



THE  
**MERCERS'**  
COMPANY

May 2025

# Early Years Special Initiative (2019–2024)



## Executive Summary Final Report for Phase 1 (March 2025)

Learning Partner: Education Policy Institute  
Author: Joni Kelly

EDUCATION  
POLICY  
INSTITUTE



## About the Education Policy Institute

The Education Policy Institute is an independent, impartial, and evidence-based research institute that promotes high quality education outcomes, regardless of social background. We achieve this through data-led analysis, innovative research and high-profile events.

Education can have a transformative effect on the life chances of young people, enabling them to fulfil their potential, have successful careers, and grasp opportunities. As well as having a positive impact on the individual, good quality education and child well-being also promote economic productivity and a cohesive society.

Through our research, we provide insight, commentary, and a constructive critique of education policy in England – shedding light on what is working and where further progress needs to be made. Our research and analysis span a young person's journey from the early years through to entry to the labour market.

Our core research areas include:

- Benchmarking English Education
- School Performance, Admissions, and Capacity
- Early Years Development
- Social Mobility and Vulnerable Learners
- Accountability, Assessment, and Inspection
- Curriculum and Qualifications
- Teacher Supply and Quality
- Education Funding
- Higher Education, Further Education, and Skills

Our experienced and dedicated team works closely with academics, think tanks, and other research foundations and charities to shape the policy agenda.

## About the Mercers Company

As trustee of Charities, the Mercers Company aim to distribute £10 million annually to charitable causes to improve people's lives, strengthen organisations and contribute to societal change. Their giving is focused on relieving disadvantage in London, Norfolk and the Northeast of England. Each year they expect to support c.180 individual organisations.

## About the Author

**Joni Kelly** is a Research Assistant at EPI. Following her previous experience in event organisation at an educational charity, Joni joined EPI as an Events Intern in July 2022 before becoming a Research Assistant in November 2022.

Joni graduated from the University of Leeds with a BA in English Literature and went on to complete an MA in Education Policy at University College London.



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Ark Start

## Executive summary

The Early Years Special Initiative (EYSI) is funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington of which the Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee and supports a range of programmes that work to improve the educational attainment and life chances of children and families facing disadvantage in London.

As a learning partner, the purpose of EPI's work was to provide a bird's eye view of the work carried out by the programmes involved in the Early Years Special Initiative. We did this through a monitoring and evaluation framework that helped us to understand the processes involved in the delivery of each programme and, ultimately, to identify important lessons across all programmes. The data we gathered complemented the data collected by each programme, and together made a significant contribution to the evidence base of what works in the delivery of interventions to support children's outcomes in the early years. Here, the early years is the period from the ages two to five and includes pre-school and reception pupils.

We worked with programmes to collect information about their delivery across a range of areas and hosted meetings with programmes within each cohort to facilitate collaboration and joined up working and learning.

In this end-of-programme report we summarise findings from across the five-year Initiative.

**CHICKENSHED**  
THEATRE CHANGING LIVES

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**  
Change your story

**Squirrels**

The first cohort of programmes, Chickenshed, the National Literacy Trust (NLT), and the Scouts, completed their grant period in Summer 2022.

1

**ArkStart**

**CatchUp<sup>®</sup>**

**CLPE**  
CENTRE FOR LITERACY  
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Cohort 2, composed of Ark, Catch Up<sup>®</sup> and the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), started their grant period in April 2020 and completed in Summer 2023.

2

Speech and  
Language UK



NATIONAL  
CHILDREN'S  
BUREAU



people



Cohort 3, composed of Speech and Language UK, National Children's Bureau (NCB), Peeple and Tales Toolkit, started their grant period in April 2021 and completed in 2024.

3



National Children's Bureau



Speech and Language UK - Darcie's Story



## What we have found – applying our evaluation framework

In the first part of the report we explore the development of each of the ten programmes over their three-year grant period. In addition to focusing on each programme individually, we draw out some common themes across programmes:

- The challenge of data collection and capturing impact—data collection challenges have made it difficult to capture true progression. We look at how programmes attempted to overcome various challenges including:
  - difficulty recruiting enough settings to conduct a large-scale trial;
  - pandemic-related restrictions and the absence of attainment data when exams were cancelled;
  - changes to the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, which is a statutory assessment of children's development at the end of the academic year in which children turn five, resulting in inconsistencies in attainment data;<sup>1</sup>
  - changes to setting schedules;
  - potential intervention generalisation, when control groups also benefit from staff delivering the intervention and the sharing of information within the setting;
  - programmes could often see their strong impact on children and families, but this could not always be translated through quantitative measures.
- The importance of good quality and accessible training—a key achievement of the EYSI programmes has been their commitment to integrating training and development into their programmes. We identify the range of adaptive strategies that were used to improve accessibility for practitioners, parents and volunteers to maximise programme impact.
- The importance of building strong relationships at multiple levels—building a network of supportive relationships was key for engagement. This included building relationships with parents, practitioners, senior leaders, and local authorities to deliver the programmes effectively. Here, we explore how the programmes worked to build trust and ensure they were adapting to reflect the needs of the communities being served.
- Maximising sustainability—programmes aimed to incorporate a sustainability element into their programmes to ensure the positive effects could be maintained beyond the lifetime of the Initiative. We explore the methods programmes used to incorporate sustainability at the setting level by ensuring practitioners had access to support and how strong relationships maximise sustainability, particularly at the borough level, as some programmes became integrated into local authority strategies.
- Increased online presence - all programmes dramatically increased their online presence over the course of the Initiative. This began as an outreach exercise during the pandemic when social distancing restrictions limited most children from accessing resources that were otherwise available in early years settings. We have found that online adaptations are being maintained since they have offered new ways to reach target audiences.

Based on this evidence we conclude with the following findings and recommendations:

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[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early\\_years\\_foundation\\_stage\\_profile\\_handbook.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook.pdf)

## Findings:

- Data collection and measuring impact is a serious challenge in the early years. This is related to both the technical challenges of data-gathering and validity challenges that make it difficult to capture learning accurately in the data.
- A key achievement of the EYSI programmes has been their commitment to integrating training and development into their programmes despite various challenges including staff capacity and difficulty releasing staff for training.
- Building strong relationships at multiple levels including between local authorities, programmes, parents and delivery partners is key for engagement. Confident communication and placing value on diversity in terms of language and culture is key to building relationships at all levels.
- Taking a consistent, borough-wide approach can be highly effective for maximising the benefits on offer from early years organisations.
- Building strong relationships plays a pivotal role in achieving programme sustainability.
- There is an increasing trend for programmes to deliver their initiative using a blend of online and in-person features. However, programmes have not sought to replace physical delivery with online content.

## Recommendations:

### Early years organisations:

- Ensure that good quality and accessible training opportunities are provided for both parents and practitioners. This is essential to enhance understanding and skill development across all stakeholders.
- Actively involve parents, practitioners, senior leaders, and local authorities to gain diverse insights on how programme aims can be successfully achieved.
- Integrate initiatives into existing setting processes to increase sustainability.
- Consider the contextual factors that can affect funding opportunities when operating at the borough level.
- Allocate sufficient time and resources to deliver interventions both in-person and online, ensuring flexibility and broad access to different learning formats.

### Evaluators:

- Evaluate programme effectiveness in a way that balances the need for valuable insights while minimising the burden on staff. This helps with staff retention and ensures that evaluation efforts are sustainable.
- For robust evaluations, ensure that randomised controlled trials incorporate highly sensitive measures and allow enough time between assessments to track subtle changes in learning outcomes.

### Schools/settings:

- Recognise the value of professional development for all staff members, and consider how it can enhance the quality of service delivery and support continuous improvement.
- Structure training into operational models in a way that allows professional development to occur without placing additional strain on staff, ensuring that it becomes a sustainable part of the school or setting's operations.

### Funders:

- Recognise the value of different types of evidence, including qualitative data. Qualitative insights can provide a deep understanding of programme impact, which may be difficult to capture fully through quantitative data alone.
- Acknowledge the challenges of producing quantitative data in early years settings due to the contextual complexities, and support the use of a mixed-methods approach for a more comprehensive view of programme outcomes.
- Ensure that funding for programmes extends long enough to allow sufficient time for outcomes to be measured and evaluated accurately.

### Local authorities:

- Understand that local authorities are well-positioned to support early years organisations, particularly in recruitment efforts, to ensure that the right individuals are reached and supported within their local area.
- Adopt a consistent, borough-wide approach to early years initiatives to maximise the benefits available to the community, ensuring that resources are distributed efficiently and effectively across the area.



## What we have found – Impact on disadvantage

In the second part of the report, we focus on the impact programmes have had on improving the attainment and life chances of children and families facing disadvantage in London since this was the focus of the EYSI. We found some programmes demonstrated a positive impact on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils using quantitative data, however, collecting strong data has been severely complicated for most programmes because of the contextual challenges they were operating in. The results are highly promising however they are not generalisable to a broader population and should, therefore, be interpreted with some caution.

The challenges each cohort faced varied depending on the time period in which they were operating. Cohort 1 began their grant period in 2019 at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and national assessments were paused at this time. It was, therefore, not possible to recover attainment data from this period to assess the impact of Cohort 1 programmes on pupil academic outcomes. Cohort 2 was additionally affected by lockdowns and all three cohorts were affected by ongoing pandemic-related effects such as the impact of the staffing crisis and increasing additional needs among pupils in the early years. We will discuss the contextual challenges in greater detail throughout the report and highlight the meaningful work the programmes continued to achieve to reach children and families in these difficult circumstances.

Three programmes (Ark Start, CLPE and NCB) produced evidence that indicated they had a positive impact on the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. The indicators of disadvantage included pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) identified by Ark Start, CLPE and NCB. CLPE further identified multilingual pupils identified by the English as an Additional Language (EAL) measure, and pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). CLPE also highlighted impacts for pupils of the Global Majority.

We found Ark Start achieved above the national average for all pupils, including FSM-eligible pupils, in each year of their EYSI funding. This was based on the good level of development (GLD) measure used to assess early years pupils at the end of reception, which marks the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. Children are defined as having reached a GLD at the end of the EYFS if they have achieved the expected level for 17 early learning goals (ELGs) spread across seven areas of learning. The areas of learning that are assessed are communication and language; personal, social and emotional development; physical development; and the specific areas of mathematics and literacy.<sup>2</sup>

Ark Start identified the percentage of non-FSM pupils who participated in their programme and achieved a GLD and the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils who participated in their programme and achieved a GLD. Comparing this data, we found that the gap between non-FSM and FSM-eligible pupils seemed to close in the final year of EYSI funding. The attainment gap refers to the difference in attainment scores achieved by disadvantaged pupils in comparison to their peers that are related to the prime area of learning.<sup>3</sup>

CLPE analysed the phonics screening check (PSC) results of pupils who participated in their programmes. The PSC is a standardised assessment that takes place in year 1 to assess whether children have learnt

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<sup>2</sup>

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early\\_years\\_foundation\\_stage\\_profile\\_handbook.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2024/>

phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard.<sup>4</sup> The data showed the attainment gap narrowed between disadvantaged pupils and their peers across a range of measures. They included FSM-eligibility, EAL, SEND and pupils of the Global Majority. Pupils with SEND and of the Global Majority were more likely to improve their attainment after participating in CLPE's programme.

NCB identified the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils in Lewisham who achieved a good level of development (GLD). Their results indicated their project narrowed the attainment gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers in 2023. However, this dipped again in 2024, following the same trend as the national average.

Evidence shows the home learning environment has a long-lasting impact on children's outcomes.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, we also explore quantitative and qualitative evidence where programmes have demonstrated impact in this area. The home learning environment includes the physical characteristics of the home, but also the quality of the implicit and explicit learning support a child receives from caregivers.<sup>6</sup> The communication environment is a strong predictor of performance upon entering school and includes activities and interaction between parents and their children, the resources a child has, and feeling a strong sense of well-being and support in the early family environment.<sup>7</sup> We identified evidence where seven programmes (Chickenshed, NLT, The Scouts, Ark Start, CLPE, NCB, and Peeple) have increased engagement and demonstrated impact in terms of how they have supported families.

We found that three programmes (Ark Start, NCB and Peeple) improved the home learning environment through training programmes for parents. Five programmes (Chickenshed, NLT, the Scouts, CLPE and Peeple) increased access to resources for children to use at home. Finally, three programmes (Chickenshed, NLT and NCB) improved access to trips, including the library and theatre. Positive effects were observed across a range of outcomes including confidence, curiosity, skills development, language and communication, increased parent-child time and increased attainment in some cases.

Based on this evidence we conclude with the following findings and recommendations:

### Findings:

- Ark Start achieved above the national average for all pupils, including FSM-eligible pupils, in each year of their EYSI funding.
- Significantly, the gap between non-FSM and FSM-eligible pupils seemed to close in their final year.
- CLPE's programmes helped narrow the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils and their peers, with notable improvements for pupils eligible for FSM, EAL pupils, those with SEND, and pupils of the Global Majority.
- Pupils with SEND and those of the Global Majority showed a greater likelihood of improving their PSC results after participating in CLPE's programme.
- NCB's project in Lewisham successfully narrowed the attainment gap for FSM-eligible pupils, as shown by the increased percentage of pupils achieving a good level of development (GLD) in 2023.

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/assessment-framework-for-the-development-of-the-year-1-phonics-screening-check/assessment-framework-for-the-development-of-the-year-1-phonics-screening-check>

<sup>5</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b67a5e5274a319e77f135/DFE-RR134.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=2680&context=sspapers>

<sup>7</sup> <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b67a5e5274a319e77f135/DFE-RR134.pdf>

- However, in 2024, the gap widened again, following the national trend, indicating that the progress made was not sustained, at least in this year.
- Enhancing the home learning environment can have positive effects across a range of outcomes including confidence, curiosity, skills development, language and communication, increased parent-child time and increased attainment.

## Recommendations:

- Continue to strengthen Early Years interventions – Ark Start has demonstrated success in achieving GLD results above the national average, particularly for FSM-eligible pupils. Their model should be scaled and evaluated further to examine its impact on a larger group of children's outcomes.
- Targeted support for FSM pupils – While the gap between FSM-eligible and non-FSM pupils closed in the final year of EYSI funding, continued targeted interventions, particularly for FSM pupils, are crucial.
- Long-term monitoring and adjustment – Since the attainment gap narrowed in some areas (e.g., CLPE and Ark Start) but fluctuated in others (e.g., NCB's project in Lewisham), it is important to monitor the long-term effectiveness of interventions. Schools and organisations should track progress over several years to identify when gaps reappear, consider possible reasons for this, and adjust programmes as needed.
- Parent training programmes – Since evidence shows that the home learning environment is a significant predictor of children's academic success, continuing and expanding training for parents through programmes like Ark Start, NCB, and Peeple should be a priority.
- Parent engagement and empowerment – In addition to training, increasing parent engagement and providing opportunities for parents to actively participate in their child's education (through workshops, community events, etc.) can have a lasting impact on children's outcomes.
- Access to learning materials – Programmes like Chickenshed, NLT, and Peeple have already increased access to resources for children to use at home. Extending this practice to ensure that all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to books, educational toys, and digital resources can further boost learning outcomes.
- Support for enrichment activities – Ensuring that children from all backgrounds have access to extracurricular opportunities, such as trips to libraries, theatres, and other cultural activities, should be a continued focus. These activities play a key role in developing curiosity, confidence, and skills that contribute to overall development and school readiness.
- Improving early communication skills – Since communication and language development are critical for future academic success, programmes should further emphasise early literacy and communication skills.
- Tailored support for SEND pupils - Since the data highlights positive outcomes for some disadvantaged groups, including FSM and Global Majority pupils, it is also crucial to ensure that SEND pupils receive adequate support. Targeted interventions for SEND children can further help to close the attainment gap across all groups, ensuring equity for those with additional needs.
- Long-term family support – Building long-term relationships with families through continued support programmes that extend beyond the early years can ensure lasting impacts. Providing consistent check-ins, additional support networks, and access to resources as children transition to primary school can continue to improve their outcomes.



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