

Experiences of the implementation of an early years communication improvement model: Speech and Language Therapist and Early Years practitioner perspectives and implications for practice.

Julie Kent and Sarah McDonald. Nottingham Trent University.

Spring edition 2019

The issue of speech, language and communication (SLC) delays in children has been a consistent but growing concern in education and is increasingly recognised as a public health issue, with the recognition that early SLC difficulties can result in long-term disadvantage (Law et al., 2017).

ICAN (2006) reported on surveys of school staff showing the belief that 50% of children UK-wide start school lacking the skills that are vital for an effective start to learning. These skills include SLC, affecting educational outcomes and long-term life chances and the report highlighted the need for skills development in the area of SLC for the whole Early Years (EY) workforce. These concerns were consolidated more systematically in the Bercow Review (2008).

A response to this review and its findings was the development and implementation of the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme in 2008. ECAT involved the cascaded delivery of training to staff in EY settings to develop their knowledge and skills in the area of SLC needs.

In her evaluation of the ECAT programme, McLeod (2011) recognised the ongoing crucial necessity for skilled carers and educators, facilitated by high-quality training in the area of SLC. More recent research continues to suggest that language promoting strategies may not be well understood by EY Educators (Goouch and Powell 2013) and that, within early years settings environmental features may continue to constrain SLC development (Degotardi and Gill 2017). Hence, there is clearly a need for continuing staff development in the area of SLC, particularly in the EY where a child's needs may be initially identified and supported.

Funding for ECAT was pulled after two years, despite evidence for its effectiveness (Gross 2011), and no national scheme was offered in its place. It is perhaps unsurprising that in Bercow: Ten Years On (ICAN, 2018), Bercow suggests that: "Understanding of speech, language and communication should be embedded in initial qualifications and continuing professional development for all relevant practitioners"(p 31).

In the face of the demise of central government support, local programmes started to be implemented, some of which met a similar fate due to a lack of sustainable funding. There has been a loss of a central evidence base and a fragmentation of good practice in some areas. Other local programmes such as

the Language Lead Approach discussed here have been maintained successfully for over a decade. We explore some of the reasons why here, as seen by those implementing the approach which involves a graded package of support and training for EY practitioners, delivered by an SLT to support the delivery of a universal SLT service to the setting involved and, consequently, to enhance the SLC provision for children in that setting.

Background to the LL approach.

The Language Lead (LL) approach was developed by the Nottinghamshire Child and Families Partnership Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) service in 2008 as a delivery model for their universal community SLT provision across the county. There has been a gradual roll out of the approach and there are now more than 150 LLs in early years settings across Nottinghamshire, supported by a named SLT. The package was designed to suit the context, based on the combined knowledge of SLTs, EY settings and commissioners, which, using additional evidence from research findings, was pulled together by the SLT service. Whilst written and shaped by the SLT service, this was and remains a cooperative approach.

In practice, the LL approach was designed to move beyond a cascade model of training to a training, support and professional development model where an identified practitioner took and developed the LL role in their setting. This individual had access to a structured package of ongoing support and development from the community SLT team in the County which included access to an accreditation, termly network meetings and a toolkit of specially developed SLC resources to use within the setting.

Aims of the LL approach

- To improve communication environments in educational settings
- To identify and support children with higher SLC needs
- To improve communication practices within early years settings for all children.

Research project

The research was undertaken in response to a request from the local SLT service as part of their review of provision for children in EY settings across Nottinghamshire. It involved open interviews with LLs and SLTs in Nottinghamshire who were recruited voluntarily. The researchers recognised that because the participants were self-selecting they were, therefore, most likely to be the most engaged practitioners in the process of implementing and applying the LL approach. Interviews used semi-structured questions about the implementation and application of the LL approach. The interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clark 2006).

Research aims

1. To understand the perceived value of the LL approach by staff from both areas.
2. To identify the shared understanding/recognition of barriers and enablers to effective progression of the approach.
3. To analyse the expectations of SLTs and EY practitioners and to consider any mismatch in how the approach is perceived by different professionals in the implementation of the approach.
4. To examine the role of leadership in supporting the model in practice.

Research findings and implications for practice

The findings from the research provide some useful insights for collaborative practice in the area of supporting children's SLC needs and staff development in this significant area of children's learning and development.

1. Crucially staff from both areas noted the value of the LL approach. The influence of LL within the setting was evidenced in improvements in the communication environment of settings, increased relevance of referrals to SLT team, EY staff undertaking accreditation in the area of SLC and better dialogue between setting practitioners and SLTs. In particular this dialogic relationship between SLT and setting staff was commented on by participants; LLs described building relationships with the SLTs through the network meetings and of finding them reliable for help and SLTs noted the more informal links in Children's Centres as being helpful to communication between the LL and the SLT, moving beyond formal referral routes into the SLT services.
2. There was a shared recognition of some of the barriers to effective progression of the approach which echoed Payler and Georgeson's 2013 research into the wide variation in confidence and competence in inter-professional working. Development of the approach was found to be dependent on staff experience and type of setting, for example, SLTs in particular noted the difference in the way the LLs worked depending on the organisational context and culture, with private nurseries or pack away settings having a higher turnover of staff making the interprofessional relationship more difficult to establish. For example, SLTs suggested that a "more settled staff team" (SLT05) was a support to implementation. The success of the approach was also seen to be dependent on the individual qualities of the LL with both SLTs and LLs expressing varying levels of confidence in the ability of the language "champion" to effectively embrace and implement their role (Law and Pagnamenta 2017). Along with the personal qualities and confidence of the LL, time was clearly identified by LLs and SLTs as probably the most significant barrier to effective implementation. McLeod (2011) identified the need to tailor training to individual contexts, and this was borne out by the research with participants valuing the mentoring

approach which allowed the universal package to be adapted to the needs of the setting.

3.The research identified a degree of mismatch of expectation between SLTs and EY practitioners. This echoes Jago and Radford's 2016 study which identified the impact of a lack of understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities in day to day practice and suggests that the consultative model of service delivery is not always understood by practitioners and also not necessarily the way that SLTs were trained to work.

4.The role of leadership in advancing the model in practice emerged as a central theme with both SLTs and LLs identifying the need for managerial support in effective implementation of the approach across the setting. SLTs particularly noted their own lack of involvement in the selection process of the LL, this usually being done by the setting manager without always a clear basis in either staff levels of interest or expertise in the area of SLC. LL staff also referred to being chosen rather than choosing to be LL. Participants from both groups clearly felt in many cases that their relationship with the setting manager was pivotal in the effectiveness of the collaboration and the way the approach was valued and rolled out in the setting, particularly in relation how much autonomy the LL was given to carry out their role. For example, practical considerations such as releasing staff to attend LL network meetings was noted by participants as a limiting factor in the development of the LL role. "I suppose if the person in charge doesn't value it then it's not going to get to anybody in the school and taken seriously is it." (LL03). However, leadership is important but not sufficient, as one SLT stated, "I think it comes from management and from the dynamics and chemistry between the staff at whatever level" (SLT05).

The research also identified that good practice in the EY often stays in the EY as staff from both professional groups noted a lack of wider dissemination of good practice for SLC beyond the Foundation Stage, a challenge for school leaders as well as for the individual LL practitioners.

In summary, this collaborative approach to ongoing EY staff training and development was a valued approach despite some mismatch of expectations between the SLTs and the EY staff involved. The approach was valued for its flexibility, although there was evidence that this flexibility could also lead to inconsistencies in implementation. Collaborative working was seen as essential in managing children's SLC needs in the county and was definitely viewed as a two-way process.

Final thoughts : challenges to practice.

What emerged from the research as a key challenge was the need to evidence the value of the LL approach, an issue which also had implications for the original ECAT programme. Although there was clear evidence of efficacy in the setting, where an improved communication environment was clearly visible, and

on the practitioners who identified their improved knowledge and skills in the area of communication and language, impacts on the child proved more difficult to measure. This presents a challenge for the SLT service in relation to ongoing commissioning with the need to continue to produce clear evidence of the efficacy of the approach for the child. In fact, the commissioning context for this service delivery model cannot be overstated; the approach was commissioned in consultation with the local SLT service to be designed and implemented in this specific way, emphasising the central role of dialogue with commissioners so that they commission appropriate, sustainable, effective and relevant interventions which represent VFM and efficacy. This aspect of the research provides an important message in the current climate where large Local Authorities, as well as individual schools and academy trusts have identified funding sources to be used for specific interventions and a strong evidence base can help to support them to see where the money is best invested. The commissioning context now is even more significant with LAs carrying the responsibility for the delivery of Public Health services since October 2015, including universal SLT provision. The local commissioning arrangements for Early Years services rely on services working together to increase impact (Early Intervention Foundation 2018). The relationship has to be bi-directional resulting in improved outcomes for the child, reduced level of inappropriate referrals to SLT services and increased professional confidence and competence in the children's workforce in managing children's SLCN within mainstream settings. In the absence of national level schemes there is a need the need for practitioners to get to know about SLC needs in their local landscapes and what funding streams may be available to support these. The success of the LL Approach in Nottinghamshire shows that this can be done and done sustainably.

2032 words

References

Bercow, J. 2008. The Bercow Report: A Review of Services for Children and Young People (0–19) with Speech, Language and Communication Needs. DCSF: Nottingham.

Braun, V and Clarke, V. 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3: 77–101.

Degotardi, S and Gill, A. 2017 Infant educators' beliefs about infant language development in long day care settings. *Early Years*. DOI: 10.1080/09575146.2017.1347607.

Early Intervention Foundation. 2018. EIF maturity matrix: Speech, language and communication in the early years. London: EIF.

Goouch, K and Powell, S. 2013. *The Baby Room; Principles, Policy and Practice*. UK: McGraw-Hill.

Gross, J. 2011. Two Years On: final report of the Communication Champion for children. UK: Office of the Communication Champion.

I CAN. 2006. The cost to the nation of children's poor communication – ICAN Report. Talk Series: Issue 2. London Borough of Bromley: I CAN.

ICAN. 2018. Bercow Ten Years On: An independent review of provision for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs in England. London: ICAN.

Jago, S and Radford, J. 2016. SLT beliefs about collaborative practice: Implications for education and learning. *Child Language Teaching and Therapy*. 1–15.

Law, J. et al., 2017. Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. A Report for the Education Endowment Foundation. EEF:UK. https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Law_et_al_Early_Language_Development_final.pdf [accessed 12/9/18]

Law, J. and Pagnamenta, E. 2017. Promoting the development of young children's language. *RCSLT Bulletin* (January p12-15). RCSLT: London.

McLeod, N. 2011. Exploring Early Years educators' ownership of language and communication knowledge and skills: a review of key policy and initial reflections on Every Child a Talker and its implementation. *Education 3-13*, Vol.39(4), p.429-445.

Payler, J and Georgeson, J. 2013. Multiagency working in the early years: confidence, competence and context. *Early Years*, 33:4, 380-397.