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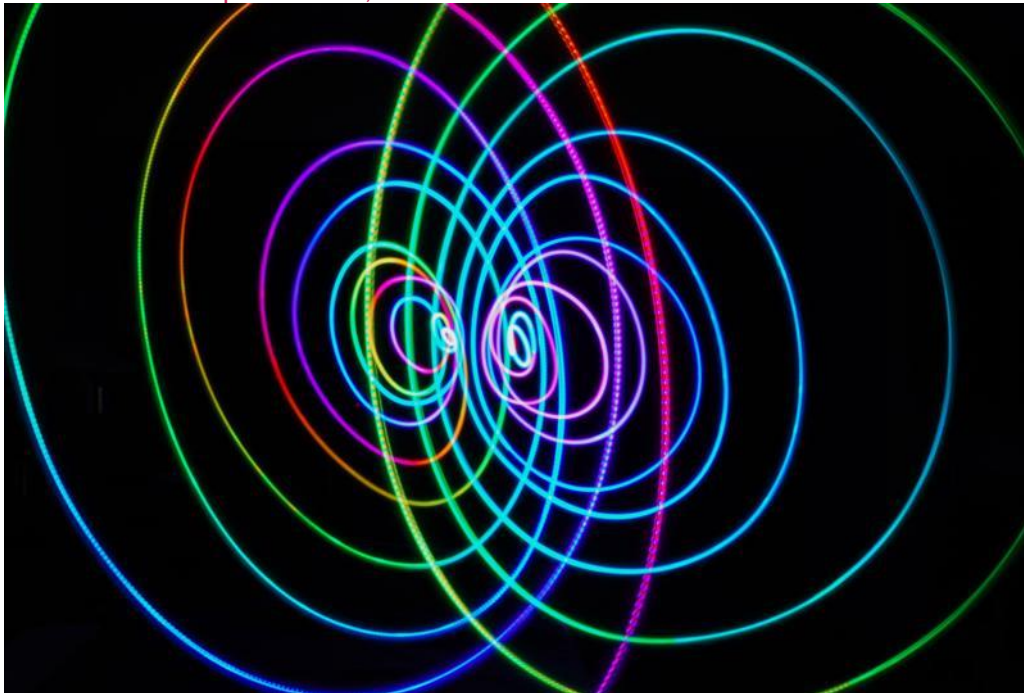
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Supporting under-fives and their families with communication, language and literacy development: A collaborative research circle project

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Written by: [Karen Boardman](#), [Charlotte Hindley](#) [Silvia Cont](#)

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KAREN BOARDMAN, HEAD OF DEPARTMENT OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION, EDGE HILL UNIVERSITY, UK

CHARLOTTE HINDLEY, SENIOR LEADERSHIP TEAM, PLATT BRIDGE COMMUNITY SCHOOL, UK

SILVIA CONT, DEPARTMENT OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION, EDGE HILL UNIVERSITY, UK

Introduction

The challenges faced by Early Years settings in supporting children's communication, language and literacy (CLL) development and attainment towards the Early Learning Goals (ELGs) (DfE, 2021) are multi-faceted according to the Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2021). Communication and language (CL) is an essential foundational area to support children's overall learning and development. The CL ELGs are positioned to support achievement of the expected level of development for listening, attention, understanding and speaking. The [Department for Education](#) (DfE, 2021, p. 8) argues that 'children's spoken language underpins all seven areas of learning and development'.

Literacy ELGs are predominantly focused on the more formal literacy outcomes of comprehension, reading and writing. This formal literacy learning often overrides the importance of CL, which should be viewed as an equal component of literacy attainment. Meeting the ELGs is an ongoing focus for all EYFS settings, but especially when considering predisposing factors such as poverty, inequalities (Avineri et al., 2015; Johnson et al., 2017) and disadvantage (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2019). Concerns about the 'language gap' (Avineri et al., 2015) have recently been emphasised, given that children's speech and language development has been delayed since COVID-19 lockdowns (Clarke et al., 2022).

The Early Years education setting

The setting described in this article is in a socio-economically deprived area in the north west local authority (LA) and initially opened as a result of two closing schools in the area. The setting is one of the most deprived schools within the LA and is identified as one of the most deprived schools nationally by the DfE. Following a decrease in reading outcomes at the end of Key Stage 2, the setting went through an internal strategic process of data interrogation, alongside enhanced provision for literacy. This process highlighted receptive and expressive vocabulary as a specific barrier to accessing literacy across the school. Many children were also identified with concerns in their language development, requiring additional targeted support to make expected progress. Further analysis identified a decreasing trend in CLL outcomes in the EYFS. On entry, teacher observations and baseline assessments in the EYFS revealed that most children enter the setting working below the expected standard in CLL areas.

Given that the school prides itself on being proactive in responding to arising needs and utilising the best available research evidence to inform its decision-making, senior leaders welcomed collaborating with Edge Hill University to support with research. The research circle approach seemed to be a clear theoretical and conceptual model through which to source and guide improvements to CLL provision for its youngest children, in order to provide early interventions to improve outcomes across the school. However, given that CLL was already at the heart of the school's curriculum offer, it made sense to review how this already language- and reading-rich environment could be further enhanced. In addition, senior leaders sought to explore how findings could be shared purposefully with families and the community to strengthen future home–setting partnerships in order to foster children's CLL development.

Research circle

This research study utilised a participatory action research tool – the collaborative research circle (RC) (Persson, 2018) – to support the setting with its research priorities in exploring how nursery and reception staff and parents, carers and families (PCF) support under-fives with their CLL development. We acknowledge that there is the potential of selection bias in the PCF who volunteered to participate and therefore they may not be entirely representative. The premise of a one-school-year RC model where researchers, schools, families and communities are all equal participants seemed to fulfil the aims of this research study. The RC project sought and gained ethical approval prior to commencement. The aims of the RC study were:

- to explore how the setting currently supports nursery children's CLL development
- to identify the common perspectives and implications for CLL development from both home and setting environments
- to highlight the voices of all participants to enhance provision and partnership
- to engage with the local community, parents, carers and families to explore the perceptions of CLL development for young children.

This mixed methods study employed short questionnaires (27 staff and 29 families), three focus group workshops and five interviews with PCF to respond to the overarching research question: How do you support very young children with their communication, language and literacy development? A focus group workshop was conducted with volunteer nursery and reception staff, leaders and practitioners working in the setting. A further two focus group workshops were carried out with PCF who expressed interest via an invitation to attend from the initial survey. A further five families volunteered to take part in a telephone interview. The data was analysed by a research assistant and key themes were identified across all the sources of data. The findings and key recommendations were shared with all stakeholders in the form of a report for senior leaders and leaflets for PCF, to support accessibility.

Main findings from the research circle

The main findings included:

1. The staff team noted that they were either confident (n=7, 58.3 per cent) or very confident (n=2, 16.7 per cent) in supporting the needs of children struggling with CLL. Only three (25.5 per cent) lacked confidence in doing so. However, out of the 12 staff respondents, nine (75 per cent) prioritised the support of CL while 10 (83.3 per cent) prioritised literacy.
2. Literacy is considered a key priority for the staff team and also for PCF, but communication and language less so. All five families interviewed stated that literacy (reading and writing) was very important for their children, while communication and language development was less important. The majority of families (24) turn their pushchairs from parent-facing to forward-facing (outwards) between the ages of six and 12 months. Thirteen families moved to a forward-facing pushchair when their child was between six months and one year old (45 per cent) and 11 from six months old (38 per cent).

3. Staff teams noted that they have already engaged with continued professional development (CPD) to support children's CLL, yet identified CPD linked to phonics, RWI (Read Write Inc.) and phonics interventions for supporting CLL.

Responses from all staff largely focused on printed books, printed activities and phonics interventions, which suggests a hierarchy led with the formal literacy skills of reading and writing.

1. All families reported that they have access to children's literature and/or books at home. For example, all 29 families (100 per cent) said they have access to children's literature/picture books and 26 (89 per cent) named their children's favourite book.
2. Families sing some nursery rhymes and other songs regularly. Sixteen families sing to their children daily (55 per cent) and 11 families between two and four times a week (38 per cent).
3. Families highlighted 'the wonderful support from the school' in encouraging their children with their literacy development. For example, all families talked about parent networks, parents' evenings, drop-ins and one-to-one support if they needed advice. Interview participants highlighted the welcoming and approachable nature of the school and the staff team.

Rethinking CLL

The RC highlighted the need for this setting to focus more on communication and language, alongside the skills of reading and writing. Key recommendations shared with all stakeholders suggested that:

- Literacy (comprehension, reading and writing) is important to everyone. The disproportionate focus on formal reading and writing needs to shift more towards communication and language. For example, include rhyme, rhythm, steady beat, poetry, music and alliteration in all planned activities, to support children's communication and language development as the foundational ELG.
- Signpost staff teams to CLL support networks and further CDP/training specific to supporting communication and language.
- Develop further partnerships with PCF to support their understanding of the importance of rhyme in CLL development. Share nursery rhymes and the rationale for these regularly in order to support CLL, along with how rhyming links to reading and writing.
- Raise and develop further awareness of rhythm, rhyming, steady beat and music to support CLL development, particularly communication and language.
- Consider supporting PCF further with the key aspects of language development – eye contact, back-and-forth conversations, pointing, etc. (linked to pushchairs) – and how families can support communication and language at home through everyday routines.

Refocusing on communication and language

This RC project identified some key strategic objectives for the setting. Senior leaders reviewed the structure of their CPD offer in the EYFS to prioritise CLL and

strategies such as high-quality interactions during the autumn term. This led to a refocus on CLL across provision to support staff with all their interactions using communication, language and vocabulary as the focus for objective-led planning. The setting has also reviewed the induction process for staff and new children. As such, 'inspire' sessions will now focus on CLL and support families with this, rather than introducing formal reading, writing and mathematics.

Final thoughts

Focusing more on communication and language is essential in ensuring that children develop strong foundations for future learning and development. Enhanced collaboration with families and communities to support children's CLL development can be achieved through discussing how nursery rhymes, songs, poems, rhythm and steady beat and the value of communicating in back-and-forth conversations strongly support literacy development. Sharing the findings with PCF enables them to continue these high-quality interactions in their home environments, valuing communication and language exchanges to help to sustain this approach.

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