



THE
MERCERS'
COMPANY

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Early Years Special Initiative (2019–2024)



Final Report for Phase 1 (March 2025)

Learning Partner: Education Policy Institute
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EDUCATION
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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

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Contents

Contents	3
What we have found – applying our evaluation framework.....	3
Findings:	4
Recommendations:	4
What we have found – Impact on disadvantage	6
Findings:	7
Recommendations:	8
Introduction.....	9
About the Initiative	9
This report.....	9
Section 1: About the programmes.....	10
Cohort 1 programmes (2019-2022)	10
Chickenshed	10
National Literacy Trust	13
The Scouts Association.....	16
Cohort 2 programmes (2020-2023)	19
Ark	19
Catch Up®	22
Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)	25
Cohort 3 programmes (2021-2024)	28
National Children’s Bureau (NCB)	28
Peeples.....	31
Speech and Language UK	34
Tales Toolkit	38
Section 2: Themes from across the programmes	41
The challenge of data collection and capturing impact	43
The importance of good quality and accessible training for early years practitioners	45
The importance of building strong relationships at multiple levels.....	47
Maximising sustainability	49
Increased online presence	51
Section 3: Impact on disadvantage.....	53
Quantitative evidence on the attainment gap	53
Quantitative and qualitative evidence that programmes have had a long-lasting impact on the home learning environment (HLE)	56
Conclusion	59

References	63
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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[®]

CLPE
CENTRE FOR LITERACY
IN PRIMARY EDUCATION

Cohort 2, composed of Ark, Catch Up[®] 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**



people



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



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;¹
 - 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:

¹

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.²

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.³

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

²

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook.pdf

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

phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard.⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.

⁴ <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>

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

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

⁷ <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.

Introduction

About the Initiative

In October 2018, The Mercers' Company launched the Early Years Special Initiative to support organisations and partnerships working to improve the educational attainment and life chances of children and families facing disadvantage in London.

The Initiative, funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington of which the Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee, provides funding for up to £350,000 per charity partner over three years across three cohorts of programmes. This was phase 1 of the initiative with a phase 2 that has followed in 2023.

EPI's role as a research partner was to provide the Early Years Special Initiative with support in three key areas throughout the grant period:

- Preparatory work: EPI supported the awarded organisations in getting ready for the start of the grant with activities such as: identifying where the programme is situated within existing evidence to understand whether there are similar programmes to use as a benchmark or examples of best practice; refining suggested measures for monitoring purposes; helping to collect baseline data.
- Programme support: EPI provided ongoing support and advice to each charity, for example acting as critical friend in setting up the evaluation strategy and helping to measure implementation rather than just final outcomes; providing support in understanding what is needed for scalability purposes, for example in terms of staffing, timing and general resources.
- Public events and end of grant reporting: EPI organised a workshop halfway through the grant period of cohort 1 (Spring 2021) and public events, such as the learning symposium held in January 2023. The events are an opportunity for the grant holders to showcase their work, to highlight the impact the grants have made and to receive feedback on their activities.

These grants provide a unique opportunity for The Mercers' Company and the wider community to learn important lessons about implementation, sustainability and scalability. Almost all programmes had an evaluation component built into their timeline. The purpose of EPI's work was to provide a bird's eye view evaluation framework to help understand and monitor processes and, ultimately, to identify important lessons across all programmes.

This report

This report focuses on all ten programmes, funded by the EYSI over the five years and across the three cohorts. We review how they progressed over their three-year grant period and join up findings across programmes to draw out what we can learn from the Initiative as a whole. As we have now come to the end of the five-year Initiative and all three cohorts have had an opportunity to produce evidence of their impact, we take a step back and look at the themes that arise across the early years programmes that have participated and consider the impact they have made on the attainment and life changes of disadvantaged children and families in London. We use the themes and the impact on disadvantage as a starting point to consider the main findings that would be beneficial to share with the early years sector.

Section 1: About the programmes

Cohort 1 programmes (2019-2022)

Chickenshed

About the programme

Chickenshed is an inclusive theatre company that runs children and youth theatres, offers training in accredited qualifications and runs outreach programmes. Chickenshed's project for the Early Years Special Initiative aimed to increase opportunities for disadvantaged children to access inclusive arts-based methods of delivering early education. They aimed to achieve this by delivering weekly activities and trips to the theatre, training early years practitioners and developing materials and tools that support the transition of activities from nursery to home.

What the programme did during the EYSI

Chickenshed worked with three schools in the London boroughs of Enfield and Haringey exploring how creative, theatre-based workshops can support children's language and numeracy development. Over the three years of the Initiative, Chickenshed delivered 144 weekly interactive theatre workshops and 27 theatre performances. They produced 19 Tales TV YouTube episodes and created new products – bespoke puppets and educational playing cards – to support young children's educational development whilst empowering children to learn through play. They also delivered 36 training sessions with early years staff, 18 consultancy events for senior leadership teams and 18 training sessions for Chickenshed staff in relation to early years, including Early Years Curriculum training, Sound for Early Years, Yoga for children, Mindfulness for children, Puppet making, Storytelling, Child mental health, National literacy Trust 'First Words', and British Sign Language.

Chickenshed's activities have reached a large number of children as well as early years professionals, and the development of their online content has multiplied this. During their EYSI grant period, YouTube site Tales TV videos had around 26,000 views and Tales from the Shed videos had around 41,500 views. Over 400 children have access to the puppets and educational playing cards that Chickenshed developed. For the weekly interactive sessions, up to 90 children attended per session. There was also high engagement from early years professionals in the training Chickenshed provided.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable disruption and, similarly to other Cohort 1 programmes, Chickenshed had to adapt during the national lockdowns. Theatre-based performances and product testing were put on hold for some time and the training, the 'Teachers' Big Meet' twilight sessions, the engagement of early years experts, the action research, and the research-sharing & debate events were all put on hold during the spring term of the second year. However, Chickenshed quickly adapted and focused on producing Tales TV episodes for families to watch and use at home when face-to-face activities were not possible. The team nimbly switched its focus to the provision of recorded sessions to schools and product development but was also ready to resume activities from the summer term of 2021. During the final year of their grant, Chickenshed proceeded at pace without further disruption with weekly performances and theatre-based activities delivered as expected.

Programme findings

Another important consequence of the pandemic for Cohort 1 was the halting of data collection. Chickenshed contracted the Open University's Child Research Centre (CRC) as an external evaluator.⁸ However, CRC could not carry out the planned observations in the second year, initially because the team was not allowed in schools during lockdowns and then because Open University staff still had a travel ban in place during the spring term 2021. The action research was one of the most disrupted aspects of the whole project. Therefore, Chickenshed put an intense research plan in place for the summer term of the third year to support the Open University's research and to ensure they maximised the opportunity to measure impact.

The research explored the impact of creative, inclusive theatre methods on pre-school children's language, literacy and numeracy. It included three schools in the London boroughs of Haringey and Enfield and children aged between 2 and 4 years old. Methods included workshop observations at the three schools in outdoor and indoor environments; large and small groups; with and without parents in attendance. "Stay and play" and classroom sessions were also observed. Interviews and focus groups were conducted with parents, teachers and practitioners, lead educators and Chickenshed performers.

The evaluation found that Chickenshed's activities successfully supported children's literacy and numeracy, in an inclusive way that ensured each child was supported and able to choose their level of participation: 'Alongside all of the storytelling, songs and music, children are taught the sign language for each word.'⁹ Therefore, children who are pre-verbal or lack confidence in speaking can be included in the workshops through actions and signing. The Chickenshed performers add exaggerated facial expressions to emphasise and engage with individual children who might be on the periphery of the group. Feedback was also extremely positive from both parents and early years staff who have commented on the increase in confidence, progress and enjoyment that the children got from Chickenshed's work.

Achievements and ongoing work

Key to Chickenshed's success was the strong buy-in they managed to curate with schools and senior leadership teams. They were able to benefit from sharing their knowledge and expertise with schools because they helped them tailor their activities to the early years in terms of the key development areas covered in the Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum. The pandemic reinforced the need for Chickenshed's work and schools and families were grateful they were quick to adapt with Tales TV. Another pandemic-related adaptation was Chickenshed's approach to outdoor learning and nature-focussed projects. They have received additional funding specifically focussed on this since the end of the Initiative and the insights gained from the EYSI are directly informing and shaping Chickenshed's approach moving forward.

Chickenshed's work as part of the Initiative led to them developing 'First Beats' – an umbrella programme that has allowed them to work in partnership with schools, local authorities and other organisations, ensuring that children in the early years remain the key beneficiaries. This work has included collaboration across sectors, with education and healthcare partnerships. Chickenshed secured additional funding, including an eight-week intergenerational project with Enfield schools and care

⁸ <https://wels.open.ac.uk/research/childrens-research-centre>

⁹ <https://oro.open.ac.uk/85039/1/Chickenshed%20Report.pdf>

homes, funded by Enfield local authority and funding for a yearlong programme focused on Barnet Early Years providers.

Chickenshed's programme now operates year-round including 32 weeks of performance and educational activities within the venue, along with 2-3 outreach projects. These outreach initiatives are often short-term collaborations, working with nurseries, Children's Centres, Theatres, and other educational institutions that share their mission. The Tales programme also runs annually at the British Summertime Festival in Hyde Park. This event has allowed Chickenshed to introduce the world of Tales to thousands of children across London, further cementing the programme's cultural impact.

Chickenshed is also collaborating with Tales Toolkit off the back of their meeting through the EYSI project. They are planning to tour a show, "Two tales come together" at several venues in Summer 2025 including the British Summertime Festival in Hyde Park, The Royal Opera, British Library, and Chickenshed theatre.



Chickenshed in action: Chickenshed performers make learning fun with puppets and interactive storytelling.



Chickenshed in action: theatrical performance makes the arts accessible for all children.



Chickenshed in action: going outdoors with Chickenshed. The programme is committed to using inclusive arts-based methods to provide early education opportunities for all children and learning in new environments can create more opportunities to learn new words.

National Literacy Trust

About the programme

The National Literacy Trust (NLT) is a charity that delivers programmes, conducts research and campaigns to combat illiteracy. NLT's Early Words Together for London expanded a pre-existing Early Words Together programme into three different London boroughs. It involved a six-week programme delivered by early years practitioners focusing on developing communication, language and early literacy skills. They achieved this by training early years practitioners, equipping parents and carers with the skills and confidence to support their child's early literacy, communication and language skills, and producing digital resources for families.

What the programme did during the EYSI

Over the three years, they trained 237 practitioners from 153 settings across the three London boroughs and reached 2,549 families. They quickly adapted during the pandemic in their first year to continue to train practitioners and deliver the Early Words Together programme to parents and children in online and outdoor sessions. Online resources were developed and accessed by 40,033 families and a series of Facebook Live family sessions reached 12,502 families. The Facebook Live sessions were based around a storybook with linked activity sessions that support early language development. Additionally, settings delivered storybooks and craft packs to families to be used alongside the online sessions. For children who did not have digital access NLT created and distributed 'Time Together' booklets, including translated copies for the dominant languages in the borough. Finally, in their third year, they delivered an Early Words Together for London Family Fun day in Emslie Horniman's Pleasance Park, where they gifted 200 books and goody bags to local families.

NLT worked with a different borough in each of the three years, delivering their programme to different priority groups of children. During the second year, NLT's operations moved to the borough of Southwark. The move to a different borough led to a change in the type of settings being targeted, with a mix of private, voluntary and independent (PVI) early education settings and children's centres. Children's centres generally had more capacity than PVIs to continue to deliver the intervention during lockdown and NLT swiftly adjusted their strategy. For example, anecdotal evidence suggests that most of the PVIs were unable to host their own online sessions with parents, but they shared those hosted centrally by NLT, which makes the focus on the digital offer even more important.

Across the three years NLT worked with childminders using an adapted model of delivery incorporating communication with families using video and other digital platforms. They developed a bespoke version of Early Words Together for Childminders that was trialled in Southwark in the second year. The bi-borough of Westminster and Kensington and Chelsea were keen to integrate this programme as they didn't have an existing network support system. The childminders received a small resource fund to support them with the cost of running the sessions and to provide take-home packs for families. NLT also adapted the timing of their training to take place in the evening and on Saturdays to fit with childminders' needs and held regular online drop-in sessions.

Programme findings

NLT's evaluation found that Early Words Together has been successful in supporting children's engagement with stories, songs and mark making. They conducted surveys with 184 practitioners before the programme, 62 practitioners at the end and 141 parents at the end:

Figure 1: Findings focused on children's outcomes and parent changes after engaging with NLT's programme

Outcome:	Percentage:
Children's Engagement:	
Child enjoyed singing songs and rhymes more than before	74%
Child listened or paid attention to stories more than before	70%
Child asked to look at stories and books at home more than before	62%
Child enjoyed mark-making and drawing more than before	61%
Child enjoyed sharing books more than before	60%
Parents' Changes:	
Parents understood the importance of talking to their child more than before	76%
Parents talked to their child more about something the child is interested in	75%
Parents sang songs with their child more than before	73%
Parents chatted together with their child more than before	72%
Parents felt more confident to sing songs with their child	62%
Parents shared stories more than before	59%
Parents felt more confident to share books with their child	58%

NLT sought to identify appropriate data to evaluate their impact on communication and language development. They invited settings in Kensington & Chelsea and Westminster to provide data from the Wellcomm toolkit, which the bi-borough had recently introduced across their early years provision. However, they found that the tool was being used inconsistently across the borough with some settings using it only for focus children, a few using the tool to assess all children, and many not yet using it at all. Despite regular contact and support, settings were unable to share a full year of data. Practitioner feedback suggested this was due to staff absences, turnover, and concerns about the consistency of their assessment.

Achievements and ongoing work

Responsiveness and adaptability have been key to the success of NLT's project. When the pandemic limited indoor access, NLT were responsive and adapted their programme delivery and training to include online and outdoor sessions. The training improved practice by fostering knowledge and confidence to support parents and practitioners in engaging with early language and literacy development. A key achievement is that these changes were observed for all practitioners and parents regardless of the mode of delivery, the setting type or previous qualifications. NLT's responsiveness to the changing circumstances additionally supported interaction given the restricted opportunities for socialising during the pandemic.

The development of the bespoke Early Words Together training for Childminders is another key success since childminders often lack access to high-quality professional development. This has enabled NLT to train and support parts of the early years workforce that were previously under-served and reach additional families. Local authority leads reported that the training has impacted all parts of childminder provision, and the model has also been successful in engaging working parents who cannot come into settings.

Reflecting on the longer-term changes in settings, local authority leads reported that The Early Words Together programme has had a lasting impact on the everyday practice of practitioners and childminders. Parents have also noticed a difference in how they approach talking and other activities with their children. The learnings NLT took from their co-production with each local authority have fed into the development of a new version of the programme, 'First Words Together' for families with children under two, in collaboration with Birmingham City Council. This was funded by the Department of Health and Social Care, in partnership with Birmingham Forward Steps.



*National Literacy Trust in action:
Left: Early Words Together Summer event;
Right: Early Words Together take home packs.*



National Literacy Trust in action: Early Words Together Online

The Scouts Association

About the programme

The Scout Association is a youth movement based around a network of volunteers running skill-based youth groups that seek to promote a positive sense of community and identity. The Scouts' Early Years Programme (Squirrels) was an adaptation of the regular programme that aimed to deliver a curriculum focused on improving communication skills, executive functions, independence and school readiness among disadvantaged children aged four to five. They achieved this by delivering activities in weekly sessions (Squirrel Dreys) via three different models – one led by a volunteer Scout leader (Scout-led model), one led by families and supported by a volunteer (family-led model), and one delivered via a partner organisation such as a nursery (partner-led model)– and producing digital resources to reinforce session-based learning and widen access to the programme.

What the programme did during the EYSI

At the time the grant started, the Scouts had already been setting up and delivering the Early Years Programme throughout England with funding from the Department for Education. The Mercers Company's grant allowed for Squirrels resources to be extended to several London boroughs, which present different demographic characteristics compared to England as a whole, and to be used to reach the most disadvantaged families. By the end of the third year of the grant, the Squirrels reached around 262 children, 59 adult leaders and 30 young leaders. The Squirrel Dreys opened in a wide range of areas in Greater London, successfully opening 20 pilots in the 30 per cent most deprived areas within the following district boroughs: Greenford & District, Bexley, Romford, Willesden, Ilford East, Bromley, Haringey, Lewisham, Chadwell Heath, Barking and Dagenham, Ealing & Hanwell and Brent.

The EYSI enabled the Scouts to test and learn from a number of different delivery models and design a programme that has demonstrated transformational outcomes for young people. The Scouts learned some key lessons in their first year testing these models that informed future strategy and action. At the very onset of the grant from the Mercers' Company they discovered that the context of London provides some different challenges to the rest of the country. For instance, they reported coming up more often against a lack of community trust in pilot schemes, with some areas experiencing fatigue from past pilots that have come and gone. The Scouts have continued to be led by parental demand when deciding which types of models to offer, having learnt from the delivery of family-led and partner-led models.

In the final year, the Scouts continued to adapt to make scouting more accessible to families from different backgrounds, considering the challenges and barriers to engaging communities new to scouting. As part of this, they adapted their family-led model so parents could bring along older and younger siblings. This involved the whole family and made scouting accessible to families who otherwise would not be able to participate due to childcare. As post-pandemic concerns began to subside, confidence grew within the community and there was an increased number of expressions of interest for Squirrels. However, the Scouts needed to recruit more volunteers to cope with the demand.

Programme findings

A key finding was about the need for time to build trust in areas previously not engaged in scouting, especially as some of the disadvantaged areas were wary of other programmes that had been offered temporarily and then withdrawn. However, group leaders were committed to offering the benefits of scouting to their local communities. These techniques were found to be effective for supporting

disadvantaged children once time had been taken to build trust, since the pupils attending the groups were largely from less socio-economically advantaged areas.

The [Centre for Research in Early Childhood \(CREC\)](#) was commissioned to complete a mixed-methods evaluation focusing specifically on the family-led model. It aimed to identify who the family leaders were, what worked in terms of offering sessions remotely and reaching less advantaged communities and what plans were being made for rolling out the family-led model post-COVID. The evaluation found that group leaders from all three groups had previous experience in scouting. The main motivations for leaders and parents to volunteer were to support children's holistic development and to engage in the fun, active and enjoyable activities of scouting.

Another key finding was about the limits of online engagement and importance of in-person community building, which was a challenge for the Scouts in particular compared other Cohort 1 programmes that could create online content for children. Although remote delivery allowed some parents to remain engaged, and possibly aided programme retention, the evaluation found that overall, the online sessions were unable to deliver some of the key benefits of the in-person sessions. Group leaders and parents expressed concerns about screen time and felt their children were too young to benefit from the online sessions. Despite the contextual challenges, a key overarching finding was that the Scouts model can successfully be adapted to younger children in London to support early learning.

Achievements and ongoing work

A key achievement of the Scouts' has been their success in engaging children from disadvantaged communities, as well as engaging children from different ethnic groups, with a diversity of languages and religions. This has been very much down to the efforts of Scouts leaders and cohort coaches who are volunteers who help set up 10 Squirrel Dreys, spending six months with them, sharing best practices and identifying areas where additional support might be needed. A fundamental part of Scouting is about building community and bringing people together and the Scouts created activity packs which were sent out to all families, to ensure children were supported in continuing scouting activities at home, regardless of their digital access during the pandemic.

Following the Mercers grant, the Scouts secured a number of donations and grants through various foundations, including the IWill fund which agreed to match funds up to £1.25 million to support the scale-up of Squirrel Scouts. Through developing their family-led and partner-led models they will continue to engage with families new to Scouting, particularly those in disadvantaged areas, providing a start-up grant for groups opening in areas that fall within the 30 per cent most deprived. They are continuing to our roll out of Squirrels across the UK and are aiming to create 12,300 new Squirrels places for communities that Squirrels is currently not present in by April 2027.

Since testing their delivery models the Scouts have been able to roll out the Squirrels programme at scale with over 1,700 units open across the UK (103 of these in Greater London) and 24 per cent (486) are open in areas that have a relatively high score falling into the bottom three quintiles on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). This is an indicator that maps relative deprivation in England's neighbourhoods with quintile one being the most deprived and quintile five being the least deprived. Over 21,000 four and five-year-olds are participating in the programme each week and 7,105 volunteers have been recruited with 46 per cent of these completely new to Scouting. 1,968 young leaders (14-17 year olds) have also been recruited into Scouting resulting in each unit having at least one Young Leader supporting the planning and delivery of programme.



The Scouts in action: Outdoor scouting activities form a key part of the Scouts' early years programme.



The Scouts in action: Squirrels Scout members participating in an outdoor cooking activity, learning valuable independence and practical skills.

Cohort 2 programmes (2020-2023)

Ark

About the programme

Ark is an education charity that works to improve educational achievement in areas of disadvantage. Their work for the EYSI developed and delivered their early years initiative, Ark Start, an integrated education programme delivered through two early years settings operating in Clapham Junction and East Croydon. The programme integrated several interventions focusing on four areas:

- Literacy improvement to increase language and communication skills for children
- Enrichment opportunities to improve children's health, resilience, independence and confidence
- Partnership with parents to engage them in early years education and improve the home learning environment
- High-quality training for early years professional staff to increase their confidence, skills and tools to deliver effective early years education

What the programme did during the EYSI

Ark Start opened two nurseries: John Archer in Clapham Junction and Oval in East Croydon. Across both sites, they reached a total of 235 children by the end of their third year. Over this period Ark also recruited and trained a team of 17 including three apprentices. The number of children Ark Start could take on was limited by staff capacity as they were affected by broader recruitment challenges. However, they reviewed their apprenticeship recruitment and support model to maximise support, leading to increased retention and quick integration for new staff. They also began working with the University of Greenwich and Ark Teacher Training to recruit undergraduate and graduate early educators who are likely to be retained, thereby promoting long-term sustainability.

The training model was adapted in response to staff feedback during their first year. In place of a single training day and weekly team meetings, the new approach involved planning meetings, weekly supervisions and individual coaching targets set fortnightly so that staff had tangible goals to work towards. Group and individual bespoke training sessions on child development also took place fortnightly. This approach has supported continuous improvement without burdening staff as training and development are incorporated into everyday tasks and coaching can take place 'in the moment'.

In addition, Ark developed parent programmes and enrichment activities to involve families in the nursery's operations. These included "stay and plays" which are an opportunity for parents to have meaningful one-to-one time with their children and "home visits" where practitioners aim to establish stronger connections with children and their families. Initially, these were put on hold by the pandemic until the second year of delivery. After April 2022, 100 per cent of children attended "stay and plays" and by the end of the third year, 97 per cent of families had received at least one home visit and 90 per cent of families attended at least one parent event. Parental engagement activities launched in 2021 also included a peer parenting programme, "Empowering Parents Empowering Communities" which was delivered by and for parents, supporting 18 families to help each other face common challenges and a "Parent Power" programme, run in partnership with Citizens UK, which provided a space for 35 families to take action on a range of issues affecting them in the community.

Programme findings

During each year of the EYSI funding, pupils who attended Ark Start nurseries, including FSM-eligible pupils, achieved above the national average on the good level of development (GLD) measures used to assess early years children at the end of reception. Significantly, the gap between non-FSM and FSM-eligible pupils seemed to close in their final year. These findings are presented in Table 1 and discussed in more detail in the third section of this report. We analyse the findings to explore the impact Ark Start has made on the lives of disadvantaged pupils, who have been identified as disadvantaged based on the FSM measure.

Ark Start's staff survey results were also very positive with all staff reporting they were happy in their role and receiving high-quality training. Over the three years, most staff reported they are proud to work at Ark Start, they expect to stay working there for at least two years, and that the training and coaching were supportive. The majority of staff also felt listened to and valued by their line manager and reported that they felt increasingly skilled in implementing the curriculum and working with parents.

Ark Start learnt that to make continued professional development (CPD) training possible they needed to have a tight timetable, and a strict register established at the beginning of a term, so they are clear about how many children will be in attendance. Early years institutions are only funded for the time they spend with the children in their care, and not for professional development that takes place before and after core hours. Therefore, they found that professional CPD had to be prioritised over profit.

Achievements and ongoing work

Integrating training and development into their operational model was a key feature of Ark Start's success. The 'coaching' aspect of the model, including 'in the moment' feedback, took place while staff members were engaging with a class. This limited the additional time burden and provided concrete feedback and examples of how to improve. Other aspects of the training such as the planning meetings and weekly supervisions took place outside of core hours, either before 8 am or after 5 pm when fewer children attend the nurseries and staff capacity was more flexible. Ark's investment in staff CPD has not only promoted the high-quality delivery of their curriculum, enrichment programme and parenting programme, but, as demonstrated by the staff survey, also means most of their staff expect to stay with them for at least two years, ensuring continuity.

Ark Start shared what they learnt about best practice as part of a coalition of organisations working for change in early years education, providing evidence about what works in areas of deprivation. As part of these discussions they co-authored a report with Early Education, LEYF, KindredSquared and Frontier Economics. They were also interviewed by the Times Educational Supplement and participated in several roundtables including those chaired by the Women's Budget Group and the Department for Education. The success of the Ark Start programme has resulted in the expansion of the pilot to 2027 to open an additional six nurseries. Since the end of this three-year initiative, they have successfully opened three more nurseries (five in total) in Elephant and Castle, Holland Park and North Kensington funded through philanthropic donations alongside government and private fee income.



Ark Start in action: engaging in a one-on-one learning session with an Ark Start educator.



Ark Start in action: exploring the "Peter Rabbit Burrow" tunnel. Ark combines literacy development with enriching experiences that foster resilience and communication skills in early years children.

Catch Up®

About the programme

Catch Up® is a not-for-profit charity that aims to reduce literacy and numeracy difficulties that contribute to underachievement, by offering one-to-one support to children. They offer two structured interventions, Catch Up® Literacy and Catch Up® Numeracy, which are proven to significantly enhance the achievement of learners who find these fundamental skills challenging. Catch Up® supports staff in participating schools to identify children falling behind so they can be invited to take part in 15-minute, twice-weekly sessions with a teaching assistant, teacher or mentor trained to deliver the programme. Through these structured interventions, Catch Up® works to ensure that every child has the opportunity to develop strong foundational skills that are essential for their future academic success and personal development.

What the programme did during the EYSI

Catch Up® Literacy and Catch Up® Numeracy have previously been used extensively with children aged 6 to 14 years. Their work as part of the EYSI aimed to develop and test a version of the intervention that is suitable for children aged five and attending a reception class in primary school. Over the course of the three-year project, Catch Up® trained 110 school staff in Hackney, Islington, Tower Hamlets and Westminster to deliver their literacy and numeracy interventions to 79 reception-age children. During the first two years, Catch Up® developed their new model using an action research approach to adapt the training and resource packages for younger children.

Revisions to the programme's resources included the production of FAQ guidance for working with reception-age pupils, progress booklets and learner materials that were modified to focus on reception-age curriculum, book collections that were compiled to support Catch Up® Literacy and supporting materials for parents and carers. These modifications enabled parents and trained school staff to work in a more effective and focused way with younger pupils. The final year focussed on trialling and evaluating the impact of the package and had intended to be a large-scale trial to produce a data set that could be used to evaluate whether programme impacts appeared statistically significant, however recruitment was badly affected by changes in the overall education landscape, including a focus on 'COVID gap closing' using the National Tutoring Service and the cost of living crisis which greatly impacted schools.

To aid recruitment challenges, Catch Up® engaged other potential partner organisations including the Education Endowment Foundation and the National Literacy Trust to explore how they supported school recruitment for their trials. Despite contacting over 3000 London primary schools and offering free training, administration grants and a set of 24 books to an approximate total value of £2000 per school, only eight schools were able to take part. In the absence of a sufficiently large, statistically robust dataset to make generalisations from, Catch Up® had to modify their approach to evaluation. Participating schools were therefore asked to report on the impact and effects by providing at least one anonymised pupil case study for each intervention they were trialling.

Programme findings

Overall, the evidence showed that the Catch Up® model had a positive impact on the attainment and progress of reception-age pupils in literacy and numeracy and had a positive effect on their confidence and attitude towards learning. During the final year of the project, 41 school staff members also responded to an online training evaluation survey including 22 staff who were trained in Catch Up®

Numeracy and 19 staff who were trained in Catch Up® Literacy. Both Catch Up® Literacy and Catch Up® Numeracy-trained staff reported on average that the training was either "Very good" or "Excellent".

Catch Up® Literacy case studies were returned for 12 pupils showing that, overall, the pupils received a total of 130 one-to-one sessions between them. All 12 case studies reported qualitatively that the pupils showed evidence of making progress or improvement in their literacy and confidence. The quantitative impact data reinforces the case study findings, showing an increase in the raw score from the Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test (SSRCT).

Catch Up® Numeracy case studies were returned for five pupils showing that, overall, the pupils received a total of 46 one-to-one sessions between them. The case studies reported that the pupil showed evidence of making progress with their numeracy, confidence and attitude towards learning and the quantitative impact data supported the findings of the case studies with improvements in progress observed using the Basic Number Screening Test (BNST). Four other case studies had expected to be returned but were not valid for various reasons. One school reported that they did not have time to start the one-to-one sessions, another reported that the maturity of the chosen pupil made any meaningful engagement very difficult, the third said the chosen pupil had EAL and did not have a sufficient level of maths vocabulary to engage, and the final school did not provide any information.

Achievements and ongoing work

Catch Up® has successfully integrated the newly created early years resources into their existing interventions and raised awareness through marketing activities. They are also running information drop-in sessions for existing users to learn more about the early years resources and how to support younger learners. A key success of the Catch Up® model has been their engagement with parents and carers to integrate literacy and numeracy learning into the family home. They adapted their approach by modifying the Catch Up® website so that parents and carers could access supporting materials remotely. This online approach to training and family engagement supported the overall sustainability of the project as the new resources can now be made available to existing Catch Up® trained schools and any future schools. The findings from the initiative have been included in subsequent educational conferences. Dr Ann Dowker presented to the British Society for Learning into Mathematics (BSRLM) Autumn Conference.

Looking ahead, Catch Up® are considering holding training courses specifically for those working with younger learners. They will also monitor the use of the new resources and feedback received to assess the impact of their continued use for struggling learners. Catch Up® would like to further investigate their impact through larger-scale trials based on this project. This would include assessing whether children who speak English as an additional language respond differently to the intervention from children who speak English as their first language and any difference in response between children who are and are not eligible for free school meals. The Mercers Initiative enabled Catch Up® to provide a legacy of resources and guidance for schools to access now and in the future, and additional trials would support even more struggling learners and make a difference.



Catch Up® in action: one-to-one support with Catch Up® Numeracy.



Catch Up® in action: one-to-one support with Catch Up® Literacy.

Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE)

About the programme

CLPE is a charity that works to support literacy education in primary schools. They provide well-researched, creative literacy training and resources to enhance classroom teaching and learning. This project (Closing the Vocabulary Gap; CVG) was a partnership between CLPE and Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, a book gifting programme that mails free, high-quality books to children under five. The goal was to improve early childhood literacy outcomes by using high-quality texts to support the development of communication, language, and literacy in the early years to train practitioners to improve their subject knowledge and pedagogical skills and to increase access to literature by distributing the books to schools and to children's homes.

What the programme did during the EYSI

The project built on twenty years of research into the impact of CLPE's flagship programme, 'The Power of Reading'. The book gifting programme distributed 12 high-quality texts over the course of a year to each child and their setting, encouraging shared social reading experiences and enjoyment while also allowing children to build on prior knowledge and vocabulary. CLPE additionally provided teachers with a sustained continued professional development (CPD) training programme; provided a class pack of 12 high-quality children's books; and access to their School Membership teaching resources so that they were able to make immediate and frequent use of the books and associated teaching sequences in the classroom.

Over the three years of the Initiative CLPE reached 88 teachers during 12 CPD training sessions (four per year) from 32 schools, located in the London boroughs of Camden, Hackney, and Tower Hamlets and provided 1,200 pupils with quality texts. CLPE had intended to deliver their CPD training face-to-face but, similarly to other programmes, they had to quickly adapt to the COVID-19 pandemic during their first year. They delivered their programme online when national lockdowns prohibited face-to-face activities, splitting their one-day training sessions into two half-days to support attention and engagement. This thoughtful approach meant they could ensure schools could access the programme despite ongoing difficulties caused by the pandemic, before returning to in-person sessions during the second year of their grant.

An evaluation that was conducted by the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) and the Sutton Trust ran concurrently with the project's implementation. The joint evaluation aimed to determine the added value and impact on communication, language and literacy engagement and attainment of children in reception. It included two components: in-depth qualitative interviews with teachers participating in the project, and the collection and analysis of pupil outcome data. Interviews were conducted with 10 reception teachers and three senior leaders during the first year and nine reception teachers during the second. Google Forms and webinar recordings were used to enable the research to continue during periods of lockdowns by collecting teacher reflections remotely.

Programme findings

The evaluation found several promising findings including that reading, revisiting and responding to a high-quality book over a sustained period of time improves communication and language development, as well as supporting authentic writing processes. It also found that social reading experiences can increase children's enthusiasm and motivation as independent readers, while active approaches to

storytelling support children to engage independently in imaginative play and story-making and better understand narrative structures, characters and themes.

Figure 2: Findings relating to the number of Reception children in the project who were working at expected (achieving ELG) at the end of their reception year compared to the beginning (C&L, Reading, Writing)

Positive attitudes to reading	Reader engagement	Communication and Language (combined)	Reading (combined)
Beginning of reception (baseline)	839	971	381
End of year reception	1182	1270	856

The qualitative findings were supported by analysis of the outcomes data which showed that the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers was smaller in project schools compared to all pupils within the local area. In addition, the year one phonics screening check results were higher for participating schools within Tower Hamlets and Hackney compared to the local population.¹⁰

Overall, the teachers interviewed felt that the project had introduced greater variety into their teaching practice. Teachers reported that they were using new pedagogical approaches and felt more confident in their teaching of literacy, language and communication.¹¹ The evaluation concluded that there is value in continuing the targeted recruitment of schools to participate in the CVG project based on indicators of disadvantage and that there should be continued funding and delivery of this and similar projects.

Achievements and ongoing work

CLPE delivered a well-designed CPD programme and provided teaching materials that supported early years teachers to work in depth with carefully selected, high-quality books through creative teaching approaches and explored how to develop positive reader identity and independent reading habits in children. A key element of the project was the book-gifting programme in which children received books to their homes from the Imagination Library UK and the same books were delivered to their schools each month. Teachers were able to reflect on and enhance opportunity for sharing these books with children through social reading experiences in school and in supporting parents to share them with the children at home.

Since the Initiative CLPE has been welcomed as a member of the Council for Subject Associations as an expert in English. They have submitted members' views to the government's Curriculum and Assessment Review and have met with the Department of Education to share the impact of their research, programmes and resources.¹² Power of Reading continues to be delivered as a longstanding and flagship CLPE programme in London and regionally in Brighton and Hove, Manchester and Rugby. CLPE is currently engaged in recruitment for an EEF-funded randomised controlled trial to explore the impact of Power of Reading on Year 5 pupils in partnership with independent evaluators at MMU. They will build on their experience of online delivery and continue to provide schools with access to their Power of Reading website, which offers detailed planning resources that are linked with the texts supplied. They

¹⁰ <https://clpe.org.uk/research/power-reading-early-years-report-2023>

¹¹ https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/CVG%20evaluation_final%20report%20%28003%29.pdf

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/improving-the-curriculum-and-assessment-system>

will continue to examine and draw on the evidence to share with government and partner organisations and to refine and develop their programme design and delivery with these elements in mind.

Looking forward, CLPE's partnership with the Imagination Library could become a model for working with schools and early years providers. They aim to use the knowledge gained from delivering the CVG project to develop a self-funded model for schools, as well as using the project outcomes to enhance and develop their other research publications and programmes. The transition to delivering training online in response to the pandemic has also offered an opportunity for the organisation to broaden their reach and increase sustainability.



CLPE in action: the project equips teachers with practical, playful methods to transform Dolly Parton's Imagination Library books into powerful vocabulary-building tools.

CLPE in action: collaboration – building a canon of rhyme and song



Cohort 3 programmes (2021-2024)

National Children's Bureau (NCB)

About the programme

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) delivered its literacy-based home learning environment programme Making it REAL (Raising Early Attainment in Literacy; MiR). It aimed to support practitioners in building parents' skills and creating supportive home learning environments, increasing knowledge and confidence to help their children develop stronger language and literacy skills, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds. This project was developed in partnership with Lewisham local authority and delivered through a holistic, borough-wide approach.

What the programme did during the EYSI

Making it REAL draws on evidence from the [original REAL project](#) by Professors Cathy Nutbrown and Peter Hannon at the University of Sheffield. REAL uses a framework called '[ORIM](#)' (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction and Model) which suggests parents can help their children's literacy development in [four main ways](#): environmental print, books, early writing and aspects of oral language. Teachers and practitioners share ORIM with families through a series of home visits and literacy events, working together to support children's early literacy development. In Lewisham, this was delivered through three strands:

- MiR Home Learning Programme, a two-day training programme for practitioners, followed by REAL projects delivered in settings involving one-to-one home visits with families and literacy events to support children's communication, language and literacy development;
- Sharing REAL with Parents which included workshops on the MiR approach delivered directly to parents to support them in improving their child's home learning environment;
- Universal Introductory MiR Training in the MiR Approach, a one-day training programme introducing MiR to a broader range of early years practitioners and services, including Health and Social Care teams.

Over the three years, 102 practitioners were fully trained to participate in the MiR Home Learning Programme and the Universal Introductory Training reached a further 278 practitioners. The workforce crisis in the early years sector affected sign-up and attendance, making it very difficult for settings to release staff to attend training. However, NCB's approach enabled them to reach a total of 427 practitioners across all strands, including 47 through additional Start for Life funding. This is a great achievement and reaching 47 per cent of early years settings in Lewisham.

Parental engagement included 640 parents reached through the Home Learning Programme, 89 through the Sharing REAL workshops with parents and 47 through additional Start for Life sessions, reaching 776 parents over the three years (25 per cent above target). Child engagement included 252 children directly supported through home visits and 449 children who attended literacy events, reaching 701 children. 77 nurseries also engaged with library services signing up nearly 400 children for Lewisham libraries and further children have been reached in Lewisham through settings using REAL approaches in their everyday practice, meaning the estimated total engagement surpassed 1200+ children. The [Centre for Research in Early Childhood](#) (CREC) was commissioned to evaluate the programme's three-year impact, assess how effectively REAL had become embedded into the borough and contribute to the evidence base to inform future planning for similar projects.

Programme findings

The [evaluation](#) showed that children who took part in MiR improved their communication, language and early literacy skills and life skills including independence, agency and confidence. The number of children in Lewisham who achieved a Good Level of Development (GLD) at the end of reception between 2022 and 2024 increased by 3 per cent (70 per cent and 73 per cent); whilst this cannot be causally attributed to NCB's programme, the borough-wide approach taken suggests some correlation.

Parents also improved their knowledge and confidence to support their child's early learning and literacy development. 100 per cent of parents who attended Sharing REAL workshops reported that it increased their knowledge, confidence and preparedness to support their child's early literacy and learning and 94 per cent of parents involved in the MiR home learning programme reported feeling confident/very confident in supporting their child at the end of the project. Following the programme, parents consistently reported they would pay greater attention and listen to their child, engage more with the outdoor environment, follow their child's interest and enjoy books together.

The greatest barrier to achieving the programme goals, as reported by practitioners and NCB's strategic leads, was staffing, including workforce recruitment, retention and ratios. This is in line with the national picture with systemic workforce challenges creating a crisis in the early years sector. Around 10 per cent of trained practitioners left their settings across the three years of the programme. Therefore, settings were encouraged to train several staff members to account for turnover, with additional support including flexible meeting options, bespoke training and community engagement efforts utilised to sustain the project.

Achievements and ongoing work

Making it REAL has had a positive impact on children's outcomes, on practitioners' knowledge, confidence and skills, and on parents' knowledge confidence and skills in supporting their children's development. A key achievement has been their deep integration into the community, expanding the programme's reach and impact. They utilised community spaces, such as libraries, for training, events, and meetings and partnered with local organisations, including Bookstart, to provide resources for families that enhanced the home learning environment. They also collaborated with Lewisham local authority to extend the introductory Making it REAL training to reach a wider range of services working with children under five. So far, they have trained early years practitioners, childminders, librarians, health visitors; speech and language therapists; family practitioners/outreach workers; Family Hub navigators, Community staff nurses, Educational Psychologists (Early Years), Foster carers, Early help coordinators, and staff from local community groups. Across the programme, 99 per cent of practitioners report increased confidence and knowledge in working with parents to support communication and early literacy.

Making it REAL in Lewisham has demonstrated what can be achieved through an authority-wide approach. Building on the success and impact of the Mercers-funded programme, Lewisham local authority commissioned further work to extend Making it REAL in Lewisham and ensure future sustainability. Additional funding was secured through the 'Start for Life' initiative that will extend the delivery of the MiR programme until June 2025. In addition to the original three strands, NCB is delivering 'Train the Trainer' sessions for practitioners to become Making it REAL trainers within their local communities and also supporting parents to become REAL champions. Good progress has already been made with integrating the initiative into early years settings and services across Lewisham and the

additional funding will support the project's growth, longevity, and deeper integration into the community.



NCB in action: learning literacy and numeracy through practical, everyday activities such as going to the supermarket.

Parents can create supportive home learning environments by engaging their children in these daily activities.

NCB in action: exploring books at the library.

By introducing children to libraries, parents and caregivers connect their families to valuable literacy resources while building routines that reinforce the importance of reading.



Peeples

Peeples is a charity that supports parents and their children to make the most of everyday learning opportunities together. They develop interventions that support parents as their children's first educators and provide training for practitioners to implement their programmes. Their project piloted and evaluated an innovative intervention, 'Exploring Together' to improve practitioners' and parents' confidence, knowledge and skills to support early STEM learning and encourage early STEM skills in children through everyday activities in their early years settings and at home.

What the programme did during the EYIS

The intervention was informed by two specific elements: the ShREC (Sh-Share attention, R-Respond, E-Expand, C-Conversations) approach and the STEM lens. The ShREC approach, originally developed by Sheringham Nursery School and Children's Centre, focuses on encouraging high-quality interactions with children and the STEM lens is a conceptual tool that uses simple STEM definitions to identify and make the most of everyday opportunities to support early STEM learning. These tools were used to inform the project's two components: the Exploring Together Training (for practitioners), and the Exploring Together Programme (for parents). During the final year, the Institute for Employment Studies (IES) evaluated the intervention in a mixed-method study which included an assessment of the quality of the home learning environment using a test to measure maths and science components.

Over the three years, Peeples worked with ten schools in London to deliver Exploring Together. They developed and piloted the intervention with Sheringham Nursery School in the first year before trialling and evaluating the programme in three settings in the second year and six in the third. In total, 15 practitioners were trained and 78 parents participated in the programme across the settings over eight weekly sessions. Peeples originally intended the Exploring Together intervention (training and programme) to be delivered in-person. However, the pandemic and other systemic issues in the sector posed significant challenges. In response to ongoing illness and capacity challenges, Peeples adopted a blended approach and quickly adapted to online delivery during the project's first year, enabling parents and practitioners to access the intervention flexibly, minimising the pandemic's effects.

The Exploring Together Programme for parents was delivered online with weekly sessions provided on a Padlet, supplemented by an A4 folder with hard copies of all materials and a 'home-play' pack with free resources to support parents in using the suggested activities at home. Peeples also provided flexible support for the intervention through a WhatsApp broadcast list, WhatsApp groups, drop-in sessions, email, telephone and support visits.

Programme findings

Peeples had intended to conduct a small-scale randomised controlled trial however, similar to other EYIS programmes, it became clear this would not be feasible in the project's first year. Peeples, therefore, adapted their approach and instead opted for an independent evaluation of the online adaptation of the Exploring Together programme, which was carried out by the Institute for Employment Studies and the University of Oxford. The evaluation aimed to measure the impact of the Exploring Together programme on the Home Learning Environment (maths and science activities) and interviews with parents and practitioners were conducted to examine the perceived impacts on parents and children.

Paired significance testing was used to identify if there were any differences in the data between the two time points that were unlikely to have occurred by chance, and therefore are likely to indicate a genuine effect. An effect size was calculated to provide a standardised measure of the 'size' of the

difference, and therefore how meaningful the result is likely to be in the real world. The effect size for both maths and science was interpreted as large, and was, therefore, a meaningful finding. The 48 parents who responded to the pre-and post-intervention surveys reported undertaking both maths and science-based activities with their children at a significantly higher frequency immediately after the programme, in comparison to before.

A post-training evaluation survey also revealed that all practitioners agreed or strongly agreed that the outcomes from all training modules had been met. Peeple therefore successfully supported practitioners to increase their confidence, knowledge and skills in supporting early STEM and engaging with parents to help them support their child's early STEM learning at home.

Although illness and capacity challenges affected participation, the design and delivery of the online programme addressed the challenge of releasing busy staff for training and enabled parents to engage with the intervention in between working hours. Peeple could also extend access to Padlet which enabled participants to catch up if sessions were missed and they maintained contact with parents and practitioners through the various communication methods if concerns were raised. Having online materials available for parents to access at their convenience was a significant benefit and contributed to the high retention rates (92 per cent of parents returned the post-intervention questionnaire) in stark contrast to face-to-face sessions where it can be challenging to catch up if sessions are missed.

Achievements and ongoing work

Families engaged in significantly more science and maths-related activities at home after completing Peeple's Exploring Together Programme. Positive effects on children were also reported across a range of areas including confidence in themselves and STEM, curiosity, STEM skills, language and communication and the benefits of increased parent-child time. Improvements were also noted in terms of interactions and relationships between practitioners, parents and children because of the overall increase in confidence, skills, knowledge and understanding. Peeple achieved this by continuously reflecting on the challenges they faced during the delivery of their programme, designing their intervention with the needs of staff and parents in mind and responding flexibly to the context they were living and working in.

Looking forward, Peeple intends to scale the delivery of the programme and test its feasibility beyond nursery settings to Family Hubs and childminders. They have secured funding from Phase 2 of the Mercers' Company EYSI to refine the Peep Exploring Together intervention and exploit the benefits of digital platforms to share the programme with families and support their interaction with settings. They will build on progress made during Phase 1 by reflecting on the findings from their pilot and independent evaluations to improve, develop and evaluate the programme as part of Phase 2.

The work will extend the evidence of the programme's impact on parents' interaction with their children, including the home learning environment and on children's outcomes, relating to language, numeracy, confidence and curiosity. Peeple also hope to commission a randomised controlled trial to enable the programme to progress up the evidence ladder for an efficacy trial on a larger scale.



Peeples in action: hands-on experiences help children develop early STEM skills while building confidence in both children and their caregivers in approaching scientific concepts through play.



Peeples in action: exploring with a magnifying glass. Peeples incorporates incorporating STEM learning into everyday activities that are engaging and accessible to young children.

Speech and Language UK

About the programme

Speech and Language UK aims to ensure every child facing communication challenges can thrive. Their mission is to equip children with the skills they need so they aren't left behind, waiting to be understood. They achieve this by creating tools for schools/nurseries, advising families, and advocating for better policies. Their project revised and evaluated an existing resource with inner London children and their parents. Early Talk Boost is a 9-week language programme for 3–4-year-old children who need language support because their communication is behind their peers based on developmental milestones. This project aimed to accelerate language and communication skills and rigorously test whether the resource could effectively boost English acquisition for multilingual children.

What the programme did during the EYSI

During the first year, Speech and Language UK worked with 12 practitioners and 44 parents to inform the development of the revised Early Talk Boost. They aimed to create training materials and resources that were culturally responsive and effective for supporting multilingual children by reviewing existing materials with parents and practitioners who had experience with Early Talk Boost. Changes that were made to the programme materials – practitioner training, parent workshop, and books - were incorporated into Speech and Language UK's standard product portfolio.

Seven films were produced to support parents and resources including "Jake & Tizzy" story books were redesigned to be shorter, more visual, and include open-ended questions and activities based on feedback. Terminology was also simplified for better accessibility and key messages were added to celebrate the advantages of multilingualism and diversity and encourage the learning of English alongside each child's home language. These are examples of changes that were made to enhance parental involvement, reinforce vocabulary and concepts from group sessions, and encourage more effective at-home learning conversations. The revised Early Talk Boost was tested in a randomised controlled trial with seven settings, 42 children and 22 parents and evaluated by an academic research partner at City University of London during the project's final year.

After receiving Early Talk Boost training during the second and third years, practitioners went on to deliver the programme to a group of children in their setting during three, 15–20-minute sessions per week for nine weeks. These sessions included activities and games supported by storybooks and parents were also provided with the books to share with their child at home. Over the three years, Speech and Language UK trained a total of 47 practitioners and worked with 233 children. An additional 60 parents were engaged either through workshops or settings who provided weekly "Jake and Tizzy" books and "Tizzy's talking tips". All practitioners who were trained in years two and three were also asked to feedback on the materials, promoting continuous reflection and allowing Speech and Language UK to learn from their experience in practice and make changes to enhance the programme's accessibility to practitioners and families who speak more than one language.

Programme findings

As part of the project's evaluation, Prof. Nicky Botting, Speech and Language UK's academic partner at City University of London, analysed the data from the RCT The Early Talk Boost group showed more widespread change across communication measures than the control group. However, changes were subtle, and some changes occurred for both groups. Children from families with lower education levels made more progress with Early Talk Boost.

The results showed that the Early Talk Boost programme seems to help children more than attending nursery. Children in the programme improved in responding to others, understanding symbols, and thinking skills. Even though the changes were not huge, they were still noticeable. There may also have been some 'intervention generalisation', where children in the control groups have also benefitted from the learning that took place during the Early Talk Boost training. The time between assessments may also been too short to capture changes. This points to a common challenge when assessing early years interventions as effectiveness is difficult to measure and more sensitive assessments may have been needed.

Speech and Language UK encountered three primary challenges that impacted their target reach, overall impact, and the results of the randomised controlled trial: setting and staff attrition, data collection issues and long-term parent engagement as families often moved to different settings. They found it would be beneficial in future to dedicate more time to understanding settings' systems and data collection capabilities during the recruitment phase and establish a sign-up cut-off point to focus resources on committed settings. Introducing a Memorandum of Understanding would also help with clarifying expectations, responsibilities, and commitments along with a detailed project schedule for staying on track. Given the high mobility of families in project locations, they will also consider using community spaces and online platforms such as Zoom to connect with parents and families, in addition to nurseries.

Figure 3: Findings based on practitioner and parents' feedback and the results of the Early Talk Boost Tracker

Measure:	Percentage:
Practitioner feedback:	96%
Agreed/strongly agreed they knew more about supporting parents in child language development	89%
Agreed/strongly agreed their understanding of speech, language, and communication needs improved	70%
Agreed/strongly agreed they knew more about supporting all children's speech, language, and communication skills	98%
Parent feedback:	61%
Agreed/strongly agreed they would use Tizzy's Talking Tips when reading with their child	95%
Agreed/strongly agreed they would change how they spoke to their child	82%
Agreed/strongly agreed they now knew more about supporting their child's language development	96%
Children's Language Skills (Early Talk Boost Tracker based on data from 105 children):	Before
Children in green category (within expected levels for their age)	4%

Children in red category (below expected levels for their age)	66%
Children in green category (within expected levels for their age)	39%
Children in red category (below expected levels for their age)	32%

Achievements and ongoing work

Speech and Language UK successfully launched the final revised Early Talk Boost pack in May 2024, incorporating it into their product portfolio. Since the pack was revised, 805 have been sold across the UK, Ireland and Australia. Their dissemination plan included two webinars for new and existing audiences, including their Licensed tutor network and a local authority network meeting where they reached ten bilingual specialists from Surrey, North Lincolnshire, Wiltshire, West Sussex, Herefordshire, East Sussex, Worcestershire and Wolverhampton councils. They also plan to publish articles and have shared films and blogs made during the project widely on social media platforms and used the key messages from the evaluation to promote the programme and achieve widespread reach.

As a result of interest in this project, Speech and Language UK created a Bilingualism Special Interest group to look at research related to children who speak more than one language and share best practice. Looking ahead, Speech and Language UK will continue to share what they have learnt and use the revised Early Talk Boost to engage with practitioners and families as the improvements can apply to all children facing communication challenges.



Speech and Language UK in action: a practitioner reading to children



Speech and Language UK in action: a mother reading her son

Tales Toolkit

About the programme

Tales Toolkit aims to close the attainment gap using evidence based, play-centred online storytelling training focusing on developing children's language, socio-emotional skills and levels of engagement with literacy. They provided interactive, child-led resources to early years settings and focused on developing quality interactions. The programme consists of extensive training for practitioners as well as easy-to-use open-ended resources to aid storytelling. Additionally, practitioners were given access to supplementary resources, including expert webinars, downloadable resources, membership of the Tales Toolkit social media community and links to further research. With this project they aimed to reach and make a difference to more children, with a focus on disadvantaged areas of London.

What the programme did during the EYSI

Tales Toolkit reached 7000 children and trained 400 teachers across 83 settings in 15 London Boroughs: Haringey, Southwark, Tower Hamlets, Waltham Forest, Sutton, Newham, Wandsworth, Lambeth, Enfield, Islington, Camden, Lewisham, Barnet, RBKC, Greenwich. Tales Toolkit usually costs schools £800 but during the EYSI they offered the programme at a discounted £200 fee. The teachers subscribed to the Tales Toolkit Members Area to complete the training and to access other online resources and Tales Toolkit also hosted termly meetings for all schools to allow for the sharing of best practice and answering questions.

During the first year, Tales Toolkit experienced some recruitment difficulties as it took time to establish relationships with busy early years teachers. They expanded the geography of their trial to address this challenge, recruiting schools from additional London Boroughs. They also encountered inconsistencies in the attainment data because of the changes to curriculum and assessment - they addressed this by creating templates to help clarify the data they needed practitioners to share.

Schools/settings shared their anonymous data allowing Tales Toolkit to identify if any specific groups of children have been particularly impacted, for example, children with Special Educational Needs (SEND), English as an Additional Language (EAL), and children eligible for Early Years Pupil Premium funding (EYPP)¹³. This was based on over 800 children's data from 19 schools/settings drawn from anonymous Development Matters data and was compared with baseline data that was collected for 133 children at the beginning of the trial and 142 children at the end of the year. Written stories were also received from 17 schools for a minimum of 60 children.

Evidence from teachers on over 800 children was also shared with Tales Toolkit about their progress including case studies about the impact, examples of children's oral and written stories over time, oral feedback from teachers and online surveys completed at the end of training sessions. 31 teachers also returned a "Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy" Questionnaire. Tales Toolkit discussed their work during two presentations at a European Early Childhood Education Research Association (EECERA) conference in 2024, which is the largest early years research conference in Europe.

¹³ This is a payment made to nurseries for each child identified as being disadvantaged based on the same benefits and income criteria used to allocate free school meals in schools

Programme findings

Tales Toolkit has promising evidence that their programme increased attainment in literacy. They found that the percentage of children working at the expected level of development across all settings that implemented the programme increased.

Figure 4: Findings based on practitioner and parents' feedback and the results of the Early Talk Boost Tracker

Area of Development:	Percentage increase:
Communication and Language	22%
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	36%
Literacy Skills	24%

Qualitative evidence further indicated that children who find it difficult to access more typical and unstructured play activities managed to participate in Tales Toolkit sessions. Teachers reported that the toolkit had a significant impact on vocabulary, storytelling abilities, confidence and enthusiasm and that the sessions were incredibly popular with the children.

Tales Toolkit have found that their resources were particularly effective for working with vulnerable learners, including those in receipt of EYPP, those with disabilities and those developing their English language skills. Tales Toolkit collected stories from the children (scribed by the adults in the setting). Using these they were able to examine the development in sophistication of storytelling over time. The children's stories developed in length and complexity, demonstrating they had moved from describing objects to using their imagination, as well as increasing their vocabulary development and confidence. Developing children's understanding of and ability to manage narrative is a good predictor of literacy outcomes. Results were promising as all children, including vulnerable learners, demonstrated this skill.

The 31 teachers who returned the Teachers' Beliefs about Literacy Questionnaire demonstrated a sound set of beliefs about children's literacy. This was very positive for their students and there was little need for improvement. Settings with staff with a high level of literacy knowledge and positive beliefs about literacy development in young children may have been more likely to be interested in Tales Toolkit in the first instance. The teachers also reported that they found the training and subsequent webinars, termly meetings and other sources of available support to be useful in stimulating conversation within the setting, and for providing signposting to other useful resources.

Achievements and ongoing work

Local authorities are considerably stretched in the post-COVID context, and many couldn't facilitate a targeted rollout to the most disadvantaged settings. Haringey developed a strategy that proved to be very successful as they were the borough with the highest recruitment and retention of settings. They chose one lead setting that seemed particularly keen to engage and had a good relationship with the local authority. This was to ensure good communication channels would be maintained with both the local authority and the programme. Tales Toolkit then supported the setting to become a best practice hub, providing services such as hosting group training, drop-in catch-up sessions, showcasing their practice, or gathering feedback. They found that building a relationship with a lead setting yielded the best results for user engagement across the local authorities that participated. Rowland Hill, the best

practice hub in Haringey, has given guidance and feedback and supported Tales Toolkit to take documentary footage for their new Parent Training sessions currently being developed.

For the last three years, Tales Toolkit have partnered with ChangeX and the LEGO Foundation to allocate funding for settings to complete an online '30-Day Challenge.' After completing the challenge, the settings will get Tales Toolkit for free, plus bonuses. Funding from ChangeX and the LEGO Foundation will be invaluable in reaching those settings with the highest levels of disadvantage who may have otherwise struggled to pay the discounted £200 fee to access Tales Toolkit.

Looking forward beyond the Initiative, Tales Toolkit received funding from the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) in 2023 to conduct a pilot evaluation. The study is currently exploring how Tales Toolkit is delivered in practice in 30 early years settings, the feasibility of delivering the programme and early years practitioners' experiences of using the programme. The EEF has commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to conduct the evaluation, and the first results will be released in Summer 2025.

Tales Toolkit is also collaborating with Chickenshed off the back of their meeting through the EYSI project. They are planning to tour a show, "Two tales come together" at several venues in Summer 2025 including the British Summertime Festival in Hyde Park, The Royal Opera, British Library, and Chickenshed Theatre.



*Tales Toolkit in action:
storytelling with Tales Toolkit
incorporates accessible and
interactive ways for children to
express themselves and build
foundational communication
skills.*

*Tales Toolkit in action:
Tales Toolkit encourage
collaborative learning
to spark imagination
and explore story
elements.*



Section 2: Themes from across the programmes

Based on our analysis of the data collected across the initiative we have identified several common themes that provide relevant insights for others working with young children to improve educational outcomes. We collected qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources including quarterly and biannual updates from the programmes, reports produced by independent evaluators and annual programme reports sent to the Mercers Company. We also collected data from the programmes using a case studies approach we developed, to evaluate how practitioners were being trained across the programmes.

The themes we identify here relate to how programmes are being delivered and evaluated. We look at the common challenges programmes experienced and identify how they were affected by the early years context in England and what we can learn about improving educational delivery in the presence of such challenges.

Firstly, we have identified an increasing trend for programmes to deliver their initiative using a blend of online and in-person features. Online delivery was accelerated during the pandemic when some programmes began operating but this has become a permanent feature for many to maximise their reach and improve accessibility. A caveat to this is that programmes have maintained an awareness of the digital divide and have not sought to replace physical delivery with online content. We found:

- Online content can increase access to resources and maximise programme sustainability.
- However, parents are fearful about too much screen time, and some feel the early years is too young to engage meaningfully in online learning.
- Practitioners, parents and children are keen to meet in person despite time constraints.
- Online delivery is practical but online fatigue is a challenge programmes must consider.
- Offering a blended approach can maximise the benefits of online and in-person delivery.

Secondly, we further explore the challenge of data collection and measuring impact. Programmes could often see the impact they were having on children's learning progress and other developmental areas. However, this was sometimes difficult to capture using quantitative data because of several challenges. These related to the technical challenge of data-gathering including insufficient numbers recruited to conduct planned randomised controlled trials, changes to government policy, difficulties with settings uploading the necessary data and issues with data validity including difficulty identifying appropriate measures that could be quantified and timing between tests being too short to capture subtle learning effects. We found:

- Programmes often needed 'hard' quantitative data to secure funding.
- However, the challenges often limited their ability to produce large-scale, quantitative datasets that captured true progression and impact.
- The programmes implemented a range of adaptive strategies to address challenges, and some were able to provide useful indications of impact using quantitative measures.
- However, none were able to produce datasets that are generalisable to a broader population and the complexity of the early years environment means that producing 'hard' quantitative data is often unfeasible.
- In some cases, intervention generalisation occurred, measures were not sensitive enough to capture subtle learning effects and/or the time between assessments wasn't long enough to

capture the changes - funders should bear this in mind to ensure programmes are funded for long enough to measure impact.

- Programmes also had to balance the importance of evaluation with minimising the burden placed on staff. This was important for increasing setting retention.
- In the context of the early years a mixed methods approach can be effective as qualitative evidence provides deep, contextually relevant insights - this is something funders should consider when reviewing programme evidence.

Thirdly, the importance of good quality and accessible training for practitioners is highlighted. Career growth opportunities in the early years sector are scarce, with only 17 per cent of staff receiving job-related training post-entry.¹⁴ The rate of unqualified staff working in nurseries and pre-schools also rose from 17 per cent in 2020 to 22 per cent in 2024.¹⁵ This trend indicates a shift towards a less qualified workforce, which is a real concern when research has shown that settings with highly qualified staff tend to achieve higher quality scores, and children typically make greater developmental progress.¹⁶ A key achievement of the EYSI programmes has therefore been their commitment to integrating training and development into their programmes despite various challenges including staff capacity and difficulty releasing staff for training. We found:

- High turnover and high classroom needs are stretching the capacity of early years practitioners, and flexibility is therefore essential in terms of how and when training is delivered.
- To maximise accessibility and reach programmes offered multiple in-person training sessions at different times and on different days to fit schedules and/or a mix of face-to-face, online live and pre-recorded sessions.
- Online training was also designed by some programmes to be completed in groups, with interactive activities and discussion.
- Some programmes tracked when trained practitioners leave a setting so additional training sessions can be offered to new staff, to tackle the effects of turnover.
- One programme structured training into the operational model of their early years setting to enable professional development without placing a greater burden on staff.
- Participants found it useful when the training had a practical focus and ongoing support after training is complete is also essential.

Fourthly we look at the importance of building strong relationships at multiple levels including between programmes, parents, delivery partners and local authorities. Building relationships with parents and communities has been vital to ensuring children can participate and helped to extend programme benefits to the home learning environment. Relationship building with practitioners and senior leaders helped to practise clear expectation-setting at all planning and delivery stages. Finally, building relationships with local authorities enabled some programmes to become permanently integrated into their delivery areas and reach different parts of the sector. We found:

- Confident and frequent communication is needed to support relationship-building at all levels.
- Programmes often trained practitioners to improve their skills and confidence in partnering with families.
- It was important to place value on diversity in terms of language and culture, rather than imposing hegemonic values on parents. Parents should not be pressured to speak English with

¹⁴ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england/>

¹⁵ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5>

¹⁶ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/8543/7/SSU-SF-2004-01.pdf>

their children and the term multilingual rather than the initialism 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) should be used when engaging with parents.¹⁷

- Involving senior members of staff in planning, training and delivery is useful to support staff and set clear expectations for the programme.
- Building relationships supports the sharing of knowledge and expertise.
- Local authorities are well placed to know what their local area needs and can support with setting recruitment.
- Local authorities can support permanent integration into an area and support reach to different parts of the sector including early years, childcare, social care, and health services.

Finally, we look at sustainability and how it can be maximised so the programmes can continue to reach vulnerable children and families beyond the lifetime of this initiative. We found that programmes have used several strategies to improve their sustainability at the setting and borough levels. In addition, building strong relationships has also been pivotal to increasing sustainability and promoting the continued use of programme materials and additional funding opportunities. We found:

- Programmes influenced setting 'processes' to incorporate sustainability at the setting level. This included strong partnerships and engagement as well as training, support and supervision.
- The conditions of 'outer contextual factors' (policy and legislation and socio-political context) and 'politics' (e.g., government leadership, political support, unreliable public sector fund allocation) are important because they can either facilitate or create a barrier to sustainability.

The challenge of data collection and capturing impact

The literature on learning development in early childhood acknowledges that there are many obstacles to collecting and accurately capturing emerging knowledge in preschool children.¹⁸ This firstly relates to the technical challenges of data-gathering including recruiting and retaining a sample, reliable data uploading and changes to government policy which can affect data access and collection processes. Data collection can often be a heavy burden on staff and a key challenge for the programmes was to balance the importance of evaluating their effectiveness for future learning, with minimising the amount of pressure that staff are under. If the burden was too great, there was a risk that settings would not be retained. Secondly, challenges relate to capturing learning accurately in the data. Children's varying attention spans can make it difficult to administer tests as they can be easily distracted by the external environment. Practitioners and researchers will also have varying abilities to put the child at ease, which might impact how the child performs on the test. These factors cause an issue with the validity of tests since results might not accurately reflect learning development but could instead be measuring other aspects of development such as behaviour, self-regulation, personality and temperament.¹⁹ By its nature, learning is also dynamic and a child's score at one point in time might not accurately reflect their learning trajectory. We found that the EYSL programmes often expressed a need for 'hard data' about their impact to provide stronger evidence on what works best for supporting all children to thrive and to help them secure long-term commitment from local authorities and funders. However, the challenges outlined often limited their ability to produce large-scale, quantitative datasets that captured true progression and impact.

¹⁷ We have used the initialism 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) in this report to refer to the measure used to record English proficiency in schools. Our recommendation that the term multilingual should be used refers to when practitioners are engaging with parents and children, rather than reflecting the measure recorded in schools' data.

¹⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2022.2125371#d1e235>

¹⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0969594X.2024.2412536#d1e127>

Programmes including Catch Up® and Peeple had planned to conduct randomised controlled trials but were severely affected by technical challenges to data-gathering. This included pandemic-related effects and the impact of the early years recruitment and retention crisis which meant that they were unable to recruit sufficient numbers to conduct large-scale trials as planned. Those who did recruit enough settings including Speech and Language UK experienced other challenges such as difficulty with data uploads. There were some inconsistencies in attainment data due to variability in the attendance of staff and children, which created data gaps. Also, recent changes to the EYFS framework made datasets difficult to compare. Deviations from the project timeline also occurred meaning that data collection periods no longer aligned with the intended programme milestones. This included delays to implementation, changes in school schedules or unforeseen circumstances which caused further delays. Capturing learning accurately in the data and validity issues also occurred. Speech and Language UK found it challenging to identify appropriate measures, either because the measures were not sensitive enough to pick up on subtle effects or because the time between assessments was too short to capture the changes. Intervention generalisation also occurred as it was challenging to ensure control groups didn't benefit from the training.

The programmes implemented a range of adaptive strategies to address the challenges such as extending data collection periods to allow for greater flexibility and increasing the chances of capturing data from all participants; onsite support for data uploading to help staff overcome any technological issues and ensure more consistent and accurate data entry; conducting in-person visits for feedback collection; sharing evaluation links during training session to encourage response rates and incorporating long-term follow-up evaluations to help measure the impact of the training in practice. Despite their efforts, the challenges made it difficult to draw conclusive insights and this points to a common challenge when assessing early years interventions as effectiveness can be difficult to measure.

Some programmes including Ark Start, Catch Up®, CLPE, NCB, Speech and Language UK and Tales Toolkit were able to use quantitative measures. Their results provide useful indications of their impact on children's outcomes which we discuss in their summaries. Additionally, Ark Start, CLPE and NCB showed evidence of impacting the disadvantage gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers who participated in their programmes, which we discuss in the section on disadvantage. However, none of the programmes were able to produce datasets that are generalisable to a broader population. This is a key challenge Ark Start highlighted since they are not yet able to deliver at enough scale to infer statistical significance on outcomes, particularly when looking at subsets of children and demographics through regression analysis. This is compounded by the time lag on key school readiness measures such as the good level of development (GLD) measure. These measures attempt to capture learning that occurred in preschool at the end of reception when a great deal can happen, and highly sensitive measures are needed to capture these effects. This is a great frustration as programmes can often see their impact on children's learning progress and other developmental areas, but demonstrating this quantitatively is a serious challenge.

The perceived need for 'hard' quantitative data points to evidence hierarchies that place greater value on research that uses a representative sample and is therefore more likely to be generalisable to the population. While it is understandable that funders would want such evidence because it is less likely to be circumstantial, the complexity of the early years environment means that producing 'hard' quantitative evidence was extremely challenging and often unfeasible in the context the EYSI programmes were operating in. This can be attributed to the technical challenges to data collection and issues with the validity of measures. In light of this, we found that using a mixed methods approach was

the most effective way to gain a comprehensive understanding of how the programme activities were operating and impacting the children, parents and practitioners they served.²⁰ We often found that qualitative evidence provided deeper, contextually relevant insights. Qualitative feedback also gave programmes clarity to reflect on what was working well and how they could adapt. We therefore find that it is important to place value on different kinds of information including qualitative data to collect high-quality data and capture learning effects. This is firstly because of the challenge of collecting quantitative data but also because qualitative evidence was often more useful for understanding the processes involved in educational delivery. Therefore, we suggest there is great value in collecting both qualitative and quantitative evidence when exploring programmes' impacts.

The importance of good quality and accessible training for early years practitioners

Research has demonstrated that settings with highly qualified staff tend to achieve higher quality scores, and their children typically make greater developmental progress.²¹ However, there is a growing crisis in the retention of qualified staff. The proportion of unqualified staff in nurseries and pre-schools has risen from 17 per cent in 2020 to 22 per cent in 2024 and this trend indicates a shift towards a less qualified workforce.²² This is partially because career growth opportunities in the early years sector are scarce, with only 17 per cent of staff receiving job-related training post-entry.²³ With less well-qualified staff available, providers are forced to use agency staff and apprentices to maintain staff-child ratios, meaning that children may not have a consistent key person and a lack of consistency can have detrimental learning and wellbeing effects.²⁴ A key achievement of the EYSI programmes has therefore been their commitment to integrating training and development into their programmes despite various challenges including staff capacity and difficulty releasing staff for training. Early years practitioners are often already stretched to capacity, and their workload pressure is being exacerbated by high turnover and high classroom needs. Some EYSI programmes reported children entering preschool with lower-than-expected levels of development, such as a lack of toilet training, requiring more time and attention from early years staff. Research also indicates that there has been an increase in the proportion of children identified with Autistic Spectrum Disorder, Speech, Language and Communication needs or Social, Emotional, and Mental Health needs since 2016.²⁵ To implement training effectively within these contextual challenges, all programmes reported that it was important to be flexible in terms of how and when training is delivered.

Various adaptive strategies were used to maximise accessibility and reach for early years staff. Many offered multiple training sessions at different times and on different days to fit schedules, as well as a mix of face-to-face, online live and pre-recorded sessions to complete in their own time. Several programmes streamlined flexible online training to improve accessibility. Peeple's training for example used a modularised approach that combined pre-recorded and live online sessions to increase retention. Peeple's scalable design shows the potential for improving participation in training as the seven practitioners recruited maintained full participation with no dropouts during training or delivery. Similarly, Catch Up® devised a distance training model to train staff in small, school-level groups of 3. They made the Catch Up® training and support resources available online and via video meetings and worked closely with the participating schools, maintaining support via regular email and telephone

²⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03054985.2022.2125371#d1e235>

²¹ <https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/id/eprint/8543/7/SSU-SF-2004-01.pdf>

²² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/education-provision-children-under-5>

²³ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/the-stability-of-the-early-years-workforce-in-england/>

²⁴ <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/120341/html/>

²⁵ <https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/annual-report-2024/>

contact. Similarly, although Tales Toolkit's training is classed as online training, it is run with several staff together as a team, rather than completing individually. This brings the team together to complete the training interactively, facilitated by activities and discussion. These distance training models allowed for greater flexibility and enabled school staff to be trained at their convenience. Training was delivered either in person or online by other programmes depending on what was most accessible and preferred by the participants. To account for turnover, NCB's EYSI programme tracked when trained practitioners left a setting so that additional training sessions could be offered. Approximately 10 per cent of trained practitioners left during the implementation of their programme, but this approach effectively dedicated resources and ongoing support to settings, ensuring that the impact of staff turnover on programme delivery was minimised.

Another approach was to structure training into the operational model of an early years setting. Ark Start enhanced investment in recruitment to deliver an integrated early years education programme that incorporated bespoke training and coaching into everyday tasks, enabling professional development without placing a greater burden on staff. The training was ongoing, with regular CPD opportunities focusing on age-specific planning meetings, weekly supervisions and coaching. Capacity during core hours between 9 am and 3 pm was limited, with large numbers of children attending the nurseries. To limit the burden placed on staff, the 'coaching' aspect of the training took place 'in the moment' while engaging with a class. Other aspects of the training such as the planning meetings and weekly supervisions took place outside of core hours, either before 8 am or after 5 pm when fewer children attend the nurseries and staff capacity is more flexible. This required clarity about how many children would be in attendance after core hours, and Ark established a tight timetable and a strict register at the beginning of a term. These methods produced impressive retention metrics. The benchmark for staff turnover in early years settings is 28 per cent but Ark Start were able to retain all their staff during the final year of their EYSI funding and a staff survey also showed that 80 per cent of the team of 17 expected to stay for at least two years.

A key finding from our analysis of the common outcome measure looking at training and development across the programmes was that participants found it useful when the training had a practical focus. This supported the delivery partners with the 'hands-on' nature of the programmes' activities. Programmes did this in several different ways including modelling their approach or using 'in-the-moment' coaching. Others had practical tasks for trainees to complete between training sessions, and they encouraged ongoing reflection using tools like reflective diaries to consider how to apply the training and to discuss the learning in the next session. Ongoing support after the training sessions were complete was also essential to help trainees put what they had learnt into practice. Ongoing support again varied depending on the delivery model and methods including regular meetings with others delivering the programme, access to forums to ask questions, visits and check-ins via phone or email, newsletters and refresher training sessions were used to share learning. Stakeholder engagement and supporting key delivery partners were central to the success of all EYSI initiatives. Programme staff had to be adaptable and flexible to respond to the challenges that delivery partners experienced. To achieve this, it has been important for programmes to continuously reflect on what was working well and what parts of the training needed to adapt to reflect the needs of those involved.

The importance of building strong relationships at multiple levels

Relationships with parents and communities

Building relationships with parents and communities is vital to ensuring children can participate in early years initiatives and to extend the programme benefits to the home learning environment. The focus of the EYSI was to fund programmes delivering in early years settings however, all ten programmes included a specific component aimed at parental engagement, training practitioners to engage with parents, training parents themselves and/or supporting the home learning environment. Although parental engagement was not the primary focus it has been a crucial feature of each programme's success because of the strong sense of trust that has been built, which has allowed the programmes to become integrated into communities and increased the knowledge, confidence and skills of both parents and practitioners to engage with each other. The programmes' impact also increased because parents and practitioners worked together with a mutual understanding of how to support the learning of the children in their care. The importance of family involvement in early years educational services is widely recognised across international curricula and frameworks.²⁶ Research has found that educators can often feel confident to share children's progress but less confident with greeting families by name, raising or responding to parents' concerns, or working with families facing significant parenting stressors.²⁷ These findings indicate the need for training to improve educators' skills and confidence in partnering with families and we consistently observed the EYSI programmes taking this approach.

The programmes reported the need for confident and consistent communication to support relationship-building with parents. Knowledge and appreciation of families and communities has been recommended to strengthen relationships with and among them and sensitive, respectful and reciprocal communication with families is recommended to support children's development and learning.²⁸ We observed this in the priority given to working with parents as part of the practitioners' training modules for most programmes, including NCB, who trained practitioners to conduct home visits to observe and support children's learning in their home environment. Programmes such as Peeple provided supplementary training specifically for parents whose children were participating in the programmes and parent-led support groups such as Ark Start's 'Parenting Power Programme' were set up to help parents take charge of issues that are important to them. We also found it was important to place value on diversity in terms of language and culture, rather than imposing hegemonic values on parents. Speech and Language UK for example involved multilingual parents in the design and production of their materials. They delivered focus groups to multilingual families who gave feedback on programme materials that would go on to be used to support multilingual children in the learning of English. A key learning was the importance of not pressuring parents to speak English instead of their first language. Another key learning was to refer to children as multilingual, rather than using the initialism 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) which is used as the standard to refer to children that speak a language other than English as their first language. They found the term multilingual challenges a deficit perspective and instead celebrates the value of speaking multiple languages.

The delivery model used by the Scouts made it even more important for them to engage families and communities. Rather than operating in settings they developed and evaluated a 'family-led model' to

²⁶ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10643-023-01580-x#ref-CR39>

²⁷ <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1836939120979067>

²⁸ https://www.issa.nl/sites/default/files/www-issa/pdf/Publications/quality/ISSA_Quality_Framework_0-3_e-version_screen.pdf

reach early years children who didn't have previous experience with scouting. In this model, the children experienced a similar format of delivery to a 'traditional' Scout-led model (weekly meetings with ad hoc events/trips etc), but parents/carers are asked to attend the session and take an active role in delivery, with the Scouting volunteer taking a coaching/facilitator role. It was initially more challenging to engage families in London in comparison to the rest of England because they were unfamiliar with the programme and had been let down by previous initiatives that had been discontinued. It therefore took more time to build trust however, once relationships had been built, the Scouts found there was greater success evident in the family-led model for engaging families from their local communities.

Relationships with practitioners and senior leaders

Research shows that limited articulation of role expectations can lead to poor-quality partnerships in educational settings. We observed that the programmes built relationships with practitioners and senior leaders to practise clear expectation-setting at all planning and delivery stages, and this is likely to have been key to their success because it enabled collaborative working between the EYSI programmes and early years settings/schools. As part of their strategy for building good relationships, Speech and Language UK involved managers in the training so that they could support staff with selecting children and preparing for the group sessions and engaged with senior members of staff to help plan for the project's implementation before training delivery. They found that involving the leadership team in training and delivery enhanced their understanding of the project requirements, leading to better time allocation for teaching staff. Another benefit of relationship building was that EYSI programme staff and delivery partners were able to share their knowledge and expertise with each other. Settings and early years practitioners/teachers benefited from learning new approaches to teaching and play activities, and they particularly appreciated when EYSI programme trainers were able to draw on their own experiences of teaching to inform the training and provide examples. EYSI programmes further benefitted as Chickenshed, for example, reported that the early years practitioners helped them tailor their activities to the early years in terms of the key development areas covered in the EYFS curriculum. This ultimately led to activities that have been further tailored to produce the best results for children and led to children having a more targeted educational experience during Chickenshed's activities and in their nursery.

Relationships with local authorities

Relationship building with local authorities has also been a real strength for some programmes. Local authorities are well placed to know what their local area needs. They were able to support some EYSI programmes with recruitment as they were able to connect the programmes with schools and settings that were more likely to benefit. Tales Toolkit for example were put in touch with schools that were both keen to engage with the programme and had a large, disadvantaged intake. This increased the chances of reaching the intended communities and recruiting settings that were more likely to be retained. Tales Toolkit developed a 'lead-setting' approach where they built a strong relationship with one school in the borough and supported them to become a 'best practice hub'. Services such as hosting group training, drop-in catch-up sessions, showcasing their own practice, or gathering feedback took place in such 'hubs' that could be attended by other schools in the borough. Haringey recruited and retained the largest number of settings and Rowland Hill in Haringey was a success story that demonstrated the difference the lead-setting approach can make.

NLT also built relationships at the local authority level to support setting recruitment. They partnered with each local authority's early years team to identify PVIs and school-based nurseries to be trained.

Local authority leads also supported the running of events to promote the programme and the training to early years settings and, usefully, each borough linked early years practitioners with library staff to help settings include library visits in their delivery of NLT's programme. Local authorities also enabled some programmes to reach different parts of the sector and NLT extended their programme to childminders in three London boroughs.

NCB also partnered with a local authority to join up services for young children in Lewisham, including early years, childcare, social care, and health services to facilitate broader reach and engagement with families. This has enabled them to ensure consistent messages about learning development can be promoted to parents to help them support their children. In partnering with Lewisham local authority, NCB were able to deliver their activities within a whole borough approach, strengthening reach and consistency in terms of children's experiences. NCB also secured additional funding to integrate a 'Train the Trainer' training model so permanent trainers can remain working in Lewisham. NCB's Making it REAL will be handed over to Lewisham local authority in Summer 2025. They will continue to deliver the programme, with support as needed from NCB. By permanently integrating their programme into Lewisham's local authority strategy NCB maximised sustainability and ensured continued reach to vulnerable children and families.

Maximising sustainability

Studies focussing on interventions that aim to increase the attainment of disadvantaged children tend to focus on effectiveness, and little research has been conducted on the sustainability of these interventions. However, some research has been conducted in the US and Australian contexts on the sustainability of school-based health interventions in the early years. The research on this is not extensive, and researchers have called for further investigation in this field.²⁹ However, the literature on this topic provides a useful starting point for contextualising the methods used by the EYSI programme to facilitate and maximise the sustainability of their early years interventions. Here, we look at the 'processes' (strong partnerships/engagement and training/support/supervision) the EYSI programmes built within settings and the 'outer contextual factors' (policy and legislation and socio-political context) that have also influenced their sustainability, particularly at the local authority level.³⁰

Intervention sustainability means, after a defined period of time, a programme, intervention, and/or implementation strategy has continued to be delivered and/or individual behaviour change (i.e., practitioner, pupil) is maintained; the programme and individual behaviour change may evolve or adapt, but the adaptation will continue to produce benefits for individuals/systems.³¹ Research on the sustainability of school-based health interventions in the early years has found that 'processes' within settings must be employed, including strong partnerships and engagement as well as training, support and supervision.³² Sustainability for EYSI programmes engaging with early years settings depended upon the settings developing and retaining senior leaders and staff who were knowledgeable, skilled and motivated to continue delivering the intervention.³³ Within each of the settings, adaptability (e.g., flexibility and adaptations to training, interpersonal communication, and resources) was also significant,

²⁹ <https://www.annualreviews.org/content/journals/10.1146/annurev-publhealth-040617-014731>

³⁰ <https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12966-024-01699-z>

³¹ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s13012-017-0637-1>

³² <https://ijbnpa.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12966-024-01699-z>

³³ <https://implementationscience.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s13012-019-0961-8>

which points to the need for programmes to be able to respond to contextual factors and consider diversity when developing and sustaining interventions.³⁴

To incorporate sustainability at the setting level we observed that programmes similarly influenced setting 'processes'. Programmes engaging with settings often trained multiple practitioners across seniority levels to increase support and ensure delivery partners could be supervised by a senior colleague who understood the intervention. CLPE found this to be especially important as where schools or multi-academy trusts put conflicting schemes or approaches in place mid-way through their project, teacher's agency to use their books and teaching approaches with fidelity or to contribute to the evaluation effectively was impeded. Therefore, senior leadership buy-in to the project was essential for teachers to make changes to teaching practice and literacy provision.

Online iterations of content and training were also developed to improve accessibility and resources that stayed within a setting were provided, including training recordings and materials, so that practitioners could train others in future. Programmes also built supportive, online networks to connect practitioners engaging in their projects to share learning and best practice. These approaches to sustainability were particularly important to help settings cope with high turnover and helped when limited capacity made it challenging for settings to release staff for training since practitioners could attend and cascade the training to other members of staff. However, this was not the case for all programmes. Catch Up® wanted all practitioners who were engaging to attend the full training to protect the fidelity of the programme. Fidelity refers to whether a programme has the same content, coverage, frequency and duration as was intended by the designers.³⁵ From their previous experience of delivering the Catch Up® interventions to older children, Catch Up® found that the fidelity of their programme was negatively affected if practitioners cascaded the learning to colleagues, who went on to deliver the intervention to children without attending the full training themselves. There is research that supports this view and proposes that for interventions to be effective and sustainable, they must also be delivered with fidelity however our analysis of the common outcome measure found that EYSI programmes held different views about whether this could be achieved without engaging with their training directly.³⁶

The conditions of 'outer contextual factors' (policy and legislation and socio-political context) and 'politics' (e.g., government leadership, political support, unreliable public sector fund allocation) are also important because they can either facilitate or create a barrier to sustainability. This is because of the impact these conditions can have on funding (e.g., concerns about the requisite financial resources to sustain programme activities).³⁷ EYSI programmes reported that the post-COVID context has led to increased focus and attention at the local authority level on enhancing support for young children and encouraging family interaction, communication and well-being through a range of early language and literacy programmes to enhance children's development and home learning environment.

The combination of the strong relationships some programmes built with local authorities with these contextual factors has meant that they became permanently integrated into local authority strategies. Programmes endorsed at the local authority level secured continued funding and promoted knowledge sharing through integrated training programmes, for example, NCB and NLT worked to join up services for young children, including early years, childcare, social care, and health services to facilitate broader

³⁴ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10029282/>

³⁵ <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/1748-5908-2-40>

³⁶ <https://fpg.unc.edu/publications/implementation-research-synthesis-literature>

³⁷ <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC10029282/>

reach and engagement with families and ensure consistent messages about child development can be promoted to parents. NLT found that partnering with a local authority drove a focus on speech, language and communication throughout the borough. After the initial delivery of the programme, one local authority created their own programme, 'The Early Communicator', building on the learning from Early Words Together. However, programmes that were not working at the local authority level were still able to maximise their sustainability by integrating what they had learnt during the EYSI into their existing packages. They have integrated their learning and secured funding from other sources to continue to reach children and expand their knowledge base.

Increased online presence

Technology is a part of our everyday lives and developing rapidly and we found that programmes are increasingly creating online adaptations of their resources to increase access to their materials. There is evidence that well-designed digital tools can support early literacy and numeracy when used with adult guidance.³⁸ However, we found that the online adaptations did not replace the work being conducted in person. Instead, programmes were offering supplementary resources online. The convenience of online delivery meant that some programmes could reach a larger number of families and online adaptations increased sustainability since resources have been made available online and can be accessed beyond the lifetime of the EYSI project. However, programmes have recognised that in-person interaction is still highly important and that inequalities in digital access can limit some children. Recent data indicated that a third of all school children don't have continuous access to an appropriate device at home for learning.³⁹ To limit the effect of the digital divide, programmes developed hard copies of online resources that were distributed to schools and homes. This dual approach allowed programmes to harness technology and reach their target audience in new ways while ensuring they were still reaching vulnerable families who may lack digital access.

Examples of programmes that began making regular online content during the pandemic includes Chickenshed, who made online content in the form of Tales TV and Tales from the Shed. Their videos reached around 67,500 views by the end of their grant period. NLT developed online resources that were accessed by 40,033 families and a series of Facebook Live family sessions reached 12,502 families. The Facebook Live sessions were based around a storybook with linked activity sessions that support early language development. Concurrently, all programmes have maintained awareness about the digital divide and produced physical resources to make sure children don't miss out because of a lack of digital access. Supplementary resources were also made available for parents and practitioners to access on programme websites. For example, Catch Up® modified their website so that parents and carers could access supporting materials remotely. CLPE provided schools with access to their Power of Reading website, which offers detailed planning resources that are linked with the children's books they supplied. Offering supplementary resources online to support programme delivery and family engagement increased overall sustainability as the resources have been made permanently available for practitioners and parents to access in future.

However, online delivery was also not without drawbacks. The Scouts for example attempted to engage in remote methods but found that parents were fearful about too much screen time and felt their children were too young to meaningfully engage in online delivery. Moreover, we found that

³⁸ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/guidance-reports/digital>

³⁹ <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/siteassets/resources/documents/research-and-data/media-literacy-research/children/children-media-use-and-attitudes-2024/childrens-media-literacy-report-2024.pdf?v=368229>

practitioners, parents and children still enjoy having the opportunity to participate face-to-face despite time constraints. This was also the case for online iterations of training discussed above. Online training has offered more flexibility and increased participation, enabling programmes to reach practitioners in remote locations and increasing retention in some cases. An important caveat to the practicality of online delivery is that online fatigue can become a challenge, and programmes have had to be responsive as needs have changed, particularly in transitions in and out of lockdown. Therefore, offering a mix of online and in-person sessions was often the best approach to increase access and maximise sustainability while maintaining the enhanced cognitive and socio-emotional benefits fostered in-person.

Section 3: Impact on disadvantage

The EYSI aimed to support organisations and partnerships working to improve the educational attainment and life chances of children and families facing disadvantage in London. Our previous analysis used several indicators of disadvantage to show that the programmes in this Initiative were operating in London boroughs that had higher levels of children who were entitled to Free School Meals (FSM), children who were identified as having Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and multilingual children identified by the English as an Additional Language (EAL) measure.⁴⁰ Therefore, we demonstrated that the programmes were successful in their attempts to reach the intended demographic of children. In the following section, we have collated the quantitative evidence produced during the EYSI relating to the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils and the impact programmes have had on different measures of disadvantage. The results are highly promising however they are not generalisable to a broader population and should, therefore, be interpreted with some caution.

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 FSM-eligible pupils (Ark Start, CLPE and NCB). One programme (CLPE) further identified SEND, EAL and non-white pupils. The complex reality of educational delivery in the early years requires giving value to other forms of evidence including the accounts of practitioners and families whose lives have been directly impacted by the work of the EYSI programmes. We therefore identified evidence where seven programmes (Chickenshed, NLT, The Scouts, Ark Start, CLPE, NCB, and Peeple) have shown impact on the home learning environment and increased engagement and support with families, which also impacts children's lives.

Quantitative evidence on the attainment gap

Figure 5 collates the quantitative evidence produced during the EYSI relating to the outcomes of disadvantaged pupils. We look at three programmes that demonstrated evidence of impact on FSM-eligible pupils (Ark Start, CLPE and NCB) and one programme that demonstrated impact on FSM, EAL, SEND and pupils of the Global Majority (CLPE). Attainment data on children's outcomes was either collected by the programmes themselves (Ark Start) or commissioned external evaluators to collect and analyse pupil outcome data (CLPE and NCB).

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 pupils in the early years at the end of reception, which marks the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum. Children are defined as having reached 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.⁴¹ In 2023/2024, just over 2 in every 3 children, or 67.7 per cent, achieved GLD nationally. Before the pandemic in 2019, this figure stood at 70 per cent (though the assessment changed over these years, so results are not directly comparable).

⁴⁰ <https://www.mercers.co.uk/sites/default/files/2023-01/EPI%20Y%203%20Interim%20report%202023.pdf>

⁴¹

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6747436ba72d7eb7f348c08b/Early_years_foundation_stage_profile_handbook.pdf

Ark Start identified the percentage of non-FSM pupils who participated in their programme and achieved GLD and the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils who participated and achieved 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. Ark Start's results are made more reliable because they are a nursery that can regulate and monitor the activities their children participate in. However, Ark Start is not yet able to deliver at enough scale to infer statistical significance in terms of their impact on outcomes. The Ark Start model might be an effective approach for closing the attainment gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. However, stronger evidence is needed to affirm this.

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 phonic decoding to an age-appropriate standard.⁴² The data showed the attainment gap between SEND and pupils of the Global Majority and their peers narrowed among children who engaged in their programmes in all areas. The data also showed the attainment gap between FSM-eligible pupils and their peers narrowed among children who engaged in their programmes in Tower Hamlets. Finally, the data showed the attainment gap between EAL pupils and their peers narrowed among children who engaged in their programmes in Hackney. However, the findings are somewhat limited by the fact that the children in their studies participated in a wide range of other interventions, and results from studies conducted by CLPE cannot be directly attributed to their programmes. Despite this, CLPE's findings are very promising. They compared their project schools with other schools in the borough and found that they had smaller achievement gaps compared to the wider area, despite having more pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds.

NCB identified the percentage of FSM-eligible pupils who achieved a GLD in Lewisham. 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. NCB's data also reflects the attainment of all children in Lewisham. This is appropriate given that their programme took a borough-wide approach, though the role of other factors is, therefore, a bigger caveat as it is not as precisely focused on children who specifically engaged in particular activities from their programme.

Figure 5: Findings focused on outcomes of disadvantaged children

Programme:	Measure focused on disadvantage:	Result:
Ark Start	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieved GLD at the end of reception who attended Ark Start's nurseries. 	<p>GLD results 2021/2022</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 15/17 pupils achieved GLD (88%) 9/11 pupils eligible for FSM achieved GLD (82%) <p>GLD results 2022/2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 23/26 pupils achieved GLD (88%) 14/17 pupils eligible for FSM achieved GLD (82%) <p>GLD results 2023/2024</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 32/36 pupils achieved GLD (89%)

⁴² <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>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 18/20 eligible for FSM achieved GLD (90%)
CLPE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> IES Sutton Trust analysis of Phonics Screening Check (PSC) results. Percentage of Global Majority, SEND, FSM and EAL pupils who have narrowed the disadvantage gap. Cannot be directly attributed to CLPE's programme as sample of children participated in other interventions. 	<p>Higher proportions of Cohort 1 pupils from certain demographic groups reached the expected phonics standard compared to their peers in the local area. This included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FSM-eligible pupils from Cohort 1 in Tower Hamlets (7 percentage points) EAL pupils in Hackney (19 percentage points) and Tower Hamlets (5 percentage points) Pupils with a SEND across all areas (7 percentage points) Pupils of the Global Majority across all areas (10 percentage points) <p>See report for a full breakdown of results.⁴³</p> <p>The Executive Summary Report also provides useful data.⁴⁴</p>
NCB	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Percentage of disadvantaged pupils who achieved GLD at the end of reception in Lewisham. Results cannot be directly attributed to NCB's programme as results represent the borough as a whole, not just the sample of children participating. 	<p>Difficult to use earlier data sets as a point of comparison due to no data for 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 and significant EYFS reforms in September 2021.</p> <p>There was a 3% increase in all children in Lewisham achieving a good level of development (GLD) at the end of their reception year between 2022-2024, with 70% achieving GLD in 2022 increasing to 73% in 2024.</p> <p>There was also a 1% increase in disadvantaged pupils achieving GLD from 2022 to 2023 in Lewisham, although following the same trend as the national average, this dipped again in 2024:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 57% FSM eligible pupils achieved GLD in 2022 58% FSM eligible pupils achieved GLD in 2023 57% FSM eligible pupils achieved GLD in 2024

⁴³ https://clpe.org.uk/system/files/2023-09/CVG%20evaluation_final%20report.pdf

⁴⁴ <https://clpe.org.uk/research/power-reading-early-years-report-2023>

Quantitative and qualitative evidence that programmes have had a long-lasting impact on the home learning environment (HLE)

Providing families with access to good-quality learning materials and fostering positive parent-child relationships can significantly contribute to supporting children's academic growth. The communication environment is a strong predictor of performance upon entering school and includes activities and interaction between parents and children, the resources a child has access to and feeling a strong sense of wellbeing and support in the early family environment.⁴⁵ We observed that all ten programmes featured a specific component aimed at parental engagement, training practitioners to engage with parents, training parents themselves and/or supporting the home learning environment with quality learning materials. In this section, we discuss the impact of their efforts on improving the educational attainment and life chances of children facing disadvantage in London. 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.⁴⁶ Research has demonstrated that improving the HLE can improve children's outcomes and warm and nurturing parenting behaviours, that encourage children's natural curiosity, are especially strong predictors of children's school achievement. This is over and above parental income,⁴⁷ parental education and socioeconomic status.⁴⁸ The quality of interactions and learning activities shared between parents and children can therefore hold greater importance than socioeconomic factors and ensuring all families have access to quality resources is crucial for raising the academic trajectory of children facing disadvantage. Therefore, we explore the qualitative and quantitative data produced by programmes during the EYSI that show their impact on the home learning environment. The data is based on feedback surveys and interviews with parents and practitioners who engaged with the programmes. These initiatives aimed to create opportunities for all children, regardless of their family's income or background, to reach their full potential by equipping parents with the necessary knowledge, resources, and support to create positive learning experiences for their children at home.

Delivering training directly to parents was an approach taken by some programmes to help parents develop their knowledge and skills to perform activities with their children. Programmes that focussed on the home learning environment found that parents engaged significantly more with positive activities after undertaking training, or one-to-one support from practitioners who had been trained to engage with parents. They reported that this work had changed the way they interacted with their children, helping them to develop their knowledge and skills to support their children with learning activities. NCB for example delivered home visits to 570 parents and 'Sharing REAL' workshops to 136 parents. Those parents reported that it increased their knowledge, confidence and preparedness to support their child's early literacy and learning. The parents also reported they would pay greater attention and listen to their child, engage more with the outdoor environment, follow their child's interest and enjoy books together following the training.

People similarly trained 56 parents during an eight-week programme. This was found to have positive effects on children across a range of areas including confidence in themselves and STEM, curiosity, STEM skills, language and communication and the benefits of increased parent-child time. Improvements were also noted in terms of interactions and relationships between practitioners, parents and children

⁴⁵ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b67a5e5274a319e77f135/DFE-RR134.pdf>

⁴⁶ <https://ro.uow.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://redir=1&article=2680&context=sspapers>

⁴⁷ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/literacy-route-addressing-child-poverty-2011/>

⁴⁸ https://spssi.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2008.00550.x?saml_referrer

because of the overall increase in confidence, skills, knowledge and understanding. Parents overwhelmingly reported having positive experiences of engaging in the home learning activities with their child and practitioners affirmed this impression from their interactions with the parents and children. Parents reported engaging with the activities in different ways, with some adapting the activities using guidance offered in the programme while the practitioners replicated activities in the setting to help reinforce the learning.

Ark Start offered “stay and plays” which are an opportunity for parents to have meaningful one-to-one time with their children and “home visits” where practitioners aim to establish stronger connections with children and their families. After April 2022, 100 per cent of children attended “stay and plays” and by the end of the third year, 97 per cent of families had received at least one home visit and 90 per cent of families attended at least one parent event. This is likely to have been particularly beneficial for the demographic of disadvantaged children who attend Ark Start’s nurseries including 15 children who were identified as having SEND and 38 per cent who are identified as FSM-eligible. The work Ark Start has conducted with parents may have contributed to the percentage increase of disadvantaged children achieving GLD at the end of reception and the percentage of children who have narrowed the attainment gap and/or who are working towards expected levels in Ark Start nurseries.

Research has found that early ownership of books and trips to the library have a positive influence on early attainment and programmes additionally created long-lasting impact on the home learning environment by increasing access to educational resources. Children who owned more books and were taken to the library more frequently at age 2 achieved higher scores on the school assessment when entering primary school.⁴⁹ Chickenshed, NLT, the Scouts and Peeple delivered storybooks and home play packs that enabled young children to access materials at home. The ‘Power of Reading’ book pack was also a central component of CLPE’s project. In partnership with Dolly Parton’s Imagination Library, they made 16 books available to children with associated lesson-planning resources for practitioners. The evaluation found the programme created a positive reading culture and a smaller gap between disadvantaged children and their peers in project schools, compared to all pupils within the local area⁵⁰.

Chickenshed, NLT and NCB also made a long-lasting impact on the home learning environment by increasing access to trips, such as to the library and theatre. Chickenshed, for example, offered free theatre performances during their grant period. In a survey of parents who had attended the theatre performances offered by Chickenshed, 53 per cent said they would be happy to pay £6 for a ticket after the project was over, and 47 per cent said either that attending in the future would be a treat or that they would not go very often, or that the price would be a barrier to attendance. This points to the free offer as key for the inclusion of a wider group of disadvantaged families that otherwise could not afford to attend.

Overall, we found that the EYSI programmes that focussed on improving the home learning environment did so through training programmes for parents and increasing access to resources for children to use at home. The quality of the explicit and implicit learning interactions children experience plays a major role in encouraging their natural curiosity. Training programmes were developed to empower parents as their children’s first educators. 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. Programmes also made a long-lasting impact on the home learning

⁴⁹ <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7b67a5e5274a319e77f135/DFE-RR134.pdf>

⁵⁰ https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/system/files/resources/files/CVG%20evaluation_final%20report%20%28003%29.pdf

environment by increasing early ownership of books and access to trips, such as to the library and theatre, which can positively influence early attainment and vocabulary because children are exposed to new environments.

Conclusion

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 (EYSI). In the first part of this report, we explored the development of each of the ten programmes over their three-year grant period. In addition to focusing on each programme individually, we drew out some common themes across programmes. To support those who are working to improve the educational attainment and life chances of children facing disadvantage, we consider what the findings mean for early years organisations, funders, schools and settings and local authorities.

Firstly, we explored the challenge of data collection and measuring impact. Programmes often need 'hard' quantitative data to secure funding. However, challenges can limit their ability to produce large-scale, quantitative datasets that capture true progression and impact. To effectively engage in a randomised controlled trial, early years organisations need to identify sensitive measures to capture subtle learning effects, ensure there is enough time in between assessments to capture the changes and limit intervention generalisation. They also need to be aware that it is important to balance the evaluation with minimising the burden placed on staff to increase retention. Funders should be aware that the complexity of the early years environment means that producing 'hard' quantitative data is often unfeasible. Creating the conditions to conduct large-scale trials is a serious challenge and funders should ensure programmes are funded for long enough to measure outcomes. Funders should consider that in the context of the early years, a mixed methods approach can be more effective.

Secondly, we discussed the importance of good quality and accessible training for practitioners. High turnover and high classroom needs are stretching the capacity of early years practitioners. Early years organisations need to be aware that flexibility is essential in terms of how and when training is delivered. To maximise accessibility and reach programmes should offer multiple in-person training sessions at different times and on different days to fit schedules and/or a mix of face-to-face, online live and pre-recorded sessions. To combat online fatigue, programmes could consider designing online training to be completed in groups, with interactive activities and discussion. Programmes should also track when trained practitioners leave a setting so additional training sessions can be offered to new staff, to tackle the effects of turnover. Schools and settings should be aware of professional development benefits. Structuring training into the operational model of an early years setting can enable professional development without placing a greater burden on staff. Training should have a practical focus and ongoing support after training is complete is also essential.

Thirdly, we identified the importance of building strong relationships at multiple levels including between programmes, parents, delivery partners and local authorities. To support relationship-building with parents, early years organisations can benefit from training practitioners to improve their skills and confidence in partnering with families. It is also important to train practitioners to place value on diversity in terms of language and culture, rather than imposing hegemonic values on parents. Parents should not be pressured to speak English with their children and the term multilingual rather than the initialism 'English as an Additional Language' (EAL) should be used when engaging with parents. To build strong relationships with practitioners and early years settings, senior members of staff should be involved in the planning, training and delivery stages so they can understand the intervention. This helps to support staff and set clear expectations for the programme. Local authorities should also be aware they are well placed to support early years organisations with recruitment processes to reach those in need in their local area. Taking a consistent, borough-wide approach can be highly effective for

maximising the benefits on offer from early years organisations. Overall, confident and frequent communication is needed to support relationship-building at all levels.

Fourthly, we looked at sustainability and how it can be maximised so programmes can continue to reach vulnerable children and families beyond the lifetime of this initiative. Early years organisations should be aware that influencing setting 'processes' including strong partnerships and engagement as well as training, support and supervision is effective for incorporating sustainability at the setting level. They should also be aware that the conditions of 'outer contextual factors' (policy and legislation and socio-political context) and 'politics' (e.g., government leadership, political support, unreliable public sector fund allocation) are important because they can either facilitate or create a barrier to sustainability, particularly at the borough level.

Finally, we identified an increasing trend for programmes to deliver their initiative using a blend of online and in-person features. Early years organisations and funders should factor in the time and resources needed to deliver interventions both in-person and online. However, online delivery should not replace in person interaction. The feasibility of online delivery should be considered on a case-by-case basis as in practise online fatigue can be a serious challenge, and effectiveness varies depending on digital access, the age of the children and parental perception of online delivery.

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 across a range of indicators 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.

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

Seven programmes (Chickenshed, NLT, The Scouts, Ark Start, CLPE, NCB, and Peeple) produced evidence of increasing engagement and demonstrating impact in terms of how they have supported families to enhance the home learning environment. This was through parental training sessions, increasing access to resources to use at home and improving access to trips, including the library and theatre. We found positive effects across a range of outcomes including confidence, curiosity, skills development, language and communication, increased parent-child time and increased attainment.

Early years organisations, local authorities, and schools should continue to strengthen and scale successful interventions, such as Ark Start, which has consistently achieved GLD results above the national average, particularly for FSM-eligible pupils. These models should be evaluated further to assess their impact on a larger group of children and to refine the approaches used. Funders should ensure that sufficient long-term investment is made in such programmes, enabling them to adapt and grow based on ongoing evaluations.

While some programmes have successfully closed the attainment gap between FSM-eligible and non-FSM pupils, continued targeted support for FSM pupils remains crucial. Schools, early years

organisations, and local authorities should focus on monitoring and adjusting interventions over time, identifying when gaps reappear, and implementing strategies to address these challenges effectively.

Thirdly, parental involvement in the home learning environment is essential to children's academic success. Programmes like Ark Start, NCB, and Peeple have made positive strides in supporting families through parent training sessions and providing resources to enhance the home learning environment. These programmes should be expanded, and schools and local authorities should continue to prioritise parent engagement, offering opportunities for parents to actively participate in their child's education through workshops, community events, and ongoing support.

Additionally, access to learning materials and enrichment activities should remain a key focus. Programmes such as Chickenshed, NLT, and Peeple have made a positive impact by increasing access to resources and extracurricular opportunities for children. Schools and early years organisations should ensure that all children, regardless of their background, have access to books, educational toys, and opportunities to experience cultural activities such as library and theatre trips. These experiences play a significant role in developing children's curiosity, confidence, and skills, contributing to their overall development and school readiness.

Finally, it is essential to continue providing tailored support for SEND pupils. Early years organisations, schools, and local authorities must ensure that SEND children receive appropriate interventions that cater to their specific needs, helping to close the attainment gap for these pupils. In addition, long-term family support is critical for maintaining progress. Building ongoing relationships with families and providing consistent support as children transition to primary school will help ensure that the positive outcomes achieved during the early years are sustained.

Based on these findings we recommend that 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. We also recommend actively involving parents, practitioners, senior leaders, and local authorities in the planning and delivery stages to gain diverse insights on how programme aims can be successfully achieved. Integrating initiatives into existing setting processes is also recommended to increase sustainability and programmes should consider the contextual factors that can affect funding opportunities when operating at the borough level. Finally, we recommend that early years organisations allocate sufficient time and resources to deliver interventions both in-person and online, ensuring flexibility and broad access to different learning formats.

We recommend evaluating 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, we recommend that randomised controlled trials incorporate highly sensitive measures and allow enough time between assessments to track subtle changes in learning outcomes.

Recognising the value of professional development for all staff members is our key recommendation for schools and settings. Structuring training into the operational model can allow for professional development without placing additional strain on staff, ensuring that it becomes a sustainable part of the school or setting's operations. This can enhance the quality of service delivery and support continuous improvement.

Recognising the value of different types of evidence, including qualitative data, is our key recommendation for early years funders. Qualitative insights can provide a deep understanding of

programme impact, which may be difficult to capture fully through quantitative data alone. We also recommend that funders acknowledge the challenges in 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. Funding periods should allow sufficient time for outcomes to be measured and evaluated accurately.

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

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