCN following sessions with the SaLT. Analysis of the Staff Journey Measure indicates that, for some staff, their confidence in understanding SLCN and knowing how to follow and adapt approaches has increased.

Whole class vocabulary teaching for topics has improved children's use and understanding of key vocabulary. The pre and post mind maps show the children's developing knowledge and use of topic words. Fliss and Kayleigh plan to use pre and post checklists with individual children to monitor progress and they plan to develop their approach to whole class vocabulary teaching across Nursery and Reception.

At the end of the Beechwood SSLiC Project (May 2023), Fliss and Kayleigh conducted final observations using the CSCOT to focus on the Language Learning Opportunities and language Learning Interactions dimensions of the tool and to mark any changes made as a result of the SSLiC Project. The observations demonstrated positive changes to the Language Learning Interactions dimension of the CSCOT (5/100 initially compared to 78/100 at the end of the project). Staff were also observed to provide more opportunities for children to engage in structured opportunities with their peers.

Key learning

There were a number of successes highlighted throughout the Beechwood SSLiC Project and an emerging model of collaborative working between professionals. It has been invaluable for the staff team at Beechwood to have protected time to observe the school SaLT deliver sessions with children and to have the opportunity to ask her questions and learn from her. The Communication Team has noticed a positive impact on the confidence of team members and their ability to deliver similar interventions with children. As one practitioner said *"You have the training, if you don't use it, you just forget"*. Being able to observe and work with a SaLT has allowed staff to understand what they are being asked to do with children in their individual sessions.

Challenges continue as to how to further embed this practice, as constraints on SaLT and teacher time were highlighted, and this can be a major barrier to collaborative working[31]. Further, such barriers to sustaining change can lead to uncomfortable feelings which may result in an implementation dip and a reversal back to more familiar, comfortable working practices[32]. However, through continuing to develop a shared language of support and through gaining further evidence of how SaLT input can be applied within the classroom setting, and the positive outcomes that can arise from SaLTs providing more frequent in-direct work, this can generate a powerful force for change.

31   Hartas, D. (2004). Teacher and speech-language therapist collaboration: Being equal and achieving a common goal? Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 20(1), 33-54.

32   Fullan, M. (2014). Leading in a culture of change personal action guide and workbook. John Wiley & Sons

The Cabin

Creating an early years environment that supports and encourages the development of good oral language skills

Research Team and setting

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Background

The Cabin has three settings (Barn Park, YMCA and Tamar View) in areas of high deprivation, and all have high numbers of children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). The team had noticed the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns on children's language levels and interactions joining their settings, which research suggests is a common concern for many early years professionals given children of all ages have been deprived of daily conversations, disrupting opportunities to develop essential skills in speaking and understanding[33,34,35].

Barn Park Nursery is in an area of social deprivation, caring for children of mixed ages and numbers range from 30-36 children. The nursery team consists of a total of 10-12 staff members. There is a high number of children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) attending the nursery and children with English as an Additional Language (EAL). The Cabin YMCA is in an area of deprivation and 90% of children have funded places, with a teaching team of 11 members of staff. There are 70 children attending the nursery from 17 months to 4 years. Nursery staff have noticed an increase in the number of children with SLCN (11 out of 45), children on Pupil Premium (18 out 45), and children with SEND (18 out of 45) over the last couple of years. Finally, Tamar View Nursery is situated in the Barne Barton area of Plymouth, also an area of high deprivation and social disadvantage. The Nursery team consists of 10 staff members. At present, there are 45 children on the register, with 21 two-year-olds and 24 three- and four-year-olds. There are 12 children (out of 45) with SEND, the majority having difficulties in the areas of language and social communication. Research has shown that language at two years predicts reading, maths and writing when children start school[36], and so the teaching staff were motivated to engage with the SSLiC Programme.

33   https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/media/3753/speaking-up-for-the-covid-generation-i-can-report.pdf Speech and Language UK (2022). Speaking up for the Covid generation.

34   Tracey, L., Bowyer-Crane, C., Bonetti, S., Nielsen, D., D'Apice, K. and Compton, S. (2022). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Socio-Emotional Wellbeing and Attainment during the Reception Year. Research Report. Education Endowment Foundation.

35   Bakopoulou, I. (2022). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on early years transition to school in the UK context. Education 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2022.2114807.

36   Roulstone, S., Law, J., Clegg, J & Peters, T. (2011) Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes. Department for Education Research Report DfE-RR134.

In 2022, The Cabin settings completed the Communication and Interaction Universal Provision Checklist section of the Plymouth Graduated Approach to Inclusion (GATI)[37]. This is a tool to support early years practitioners and setting leaders to identify, assess and record the needs of children requiring additional needs or special education provision. Analysis of the results highlighted strengths in the setup of learning environments and identified areas requiring development relating to the language learning interactions provided by adults (including, adults modelling and extending language, using more comments than questions, and providing opportunities for conversations). Research suggests that a key theoretical underpinning of language acquisition is the role socially meaningful interactions play in supporting early language development, and that adults in educational settings have a key role in scaffolding classroom interactions[38].

In order to support change across the three Cabin settings, a Communication Team was established with representatives from each of the 3 settings. Analysis of the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit identified well developed practices in two domains of the Audit: Language Leadership and Identifying and Supporting SLCN. However, there was an acknowledgement that there is a need for all staff to understand how to create strong language environments by using language learning interaction techniques and providing high-quality opportunities for language and communication, a development area that corresponded with the findings of the GATI.

The SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit also pointed to the fact that, although nursery staff have access to a range of good opportunities for staff professional development and learning (for example, access to Noodle, that offers online training modules), there were less regular mentoring opportunities and a system of peer observations to support good quality practice

in relation to children's language development amongst members of the nursery staff. Research[39] suggests that observational learning (and discussion around these observations) can support practitioners in developing ways of talking with children to enhance the children's oral language. In the same vein, studies[40] have also shown that observational tools can be used to provide a framework to structure feedback and encourage discussion about classroom practice. In addition to this, the Cabin Communication Team wished to ensure that new members of staff and apprentices understand the approaches being used in the nurseries to provide high quality interactions and have support in place for them to learn from more experienced members of staff. Therefore, the Cabin SSLiC Project focused on developing systems of providing staff with regular mentoring opportunities and peer observations.

What was done?

At the heart of this project was the desire to develop a clear process in order to lay strong foundations to support professional development, with a focus on developing interactions to extend children's language. A number of actions were carried out:

Developing interactions to extend children's language.

At the beginning of the SSLiC Project, the Communication Team used the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)[41] to make observations in each other's settings and profile classroom environments. Analysis of the CSCOTs identified many strengths in the dimension of the Language Learning Environment. The areas for development identified included increasing Language Learning Opportunities and Language Learning Interactions. Although there was evidence of some good practice, there was also acknowledgement that language learning interaction techniques were not used

37 https://www.plymouthonlinedirectory.com/media/2152/Graduated-Approach-to-Inclusion-Early-Years-Foundation-Stage/pdf/Plymouth_EY_Graduated_Approach_To_Inclusion.pdf?m=637193838428630000

38 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 31(3), 1-16.

39 Girolametto, L., Weitzman, E., & Greenberg, J. (2003). Training day care staff to facilitate children's language. American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology, 12(3), 299-311.

40 Law, J., Tulip, J., Stringer, H., Cockerill, M., & Dockrell, J., (2019). Teachers observing classroom communication: An application of the Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool for children aged 4-7 years. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 35(2), 203-220.

41 Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct_bcrp_csc_final.pdf.

consistently and by all members of the nursery team, an issue also widely observed in research[42]. There was also a wish to develop staff confidence in using more advanced language learning interaction techniques.

Following the observations, the Communication Team members in each setting introduced the SSLIC Programme in a staff meeting and shared analysis of the CSCOT findings, ensuring all staff members understand what the strengths of each setting are and what are the identified areas for development.

The SSLiC Facilitator shared evidenced based strategies of different ways to focus on language learning interactions, including the ShREC approach, which aims to provide early years professionals with a simple and memorable set of specific evidence informed strategies that can be embedded into everyday practice[43]. The Communication Team shared additional tools and resources with their respective staff teams and used the CSCOT observations to identify a monthly Language Learning Interaction technique as a target. Research has shown that the ways adults talk with children can enhance children's expressive and receptive language skills[44]. Interactions which include modelling of target words, expanding the utterance and recasting are thought to lead to faster language acquisition and competence in the use of strategies such as extending, labelling and scripting are fundamental to providing high quality verbal input[45].

Increasing peer mentoring opportunities

The Communication Team aimed to support all staff to use high quality interaction techniques with children by utilising the Language Learning Interaction section of the CSCOT to observe and monitor their interactions. The Communication Team was keen to explore different ways to share the monthly targets with all staff, including part-time and casual staff. This included using staff WhatsApp groups, sharing the Language Learning Interaction monthly target on the settings' shared

Facebook page and putting up posters in the settings to remind staff of the monthly target. All staff were encouraged to use the CSCOT as a peer observation tool and review the findings at each planned staff meeting.

Finally, based on regular observations using the CSCOT, further professional development and learning needs were identified (for example, use of gestures and signs), and the Communication Team was able to recommend free online modules for all staff to complete within a given time frame.

What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

The Communication Team found that having a monthly focused Language Learning Interaction technique target helped to keep strategies in the staff's minds. Repeat observations carried out by the Communication Team using the CSCOT at the end of The Cabin SSLiC Project showed a more consistent and increased use of Language Learning Interactions as well as more opportunities for children to engage in structured conversations with adults.

Results demonstrated that the SSLiC Project has had a positive impact in increasing understanding amongst nursery staff as to how children develop their receptive and expressive language skills and the ways the adults can monitor classroom interactions and respond by altering the classroom context to support the development of oracy skills. Observational learning and mentoring was the key approach used in The Cabin SSLiC Project to improve adult behaviour when interacting with children, an approach increasingly supported by research and educational policy[46]. The CSCOT provided nursery staff with a complementary approach to universal intervention where they could observe each other's settings, and the evidence produced was used to set targets and develop new

42   Dockrell, J., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2015). Capturing communication supporting classrooms: The development of a tool and feasibility study. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 31(3), 1-16.

43   Education Endowment Foundation (2018) Preparing for Literacy: Improving Communication, Language and Literacy in the Early Years', London: Education Endowment Foundation Report.

44   Dickinson, D.K., Hofer, K.G., Barnes, E.M., & Grifenhagen, J.F(2014). Examining teachers' language in Head Start classrooms from a Systemic Linguistics Approach. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 29(3), 231-244

45   Chapman, R.S. (2000). Children's language learning: An interactionist perspective. The Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, 41 (1), 33-54

46   Education Endowment Foundation (2023). Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years.

approaches. Research[47] points to the CSCOT clearly having utility as a starting point in auditing classroom communication by allowing teachers to compare between classrooms and year groups and potentially foster collaborations between teachers.

Key learning

Despite many challenges at The Cabin during their SSLiC Project, all three settings have observed noticeable changes in the language learning opportunities offered to children and the language learning interaction techniques used. Key to the success has been selecting small achievable aims each month and revisiting strategies to ensure they are embedded across the team. The Communication Team acknowledged that empowering staff to follow new approaches takes time and not all come along at the same pace. The need to revisit techniques and strategies has been highlighted, aligning with guidance from key educational reports suggesting treating implementation of educational projects as a process, not a one-off event[48].

A future plan for The Cabin settings is to use CSCOT as a peer review tool, so all staff have opportunities to review and develop their practice and carry out peer observations as part of a new buddy system. The challenge now will be to maintain the process and sustain the improvements over time in a continuous cycle of regularly monitoring and reviewing professional development and providing appropriate support to all staff as they move forward.

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47   Law, J., Tulip, J., Stringer, H., Cockerill, M., & Dockrell, J. (2019). Teachers observing classroom communication: An application of the Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool for children aged 4-7 years. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 35(3), 203-220.

48   Education Endowment Foundation (2019) Putting Evidence to Work - A School's Guide to Implementation | EEF (educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk) accessed 5th June 2023.

Plym Bridge and Ham Drive Nursery School and Day Care

A whole setting approach to staff development and training by bringing the whole team along.

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Plym Bridge Nursery School and Day Care

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Background

Plym Bridge and Ham Drive Nursery schools form the Plymouth Nursery Schools Federation and are part of the IDEAL Federation which hosts the South West Early Years Stronger Practice Hub. The Early Years South West Stronger Practice Hub aims to support other early years settings and childminders to improve outcomes for all children across the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The Early Years South West Stronger Practice Hub focuses on areas of development most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic informed by research.

The Plymouth Early Years Speech and Language Specialist Support team are based within Plym Bridge, and both settings have Communication Champions assigned in them. Supporting children's speech and language development has been a main priority in the Nursery Development Plan for over 3 years.

The table below shows the distribution of children by setting

Setting overview	Number of children	% SEND	Total % SLCN (as primary need)	Total % EAL
Ham Drive Nursery (3-4)	62	21%	11%	8%
Ham Drive Day Care (2-3)	30	30%	20%	23%
Plym Bridge Nursery (3-4)	48	32%	23%	6%
Plym Bridge Day care (0-3)	38	13%	11%	5%

As part of the SSLiC Project, Plym Bridge and Ham Drive Nurseries chose to work together and created a Communication Team with representatives from the Nursery and Day Care from both settings. Analysis of the SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit revealed that most domains were well developed or being developed. However, the Staff Professional Development and Learning domain of the Audit was identified as an area of work. Although supporting children's speech and language development and understanding about Speech, Language and Communication Needs (SLCN) has been a prominent part of professional development activities in both settings, there was an acknowledgment from nursery staff that, recently, there have been a number of staff changes in both settings, and this meant that not all staff have accessed the same training opportunities leading to inconsistencies in the settings' language provision. The importance of the adult role is well documented in research[49] and a common theme is one of educational practitioners not feeling adequately skilled and lacking in the knowledge and understanding to meet children's language learning needs[50,51]. A focus on creating systems of support and professional development was therefore decided to be the main focus for the Plym Bridge and Ham Drive SSLiC Project.

What was done?

Systematically identifying professional development and learning needs

A key focus for the SSLiC Project was the desire to equip all staff with the skills and knowledge to support children's language throughout the day. Research has pointed to the implementation of a whole setting approach to supporting SLCN as being well regarded by teaching staff [52]. In order to systematically review professional development needed, the team used simplified questionnaires (Skills and Knowledge Questionnaires) based on the Speech Language and Communication Framework[53] to audit professional development needs of three different staff groups: a) newly qualified early years staff (the audit baselined their knowledge of foundation and universal support, their awareness of speech, language and communication development and SLCN), b) experienced staff (the audit baselined their knowledge of enhanced support including more specialist learning around supporting speech, language and communication development as well as identifying and supporting SLCN) and c) senior leaders and special education needs coordinators (SENCos) (the audit baselined their knowledge of specialist support including the skills and knowledge needed by those with a significant role in identifying and supporting children with SLCN and supporting other practitioners).

49   Hoff, E. (2003). The specificity of environmental influence: Socioeconomic status affects early vocabulary development via maternal speech. Child Development, 74, 1368-1378

50   Dockrell, J.E., Howell, P., Leung, D., & Fugard, A.J. (2017). Children with speech, language and communication needs in England: Challenges for practice. Frontiers in Education, 2, 35.

51   Dockrell, J.E., Hurry, J. (2018). The identification of speech and language problems in elementary school: Diagnosis and co-occurring needs. Research on Developmental Disabilities. 81, 52-64.

52   Leyden, J. Stackhouse, J., Szczerbinski, M. (2011). Implementing a whole school approach to support speech, language and communication: Perceptions of key staff. Child Language Teaching and Therapy, 27 (2), 203-222.

53   https://www.slcframework.org.uk

The Communication Team analysed the results and used them together with the findings from the Language Learning Interactions dimension of the Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool (CSCOT)[54] to identify professional development and training needs across the three groups. Staff in-service training was then organized for all three groups tailored to each groups' professional development needs. Following completion of the in-service training sessions, all staff were asked to complete pre- and post-training evaluations created by the Communication Team that aimed to assess the impact of training received.

Development of an induction pack for new staff and introduction of a mentoring system with a focus on communication and interaction

The SSLiC Facilitator shared free resources and training available for early years practitioners from Speech and Language UK[55,56,57], based on which, the Communication Team created an induction pack for new staff joining the nurseries which included strategies to support high quality interactions and a video recording of all the strategies shared at the in-service training. It was also decided that a buddy system would be developed that could act as a mentoring system for new members of staff with a specific focus on communication and interaction.

What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

Results from the initial CSCOT observations highlighted a need to focus on ensuring all staff consistently engage in high quality interactions with children throughout all areas of the provision. Pockets of high-quality interactions were observed but not with all staff and not consistently. This was particularly evident with newer, less experienced members of the team.

The Plym Bridge and Ham Drive SSLiC Project was evaluated in three different ways:

A) Speech Language and Communication Framework Skills and Knowledge questionnaires

The Speech Language and Communication Framework Skills and Knowledge questionnaires were repeated at the end of the SSLiC Project. Analysis of the questionnaires showed an increase in practitioner knowledge across the three staff groups. Newly qualified staff reported an increase in their knowledge of foundation and universal support and their overall awareness of speech, language and communication development and SLCN. Similarly, experienced staff showed an improvement in their knowledge of enhanced support as well as their awareness of identifying and supporting SLCN. Finally, senior leaders reported an increase in their knowledge of specialist support of children with identified needs and supporting other practitioners.

B) Staff self-evaluations following in-service training

Staff were asked to complete evaluations before and following the targeted in-service training provided to the three groups. Analysis of these self-evaluations were overwhelmingly positive across all three staff groups. Staff confidence in understanding the communication chain, overall awareness of typical speech and language development in early years and in knowing how to support quality interactions all showed increases.

C) Repeat classroom observations using the CSCOT

Initial scores on the Language Learning Interaction dimension of the CSCOT for Plym Bridge were 45 out of 100 and repeat observations at the end of the SSLiC Project showed a 43% increase (86/100). Similar improvements were observed in Ham Drive Nursery moving from 52 to 95 out of 100 (41% increase).

54   Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/for-professionals/the-communication-trust/more-resources/classroom-supporting-tool/.

55   https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/talking-point/cpd-online-short-course/

56   https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/eysend/

57   https://speechandlanguage.org.uk/media/3224/tct_univspeak_0-5_update.pdf

Key learning

The Plym Bridge and Ham Drive SSLiC Project has demonstrated the importance of adopting a whole team approach in supporting professional development so that the teaching team feel empowered to create a strong language provision in their settings. Staff at Plym Bridge and Ham Drive Nurseries adopted a 'balanced approach' to professional development that encompassed four key areas: building knowledge; motivating educators; developing teaching techniques; and embedding new learning into everyday practice[58].

The Communication Team acknowledged the challenge of providing professional development and learning opportunities that are tailored to the needs of all staff based on careful auditing of existing strengths and areas for further development. Importantly, the team recognised the strength of using robust, repeatable and evidence-based tools and audits (such as the Speech Language and Communication Framework and the CSCOT) to inform professional development opportunities.

Involving the whole staff team in the journey to ensure a collaborative approach to developing practice and confidence remains a priority for practitioners in Plym Bridge and Ham Drive Nurseries, who strongly believe that a quality learning experience for children requires a quality workforce. Importantly, there is an acknowledgement that well-qualified and skilled early years practitioners strongly increase the potential of their settings to deliver the best outcomes for children[59].

Following the success of the SSLiC Project, the Communication Team are planning to introduce regular observations to ensure continual development of practice and foster consistency of practice. Professional development that is centred around ongoing, high-quality professional conversations that enable early years professionals to review, reflect on, and develop professional practice will further support the effective implementation of educational programmes and activities (such as the SSLiC Programme) and their sustainability in the future[60].

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58   Education Endowment Foundation (2023). Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years.

59   DfE (2021). Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (3.21, p.26)

60   Education Endowment Foundation (2021). Putting Evidence to Work – A school's guide to implementation.

Bright Stars Nursery

Developing parental engagement by sharing book packs at home
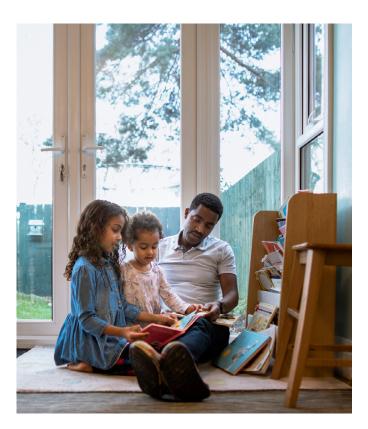
Research Team and Setting

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Background

Bright Stars is in a suburban area of Plymouth. The Nursery offers places for 2-4 year olds and currently caters for low numbers of children with English as an Additional Language (EAL) and special educational needs and disability (SEND). However, the staff team noticed that, following the Covid-19 pandemic, the children starting at the nursery had lower speech, language and communication levels, a concern also reported in recent studies[61,62]. The main priority for the setting was to re-engage with parents following the Covid-19 lockdowns and the imposed changes to the way parents visited the setting.

A Communication Team was set up that included members of the nursery's Senior Leadership Team. The SSLiC Facilitator supported the Communication Team to review the result of their SSLiC Self-Assessment School Audit and identify priorities to work on. The Audit highlighted a need to re-engage with parents and support stronger parental involvement, pointing to a need to support parents with language learning opportunities at home. Education guidance emphasises the role parents play in supporting their children's learning demonstrating that levels of parental engagement are consistently associated with better academic outcomes[63]. Therefore, the Communication Team chose to focus their SSLiC Project on supporting parents' understanding of how to provide language learning opportunities with a particular focus on sharing books at home. Repeatedly, research studies highlight the benefits of encouraging parents to read books at home with their children demonstrating that children who read regularly with an adult in the preschool years learn language faster, enter school with a larger vocabulary and become more successful readers in school[64]. When parents share books with young children, this has a significant impact on their language development, particularly their understanding of vocabulary[65].

61   Tracey, L., Bowyer-Crane, C., Bonetti, S., Nielsen, D., D'Apice, K. and Compton, S. (2022). The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Children's Socio-Emotional Wellbeing and Attainment during the Reception Year. Research Report. Education Endowment Foundation.

62   Bakopoulou, I. (2022). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on early years transition to school in the UK context. Education 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2022.2114807.

63   van Poortvliet, M., Axford, N., & Lloyd, J. (2021). Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning Guidance Report. Education Endowment Foundation.

64   Mol, S.E., Bus, A.G., De Jong, M.T., Smeets, D.J.H., (2008) Added value of dialogic Parent-Child Book readings: A meta-analysis. Early Education and Development, 19(1), 7-26.

65   Law, J., Charlton, J., McKean, C., Beyer, F, Fernandez-Garcia, C., Mashaveskhi, A., & Ruṣh, R. (2018). Parent-child reading to improve language development and school readiness: A systematic review and meta-analysis. Nuffield research project.

The Communication Team reported that during nursery observations, staff had noticed that some children didn't know nursery rhymes or how to join in during book time, a concern also shared by recent educational research[66]. Therefore, the Communication Team decided to focus their SSLiC Project on providing more interactive book reading opportunities at Nursery, which also aligns with recent early years education guidance that shows that interactive book reading and modelling vocabulary can have a 'very high impact' of up to 7 months on children's learning[67].

What was done?

Parents know how to provide language learning opportunities including how to share books at home.

The Communication Team chose an initial group of parents to work with and created an initial questionnaire to find out how often parents shared books at home and asked if they would like some ideas and tips on sharing books to develop interaction and language skills. The Bright Stars Communication Team met to review the results and selected a pilot group of parents to work with.

The Communication Team researched different ways to share packs and decided on key strategies and top tips to share with parents. They then created a handout with guidance for parents about how to share and read books at home and this was added to the book packs[68,69,70]. The guidance included ideas of key vocabulary to focus on for each of the books and different ways to extend and develop their child's language. A comments page was added to the handout to encourage parents to record their views on the book sharing.

The Communication Team created and shared book packs for 2 ages of children (2–3-year-olds and 3-4 year olds).

Example of a book pack and handouts.

Staff know how to create opportunities for children to engage in interactive book reading and ways to extend the language learning opportunities they provide.

The Communication Team completed the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT)[71] in the nursery classrooms which indicated a need for staff to develop their own understanding of strategies and techniques for effective interactive book reading. The Communication Team shared the parent book packs with staff and led a short session to highlight interactive book sharing ideas, reminding staff of key techniques to use during book sharing (such as pacing, pausing, commenting and expanding). The SSLiC Facilitator shared with staff research articles on dialogic reading styles to develop their understanding of the importance of interactive book reading and appropriate strategies[72,73]. In the Nursery, staff shared the same books given to parents and engaged children in regular interactive book reading opportunities to embed the learning.

66   Bakopoulou, I. (2022). The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on early years transition to school in the context of the UK. Education 3-13, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2022.2114807.

67   Education Endowment Foundation (2023). Early Years Evidence Store. Communication and Language. Accessed 7th June 2023.

68   Hanen Book Nook

69   National Literacy Trust. How to share books and talk together.

70   National Literacy Trust. Engaging Parents. A resource for Teachers.

71   Dockrell, J.E., Bakopoulou, I., Law, J., Spencer, S., & Lindsay, G. (2012). Communication Supporting Classroom Observation Tool. Freely available from: https://www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/93866/tct_bcrp_csc_final.pdf. Accessed 5th June 2023

72   Mol, S., A., & de Jong, M. (2009). Interactive book reading in early education: A tool to stimulate print knowledge as well as oral language. Review of Educational Research, 79, 979-1007.

73   Hargrave, A.C., Senechal. M. (2000). A book reading intervention with preschool children who have limited vocabularies: The benefits of regular reading and dialogic reading. Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 15, 75-90.

In addition, specific learning areas were created that relate to the book packs and staff created spaces for children to act out the story using puppets, toys and other props. Staff regularly joined children in these areas to reinforce language by modelling and extending language from the selected books. Story shelves have been set up and activities to develop ideas from the stories and encourage use of vocabulary have been created in the setting e.g., zoo scenes set up (based on the Gorilla book). Nursery staff have also planned craft activities linked to the focused story. The Communication Team encouraged each member of staff to create story packs so that everyone takes ownership and becomes involved. To further celebrate books and develop a buzz about books, the Communication Team led a session with the children talking about libraries. Following that, the Communication Team created library cards for early years children and visited the library providing more opportunities to excite children about book reading.

What were the findings and outcomes of the project?

The initial parental questionnaires highlighted that parents were reading regularly to children at home, but they would also value advice on ways to support their children's language development at home. Questionnaires completed by parents after they had used the packs demonstrated that the book packs have been a helpful tool for parents, offering practical ways parents can support their children at home. For example, parents commented *"it has been helpful to have the vocabulary to remind us to use new words regularly, outside of just reading them the book."* Staff have commented that the link between home and setting was strengthened as a result of book sharing as children appeared to know and comment on the books more.

Finally, nursery staff report observable change in the number of conversations between the children and adults and interactions between children are also developing, particularly in the book topics areas. Repeated observations using the Language Learning Opportunities and Language Learning Interactions domains of the CSCOT show very positive changes at the end of the SSLiC Project (from 14/25 to 22/25 in LLO and from 58/100 to 82/100 in LLI).

Key learning

A key learning point from the Bright Starts SSLiC Project has been the importance of reflective practice and the need to bring the whole team together to effect and drive change, by creating a sense of positivity to encourage the engagement of all staff.

There were a number of successes from this project, particularly improving engagement with parents, so that children experience language learning opportunities across environments. The results indicated that parents were keen to know about ways to support their children at home. The project also provided an opportunity for staff to reflect on their current practice, develop more strategies in interactive book reading and providing high quality language learning opportunities during book sharing.

Following the success of the SSLiC Project, the Communication Team are planning to develop a wider range of book packs and offer them to all parents at nursery. Plans include extending the book pack range and creating new packs for different ages with a different focus. For practitioners at Bright Stars Nursery, the positive impact of interactive book reading is indisputable as an approach to improve language and communication in the early years. The challenge now will be to sustain this change and to further develop their practice.

Conclusion

The participants in the SSLiC programme implemented a variety of changes in their early years settings at pupil, practitioner and setting levels. At the pupil level, initiatives included a more tailored and individualised support of identified SLCN. At practitioner and setting levels, some of the participants used the SSLiC programme as a springboard in their setting to enhance staff understanding of language development, further support professional development and effect systemic setting changes in assessing and identifying language needs as well as working collaboratively with parents and external professionals. Ultimately, all participants reported that they used the SSLiC programme to raise the profile of the importance of oral language for children's educational attainment. One of the aims of the SSLiC programme is to continue to support developments in practice after the programme has ended through ongoing review of the self-assessment audit and action plan. All of the early years settings in the SSLiC programme have continued with their focus on the projects described in this publication and in doing so are ensuring that their work contributes to the wider evidence base for supporting pupils with SLCN.

Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) is a knowledge exchange programme that aims to support the development of practice in schools and to expand the evidence base to ultimately improve outcomes for children with speech, language and communication needs.

University of BRISTOL

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