Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

Year 2 final report

SQW

Contents

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Executive Summary

1.   The Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 is funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington, for which The Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee. The Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness.

2.   Following the success of Phase 1, Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in January 2023. In Phase 2, two cohorts of grantees are being funded for four years of delivery each. The first cohort (comprising six organisations) received funding in July 2023; the second cohort (comprising seven organisations) received funding in July 2024.

3.   SQW, a public policy and economic research consultancy, was commissioned by The Mercers' Company in August 2023 to be Learning Partner for Phase 2 of the Initiative, to help the grantees to reflect on and develop their work. SQW's approach combines knowledge generation activities (such as Special Projects – 'deep dives' into themes identified by grantees, Action Learning Sets, and light touch data collection) and knowledge sharing (Learning Seminars).

4.   The Initiative is showing accelerating momentum and reach. At the end of June 2025 almost 6,000 children had benefited from the Initiative (against 2,790 in June 2024), including 2,587 children from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 486 Early Years practitioners, 562 parents and carers, and 292 settings had been engaged in Initiative activities.

5.   The learning approach has continued to be well received by grantees. The Action Learning Sets provided opportunities for grantees to consider specific challenges and develop reflective practice skills, boosting confidence and building relationships that can outlast the Initiative. The cohort model adopted by Mercers' has enhanced learning by enabling peer exchange, mutual support, and a shared sense of purpose across grantees.

6.   In combination, the flexibility and duration of Mercers' funding and the embedded learning approach have provided both time to refine delivery approaches and supported reflection on delivery, yielding learning about how to design and implement Early Years programmes.

7.   This year's Special Project on parental engagement highlighted the range of benefits for parents, practitioners, and children, including enhanced skills and confidence, strengthened relationships, and improved learning environments at home and in educational settings. The Special Project also considered ways to overcome practical, social, and emotional barriers to parental engagement, including practitioner training in engagement approaches, inclusive communications to parents about activities, and empowering activities for parents.

8.   Overall, grantees have continued to make progress and secure achievements in a challenging, resource-constrained Early Years landscape. A key priority for the upcoming year is selecting

a topic for the Special Project that will provide meaningful insights for both cohorts, and in particular will help Cohort 1 grantees feel confident, equipped, and well-supported through to completion.

Introduction

Overview of the Early Years Special Initiative

1.1 The Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 (henceforth referred to as 'the Initiative') is funded by The Charity of Sir Richard Whittington for which The Mercers' Company is Corporate Trustee. The Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness (namely their personal, social and emotional development).

1.2 Phase 1 of the Initiative was launched by The Mercers' Company in 2019. During this first phase, ten organisations were supported for three years to deliver programmes aiming to improve the educational attainment of children and families facing socio-economic disadvantage. The funded organisations formed three cohorts who came together to share approaches and learning. In addition to their internal evaluation activities, all grantees participated in an evaluation of the Initiative as a whole, led by the Education Policy Institute (EPI), assessing grantees' impact on participating children and practitioners.[1]

1.3 Following the success of Phase 1, Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in January 2023. In Phase 2, two cohorts of grantees are being funded for four years of delivery each. The first cohort (comprising six organisations) received funding in July 2023; the second cohort (comprising seven organisations) received funding in July 2024. As with Phase 1, all grantees will undertake an evaluation of their programme (either internal or external), alongside participating in the Initiative-wide learning activities.

Cohort 1 grantees

1.4 A summary of the Cohort 1 projects is provided in Table 0-1:

Table 0-1: Cohort 1 Early Years Special Initiative projects

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
Campaign for Learning	**'Early Years Maths Through Storytelling'** This family numeracy programme designed with families, maths experts and Early Years providers seeks to teach parents how to build maths concepts (e.g., numbers, patterns, spatial reasoning) into story telling activities with their children.
Coram Family and Childcare	**'Increasing parental confidence to develop emergent literacy skills in the home environment'** Working with parents to co-design, co-market and co-deliver a series of fun courses for parents and their children in community settings, the

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[1] https://www.mercers.co.uk/young-people-education-evaluating-our-special-initiatives

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
	programme seeks to spark a love of reading so that it becomes a habitual activity in the home.
Early Education	*'Supporting Pedagogy, Arts and Creativity Everywhere (SPACE) to Flourish'* Early Education provides bespoke coaching and mentoring for Early Years practitioners, inspiring practitioners to incorporate arts-based approaches and creativity into learning and teaching. The programme uses 'Thinking Spaces' to develop a sustained reflective community, alongside the creation of new resources.
Fatherhood Institute	*'FRED: Fathers Reading Every Day'* FRED will equip Early Years practitioners with evidence-based techniques for successful father-engagement in their child's development, supported by resources and the training of a 'Dad Squad' of local male volunteers to support settings' promotion, outreach and evaluation activities.
National Day Nurseries Association	*'Early Years Maths and Language & Communication Champions'* This online training for Early Years Practitioners will help them embed maths and literacy learning into play-based activities and use auditing tools to assess learning. Champions will then use audits to evaluate current practice and the competence levels of staff in their setting. Audit results will be used to create an action plan, which is implemented by Champions with online support.
Youth Sports Trust	*'Healthy Movers'* This programme seeks to train Early Years practitioners to integrate play-based learning through the delivery of physical activity sessions. In addition, parents will be engaged through 'Stay and Play Clubs' and Healthy Movers Ambassadors (practitioners and local authority staff) will be recruited and trained. Mentoring for practitioners will be delivered in settings to establish and sustain programmes. Virtual networking for practitioners will support cross-setting engagement and identify support requirements.

Source: SQW analysis of programme documentation

Cohort 2 grantees

1.5 A summary of the Cohort 2 projects is provided in Table 0-2:

Table 0-2: Cohort 2 Early Years Special Initiative projects

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
Auditory Verbal UK	*'Sound Futures - transforming outcomes for deaf children aged 2-5 in London'*

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
	Auditory Verbal Therapy (AVT) is an early intervention approach for deaf children under five, globally renowned for enabling them to acquire spoken language on a par with hearing children. Sound Futures will help increase the literacy, language and communication skills and school readiness of deaf children living in London by delivering: outreach to families who are not currently able to access AVT; AVT for deaf children aged 2-5; and training for London-based professionals.
Chickenshed	**'New Botanics - Urban natural teaching initiative'** Chickenshed will run a series of workshops that have been co-designed with nursery staff, the Canal Trust and the National Children's Bureau's programme, Natural Thinkers. The workshops will combine the arts with outdoor learning, using music, movement, sign and puppetry to support learning and improve school readiness. The workshops will be delivered in 30 nursery settings per year, each over the course of five weeks. Nursery staff will be upskilled to be able to embed creative and outdoor learning into their settings.
Discover Children's Story Centre	**'Sensory Storytelling: reading engagement activities plus training for Early Years practitioners and parents/carers'** Discover will co-create a sensory storytelling session for 2-5 year olds, working in partnership with the staff, parents and children of a Newham based London Early Years Foundation Nursery. This will involve running Story Builds, inviting children, families and staff to suggest ideas for stories. The programme will then embed Discover's Story Builders as resident storytellers in 12 settings across East London to deliver the co-created session. The programme will also provide practical training sessions for parents and Early Years staff in Discover's play and storytelling methodology.
Home-Start London	**'Big Hopes, Big Future'** Big Hopes, Big Future is a tailored school readiness programme that will deliver enhanced training to staff and volunteers covering the key Early Years Foundation Stage framework areas. Trained staff will assess each referred family to identify children whose development is behind expected milestones. They will then work with the family to agree an individual package of support, such as practical support, weekly home visits, digital and physical resources, weekly groups and outings.
National Literacy Trust	**'Early Words with Childminders'** The Early Words with Childminders programme aims to improve children's early language and literacy skills through improving the practice of childminders. The programme will achieve this by providing high quality training for childminders to embed language supporting strategies in their daily practice and strengthen their relationships with parents/carers to support language and literacy development at home. It will also facilitate networking opportunities for childminders as well as provide free resources and support.

Grantee	Description of Early Years Special Initiative project
Peeple	**_'Exploring Together - The Foundations of STEM; from pilot to practice'_** The Exploring Together programme will support parents to encourage early STEM learning at home and to upskill Early Years practitioners with the confidence, skills and knowledge to support STEM in their settings. The programme was successfully piloted during Phase 1 of the Early Years Special Initiative. After building in learning from the evaluation findings in Phase 1, the programme in Phase 2 intends to scale delivery to work with more families and practitioners across London and to explore and use digital platforms and online training.
The Children's Literacy Charity	**_'Story Lab'_** Story Lab is a language and communication intervention. The programme uses storytelling to support children's literacy and social development, with a focus on school referrals of children with SEND, EAL and/or other barriers to learning, including families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Specialist tutors will deliver fun, engaging, twice-weekly storytelling sessions for groups of five children. The storytelling sessions will involve modelling strategies and a diverse range of picture books to support children's engagement and therefore a range of literacy outcomes relating to listening, attention, understanding and speaking.

Source: SQW analysis of programme documentation

Learning Partner for Phase 2

1.6   SQW, a public policy and economic research consultancy, was commissioned by The Mercers' Company in August 2023 to be Learning Partner for Phase 2 of the Initiative. We will work with Mercers' and the two cohorts of grantees for the duration of Phase 2 (until Autumn 2028), helping the grantees to reflect on and develop their work.

Purpose and structure of this report

1.7   This report summarises the headline findings from our work as Learning Partner in Year 2 of the Initiative. The report is structured as follows:

- Chapter 2: Our approach

- Chapter 3: Findings from the 'Parental Engagement' Special Project

- Chapter 4: Impact of the Initiative (so far)

- Chapter 5: Insights from the Action Learning Sets

- Chapter 6: Insights from the Learning Seminar

- Chapter 7: Feedback from grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities

- Chapter 8: Reflections and recommendations

- Annex A: Detailed description of Learning Partner activities

- Annex B: Logic model for Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

Our approach

Summary

- SQW's approach to the Learning Partner role in Year 2 involved three stages:
  - Inception and scoping: Cohort 2 kick-off meeting; catch up with Cohort 1 grantees; updated Initiative logic model and data collection framework
  - Knowledge generation: Action Learning Sets; Special Project on parental engagement; collection and analysis of light touch monitoring data
  - Knowledge sharing: Learning Seminar with live illustrator
- Grantees were asked to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 2 to inform planning for Year 3.

2.1 Our approach to the Learning Partner role is summarised in Figure 0-1. Each year comprises three stages: inception and scoping, knowledge generation, and knowledge sharing. This chapter provides a brief overview of the activities undertaken in Year 2. A more detailed description is located in Annex A.

Figure 0-1: SQW's approach to the Learning Partner role
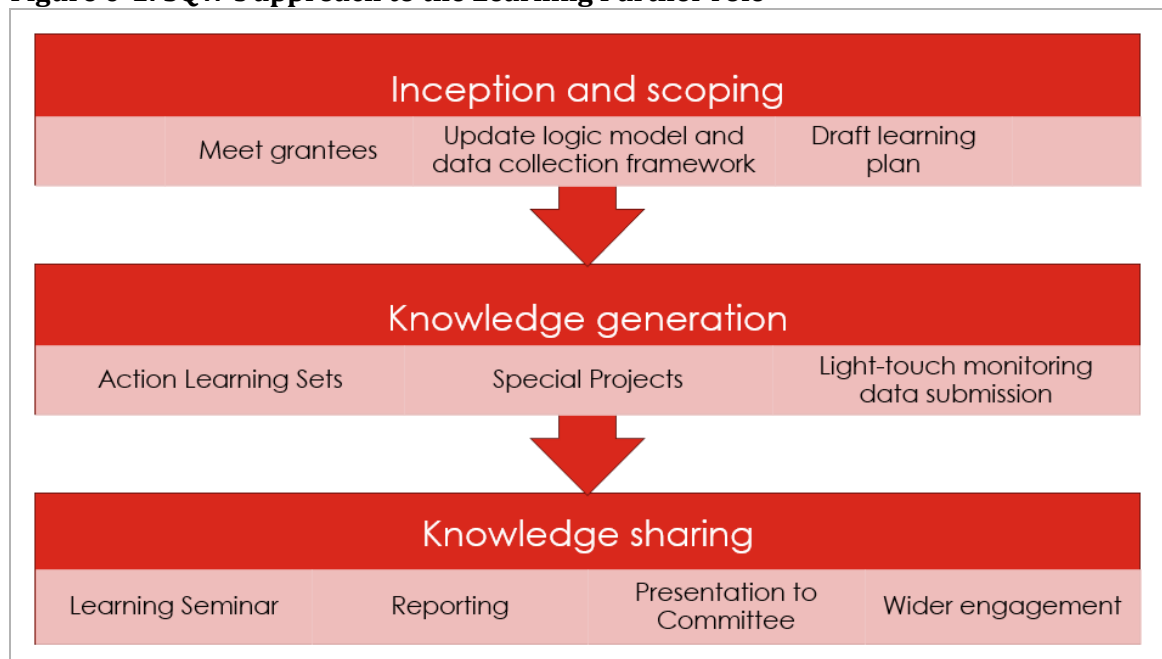
Source: SQW

Inception and scoping

2.2 At the start of the scoping phase in Year 2, SQW participated in the Cohort 2 kick-off meeting held at Mercers' in September 2024. During the meeting we explained our approach to the

Learning Partner role to the new grantees (which included a video of our Associate La Toyah McAllister-Jones introducing Action Learning).

2.3 Subsequently, we reviewed the Cohort 2 organisations' application forms and held introductory meetings with each of the new grantees. Through this, we learned about the grantees' work, their plans for their internal or external evaluations, and their ideas for the Special Project in Year 2. We also requested access to any relevant programme documentation such as theories of change or internal programme and evaluation documents.

2.4 Using the insights from the Cohort 2 introductory meetings and review of programme documentation we updated the high-level logic model for Phase 2 of the Initiative. The logic model is attached in Annex B.

2.5 During the scoping phase we also held 30-minute catch up calls with each of the Cohort 1 grantees to find out how their projects were progressing and their plans for delivery in Year 2. We also asked if they had any suggestions for the focus of the Special Project.

Knowledge generation

2.6 The knowledge generation phase comprised three activities:

- **Action Learning**: Action Learning is an effective way to help people solve real problems with support from their peers. Each grantee organisation nominated one individual (or two in the case of Early Education) to take part in their Cohort's Action Learning Sets throughout Year 2 of the Initiative. The meetings followed a set structure.

- **Special Project**: The Special Projects are 'deep dives' into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. The theme selected for the Special Project in Year 2 was 'Parental Engagement'. Six research questions were explored through a rapid review of existing evidence and interviews with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees. Following completion of the fieldwork, an emerging findings workshop was held online in April 2025 to give grantees the opportunity to explore the findings and implications for their work in advance of the Year 2 report. After the workshop, infographics summarising the principles for engaging parents in the Early Years Special Initiative were developed (these are presented in the next chapter).

- **Light touch monitoring data**: in order to identify the collective impact of the Initiative, light touch monitoring data was collected from the grantees via a short online survey in June 2025.

Knowledge sharing

2.7 We hosted an internal Year 2 Learning Seminar[2] at Mercers' on 9th June 2025 to celebrate the grantees' work on the Initiative and share learning. A live illustrator attended the event to capture the key messages from SQW and the grantees' presentations and discussions in an engaging resource, presented in Chapter 6.

Additional activities

2.8 We asked grantees to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 2 to inform planning for Year 3. The feedback was collected via a short online survey in July 2025 and is presented in Chapter 7.

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[2] In Year 1, we called the same event a Learning Symposium. We changed the name to Learning Seminar in Year 2 to differentiate the internal learning event for grantees from the external learning event for a wider audience, beyond the grantees.

Findings from the 'Parental Engagement' Special Project

Summary

- The Special Project for Year 2 focused on 'Parental Engagement'.
- Parental engagement is the engagement of mothers, fathers and carers in their children's learning, both in the home and in Early Years settings.
- Two types of parental engagement exist across the Early Years Special Initiative: direct parental engagement and indirect parental engagement.
- Parental engagement has a range of benefits for parents, practitioners and children. Key benefits include improved skills, knowledge and confidence for parents and practitioners to support children's learning, improved relationships between parents and practitioners, and improved learning environments for children in the home and in educational settings.
- Despite the benefits of parental engagement, parents can face practical, social and emotional barriers that prevent them from engaging.
- Key enablers to overcome these barriers include practitioner training in parental engagement approaches, inclusive communications about parental engagement activities to parents, and empowering activities for parents.

Special Projects and focus in Year 2

3.1 As is explained briefly above (and in greater detail in Annex A), Special Projects are 'deep dives' into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. The Year 2 theme was 'Parental Engagement', which we deemed to be an important topic for grantees across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 following a consultation process where we asked grantees for suggestions.

3.2 By parental engagement, we mean the engagement of mothers, fathers and carers in their children's learning, both in the home and in Early Years settings.

3.3 The Special Project on parental engagement was structured around the following research questions:

- What types of parental engagement exist across Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative?

- Why might grantees seek to involve parents in their activities?

- What are the perceived, and realised, benefits of engaging parents?

- What are the barriers and enablers of parental engagement?

- Which groups of parents are more or less likely to engage with Initiative activities?

- What role does/can technology play in helping parents to engage?

3.4 These research questions were explored through a review of existing evidence relating to parental engagement and interviews with all Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees.

3.5 Note that all quotes included in this section on parental engagement have been extracted from interviews with grantees which took place during the Special Project research period.

What is 'parental engagement'?

3.6 The literature and discussions with grantees highlighted three key elements of parental engagement, which include:

- **Parents being actively involved in their children's learning in educational settings**. This entails settings being accessible and welcoming to parents and parents being informed of what is going on in the setting and how they can participate.

"It's the opposite of parents just dropping off their children at the nursery door and going away."

- **Parents feeling capable and empowered to take action in the home** to support their children's learning and understand the value of their role.

- **Strong relationships between parents and practitioner,** which involve regular, open communication and are considered to be partnerships where parents and practitioners work together to support learning.[3]

What types of parental engagement exist across Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative?

3.7 Parental engagement was important across Phase 2 of the Initiative, with all Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees seeking to engage parents in initiative activities to some extent. It should be noted that the funding conditions of the Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 do not require grantees to engage parents. Rather, parental engagement was identified as one important area of focus for grantees. Two types of parental engagement were identified through interviews with grantees: direct parental engagement and indirect parental engagement.

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[3] Birth to 5 Matters - 'Parents as partners' - https://birthto5matters.org.uk/parents-as-partners/

3.8 **Direct parental engagement** is where parental engagement is at the heart of initiative activities, with parents being the primary beneficiary. Half of grantees sought to directly engage parents in activities. Examples of such activities included:

- **The co-design of activities and resources with parents.** This involved grantees recruiting parents to support their initiative design process, with grantees gathering feedback on their initiative's likely accessibility and intended impact, as well as how to attract other parents to the programme.

- **The delivery of activity sessions or workshops to parents.** The purpose of such activities was to develop parents' confidence, skills and knowledge in Early Years topic areas such as STEM, language and literacy. Activities were designed to show parents how learning activities could be incorporated into their everyday routines, often in interesting ways, to support their children's learning and development. For example, one grantee described how their initiative delivers maths learning by getting parents to read stories to children that do not directly involve maths but offer subtle opportunities for maths learning.

- **The sharing of resources with activities for parents to do at home with their children.** Resources could be digital (e.g. online videos or Padlet resources) or physical (e.g. paper resources, postcards, or loaning equipment to parents). For example, one grantee described how they loan simple equipment to parents each week, such as a water bowl to experiment with floating and sinking objects, to encourage parents to do different STEM based activities with their child.

"At the beginning of the programme, we're developing their [parents'] knowledge and skills… we're then supporting them with high quality interactions of everyday things that they can do at home."

"There are guides to what parents should expect children to be doing at different stages with regards to their…. development. But it's in very parent-friendly terms…it gives them lots of little hints and tips. You know, little games that they can play in the bath or at lunchtime… things that they can add into routines during the day".

- **The inclusion of Parent Champions in delivery** to advocate for initiatives, to engage other parents, and help create a welcoming and inclusive community. Parent Champions are volunteer parents whose role it is to support other parents in their community through peer support, information sharing and engagement.

Indirect parental engagement

3.9 **Indirect parental engagement** is where Early Years practitioners are the primary beneficiary of initiative activities but parental engagement is considered as part of the

initiative. **Half of grantees sought to indirectly engage parents**. The level of parental engagement was variable. In most cases, parental engagement activities took place via the practitioner, with activities designed to support practitioners to effectively engage parents both in the initiative itself and in the setting more broadly:

"One of the main aims of the programme is to improve outcomes for children. We can only do that by involving parents but we don't have any direct contact with parents. So we look at methods of supporting practitioners within the settings and give them ideas that they can share with parents."

3.10 Activities in relation to indirect parental engagement included:

- **The delivery of training for practitioners** to improve their skills, knowledge and confidence in parental engagement. One initiative delivered training for practitioners that involved workshops to challenge practitioner bias linked to the role of parents in children's development.

- **Building complementary parental engagement activities into the initiative design to be delivered/facilitated by practitioners**, for example producing resources for practitioners to share with parents to supplement initiative activities and encouraging settings to inform parents about activities being delivered such as via the setting's newsletter or stay and play clubs. One grantee who is delivering a literacy intervention to practitioners described how they ask settings to share the book they are currently learning with parents to support learning outcomes:

"Every two weeks, children take a book home – the book that we're learning in the session. We really need the parents on board to read and share the book…. We've been lucky in that the schools have been very supportive in terms of bringing parents in and sending text message reminders or that kind of thing."

Why might grantees seek to involve parents in their activities?

3.11 Improving learning and development outcomes for children was the primary motivation for grantees seeking to involve parents in their activities. The literature identifies reasons why involving parents may improve outcomes for children:

- **Parental engagement fosters a supportive home learning environment.**[4] Parents who are aware of what is happening in their child's Early Years setting and are equipped with the necessary skills and confidence can better understand how to support their child's learning in the home and feel empowered to do this.

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[4] Birth to 5 Matters - Parents as partners - https://birthto5matters.org.uk/parents-as-partners/

- **Parental engagement enhances the quality of learning in educational settings.[5]** Parents know their children's needs best. Practitioners who have strong relationships with parents are better able to tailor their support to children's unique learning needs.

3.12 This dual enhancement of children's primary learning environments is important for their development, leading to increased interest in learning and positive educational outcomes.

What are the perceived, and realised, benefits of engaging parents?

3.13 Discussions with grantees highlighted a range of perceived benefits for parents, practitioners and children, reinforcing the importance of parental engagement and the reasons for it:

- **For parents**, grantees reported empowerment and increased confidence as key benefits, both in supporting their child's learning and in their own relationship with learning more broadly. This stemmed from the development of new skills and knowledge of Early Years topics, such as maths and reading, and how to better support their child's learning and development in relation to these.[6] Improved wellbeing was also reported to be a benefit for parents, which was attributed to spending quality time with their child, as well as parents' improved confidence and skills.

- **For practitioners**, the benefits of parental engagement were improved relationships and communication with parents, which increase practitioners' knowledge about how best to support individual children. This means that practitioners are able to be more effective in their role, leading to better educational outcomes for children. Another benefit for practitioners of improved relationships and communication with parents is that parents are better able to reinforce learning that takes place in the setting in the home environment. This further supports practitioners' role in children's learning and development.

- **For children**, the main benefit was improved learning and development outcomes, particularly in early reading, language and number skills. This is the result of the dual improvement in their main learning environments (described above), and greater continuity between these.

3.14 Positive improvements to the home learning environment were noted by grantees to be particularly important for children's long-term development and success because children are likely to model their parents' improved confidence and more positive attitudes towards learning. This was seen to be crucial in reducing the likelihood of intergenerational transmission of negative attitudes towards learning. Indeed, the literature indicated that

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[5] Parentkind - Parents Matter: The Research - https://www.parentkind.org.uk/for-schools/parents-matter-the-research

[6] Connect Childcare - 'Strategies for Effective Parent Partnerships in Childcare Settings' - https://connectchildcare.com/blog/strategies-for-effective-parent-partnership-in-childcare-settings/

parental engagement has significant benefits beyond the Early Years, with active parental participation in their children's learning linked to higher academic achievement, increased participation in further education, and greater social mobility.[7]

Figure 0-1: Benefits of parental engagement for parents, practitioners and children
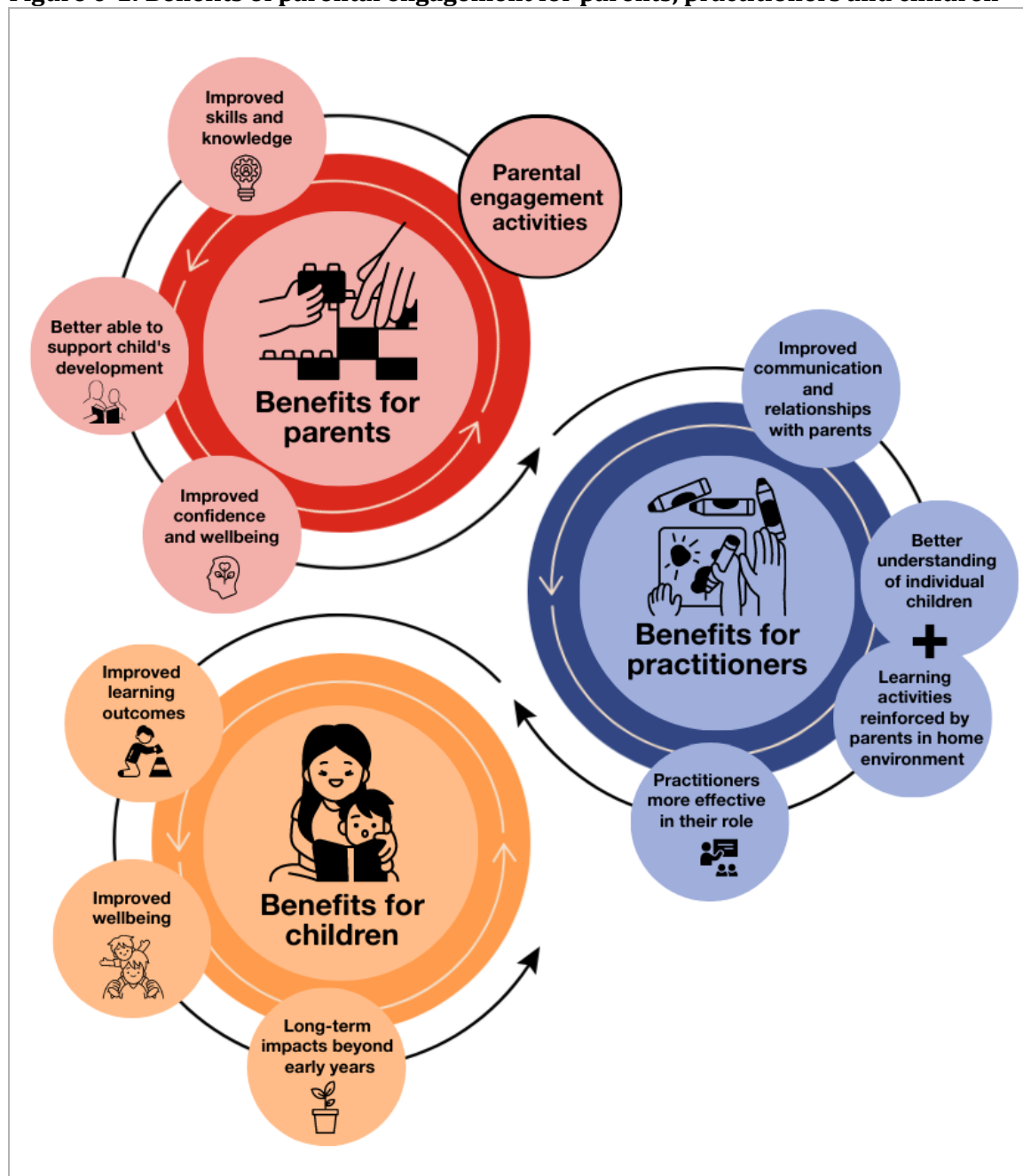
Source: SQW

3.15 Grantees were asked during interviews about the extent to which these benefits had been realised through their Mercers' funded initiative. Whilst there was emerging evidence of

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[7] Educational Review - 'Understanding parental involvement with schools and parental engagement with learning across schools in areas of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales' - https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00131911.2024.2432255

benefits, most grantees were not able to substantiate the benefits of parental engagement, either because monitoring activities were still ongoing or because grantees were not collecting data in relation to their parental engagement activities (this tended to be the case for grantees seeking to indirectly engage parents). For some Cohort 2 grantees who were in the very early stages of delivery at the time of interviews, it was too early to say what the benefits of parental engagement activities had been.

3.16 Examples of emerging evidence included:

- Positive responses and engagement from parents, such as excitement around activities, good parental attendance at initiative activities, and parents recommending the initiative to other parents.

- Improved confidence and skills amongst parent champion volunteers who were involved in the delivery of initiative activities (observed by one grantee)

- Improved relationships and communication between practitioners and parents.

3.17 Some grantees also highlighted that parental engagement activities delivered as part of their programmes are grounded in evidence of these activities leading to positive learning and development outcomes for children. For example, one grantee reported that an earlier study of their programme, which encourages parents to incorporate talking about maths when reading stories to their children, demonstrated that children made three months additional progress in mathematical development and in their language development compared with children not involved in the programme. As such, grantees anticipated that the relevant learning and development outcomes outlined above – school readiness, in particular early reading, language and number skills – would be realised (partly driven by parental engagement) as their Mercers' funded project progresses.

3.18 Grantees also reported benefits to their initiative when parents were involved in co-production activities: "involving parents in the beginning, because we are listening to what will work for parents in terms of the design of the programme, immediately increases the engagement of parents. We understand how sessions work for parents and can make sure they benefit."

What are the barriers to and enablers of parental engagement?

3.19 Despite wide-ranging benefits, parents and practitioners alike experience a multitude of barriers which can make effective parental engagement challenging. Understanding what these barriers are, and how to overcome them, is essential for effective parental engagement.

What are the barriers to parental engagement for parents?

3.20 Discussions with grantees, alongside the literature review, highlighted a range of barriers – practical, social and emotional – that can prevent parents from participating in engagement activities or feeling confident to be involved in their child's learning. These barriers are summarised as follows:

- **Practical barriers** such as a lack of time to engage, the cost of engaging, and the inaccessibility of resources and activities. The latter can relate to a range of factors, including the timing and location of activities, the format of activities and resources, the language of resources and their perceived relevance.

- **Social barriers** such as: stigma around accessing support (linked to the perception that accessing support reflects negatively on parents and their children); parents' own negative experiences of education, which can make engaging in education settings intimidating; parents' lack of skills and knowledge in both Early Years topics and how to support their child's learning in the home environment; and parents' lack of awareness of the importance of their role in their child's development. In addition to this, grantees highlighted that practitioners are often seen to be the 'experts' compared to parents, which can make educational settings intimidating environments for parents.[8] As one grantee described:

"[There are] still very hierarchical systems that exist in formal education – in nurseries, Early Years settings and schools. They're really intimidating places for parents, and particularly for parents who haven't had a very positive experience during their own childhood."

- **Emotional barriers,** arising from parents' own experience of education and the feelings they associate with it such as anxiety, low self-esteem and unhappiness, or more recent experiences that affect parents' willingness and confidence to engage in parental engagement activities, in educational settings and in Early Years topics. This often relates to parents' belief in their ability to support their child's learning and development and/or their ability to acquire the skills to do so, and how comfortable parents feel engaging with educators.

3.21 These barriers were seen to influence each other, with practical and social barriers exacerbating emotional barriers. For example, if parental engagement activities are inaccessible or associated with stigma, a parent who is already anxious about attending might be even less likely to attend. Arguably, some of these barriers could also be considered as systemic, for example parental poverty and educational policy choices that accord practitioners greater expertise than parents. This imbalance in perceived authority can create a hierarchical dynamic in which practitioners are viewed as gatekeepers of knowledge while parents are positioned as passive recipients. Such power differentials may undermine

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[8] Teach early years - SEN parents – Working in partnership in Early Years - https://www.teachearlyyears.com/a-unique-child/view/sen-working-with-parents

parental confidence, discourage open dialogue, and foster feelings of inadequacy or exclusion. As a result, relationships between parents and practitioners risk becoming strained or transactional rather than collaborative and empowering, further entrenching emotional barriers to engagement.

Figure 0-2: Practical, social and emotional barriers for parents
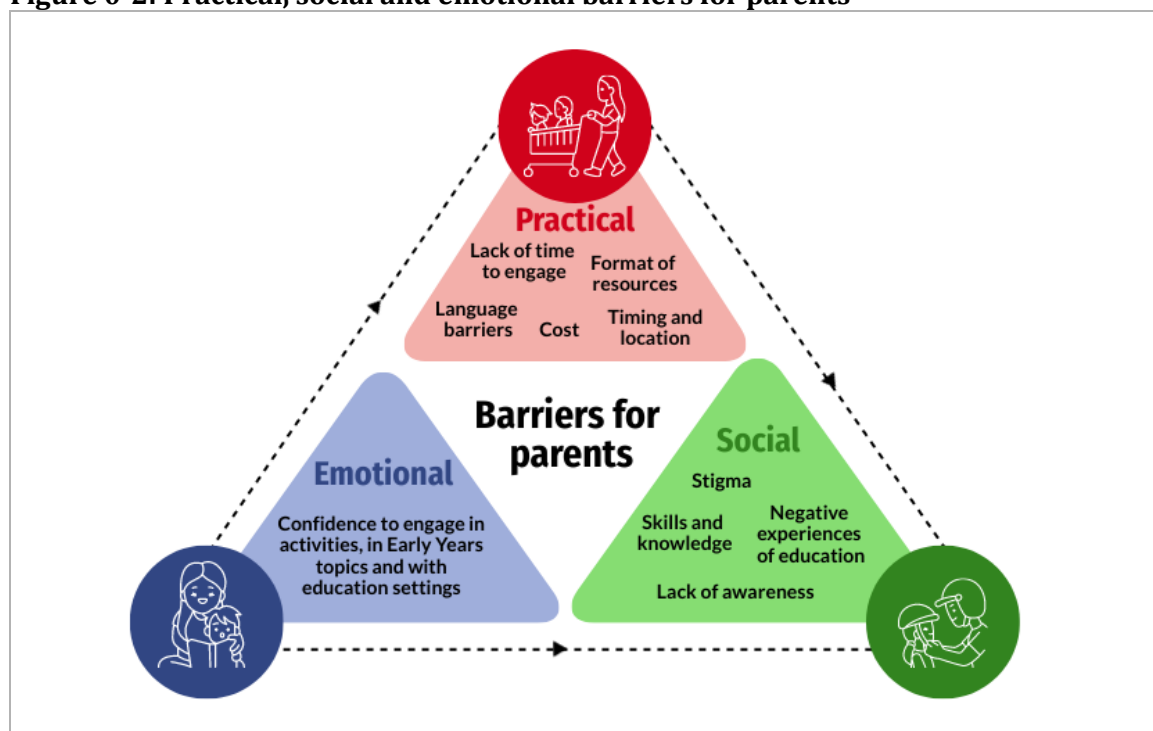
Source: SQW

Which groups of parents are more or less likely to engage with Initiative activities?

3.22 Grantees and the literature indicated that some groups of parents are more likely to experience the barriers described above and therefore are less likely to engage in parental engagement activities, for example:

- **Parents from poorer socio-economic backgrounds** who are more likely to work longer hours or multiple jobs and have less time to engage, and for whom the cost of engaging is a greater barrier. [9]

- **Parents with lower levels of education** who may have less confidence about learning, particularly if their own experience of education was negative.

- **Single parents** who have less time and access to resources.

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[9] Children's Alliance - 'The role of the family in early years education' - https://childrensalliance.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/THE-ROLE-OF-THE-FAMILY-IN-EARLY-YEARS-EDUCATION-FINAL.pdf

- **Fathers**, who are less well represented in Early Years settings, who may live apart from their children (if separated from the mother), or who may be the primary working parent. As such, in addition to the barriers described above, fathers are more likely to feel or be excluded from parental engagement activities, with responsibility for their child's development defaulting to the mother. [10]

- **Parents for whom English is an additional language,** which can make communication with educational settings more difficult. This group of parents are also more likely to find educational settings and learning resources inaccessible and intimidating.

- **Parents of children with SEND**, who may worry that their child's needs are not being met and who may find non-specialised education settings overwhelming and inaccessible.

Barriers for practitioners

3.23 There are several barriers practitioners in Early Years settings might experience when it comes to parental engagement.

3.24 At an **organisational level,** a key barrier is the extent to which parental engagement is a priority. Settings may not have clear policies regarding parental engagement, resources may be limited, and high workloads may make it difficult for practitioners to prioritise parental engagement.

3.25 At a **practitioner level,** barriers include: a lack of confidence to engage parents, perhaps linked to previous negative experiences with parents or difficulties communicating with different groups of parents; limited skills and knowledge about how to engage parents effectively; a lack of awareness of the impact of parental engagement on children's development; and practitioner bias about the role of parents, linked to hierarchical systems as described above, which may cause practitioners to appear unapproachable.

"I'd still say that we're in that quite traditional mindset where there's a sense that teachers are at the top of the hierarchy and parents are of a lower standing. I think particularly where families are vulnerable or where fathers and mothers are less articulate, less formally educated, they can be written off."

3.26 Practitioner level barriers are linked to organisational barriers in that where parental engagement is not a priority in settings (i.e. no clear policies and structures are in place), practitioners are less likely to be encouraged and supported to develop their parental engagement skills and knowledge, be confident at engaging parents and understand the importance of parental engagement.

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[10] Early Years Alliance - 'Involving parents in their children's learning' - https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/involving-parents-their-children%E2%80%99s-learning

3.27 Barriers for practitioners were also considered to be a product of wider systemic barriers, such as inadequate focus on parental engagement in Early Years education policy, limited opportunities for training on parental engagement in formal education, and increasing pressures on the Early Years sector driven by recent changes to childcare entitlement[11], the changing needs of children within Early Years settings, and financial constraints affecting Local Authority services and settings themselves. These wider systemic barriers were considered to have a top-down effect, influencing organisations' priorities regarding parental engagement and subsequently practitioners' ability to engage parents effectively.

"I would say settings who are hurried and under pressure and under resourced, the expectation that they do engage with their families, their fathers, their mothers, is challenging. It's much easier to just do what you do. Engaging with fathers and mothers adds complexity."

What are the enablers of parental engagement?

3.28 Three broad categories of enablers of parental engagement were identified in interviews with grantees:

- **Wider systemic change** to empower Early Years settings to engage parents, for example:

  - **Campaigning to increase the governments' focus on parental engagement** policies in Early Years education, for instance including parental engagement as a criterion in inspection frameworks and encouraging parental engagement as part of curriculum activities.

  - **Increased investment in parental engagement provision**, such as parental engagement programmes, family liaison roles within Early Years settings and training budgets for practitioners to develop their parental engagement skills.

- Supporting practitioners to engage parents for example:

  - **Clear leadership on parental engagement,** such as frameworks for engaging parents within settings and senior leadership making it a clear priority.[12]

  - **Training for practitioners in parental engagement skills and knowledge**, for instance how to build relationships with parents and how to practise inclusive communication with parents.

  - Training for practitioners that involves challenging their belief systems regarding the role of parents in children's learning.

- Being empowering, inclusive and accessible for parents. Enablers include:

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[11] [30 hours childcare for eligible working families in England | Childcare Choices](#)
[12] Birth to 5 Matters - 'Parents as partners' - https://birthto5matters.org.uk/parents-as-partners/

- ➤ **Demonstrating the 'why'**; showing parents the impact of engaging on their child's learning and development, emphasising the impacts that matter to them most:

"You need quite a big lean on benefits and actually why this work is essential for your child… you know, this is hugely important for children's development…and actually this is quite accessible for you to do at home. And just to build on that. The reason why [they will engage] will be different for different parents."

- ➤ **Building positive relationships** with parents helps foster mutual respect and trust, as well as a partnership between practitioners and parents. Effective partnerships ensure that parents feel included, listened to and trusted in their role.[13] This could be as simple as greeting parents when they pick up their children and having conversations about activities they had done. Suggestions for building positive relationships with parents when it comes to engaging parents in initiative activities included:

- ➤ **Using parent champions** who may appear more relatable to parents and are able to demonstrate that engagement in learning and education can be a positive experience. One grantee noted the role of parent champions in creating a welcoming environment and sense of community within their programme.

- ➤ **Using local partners** who are likely to already have trusted relationships with parents and therefore are well placed to encourage parents to engage with learning activities.

- ➤ **Inclusive communications.** Promoting activities to parents in a way that makes them feel welcomed, informed and empowered to participate. This could mean: using simple, jargon free language; making information visually appealing; and, if targeting parents for whom English is an additional language, providing key information in their home language.

- ➤ **Regular communication.** Grantees noted the value of giving resources to parents to use at home on a weekly basis, which in turn gives practitioners and parents alike a reason to have regular check-ins and conversations. Also, for non-face-to-face interactions, communication via regular communication channels about parental engagement activities was noted to be important so that parents don't have to go looking for resources:

"Make use of the existing home to the school nursery mechanisms that are in place so that we can piggyback on to those and use those to be able to engage with parents as well".

- ➤ **Being flexible around the timing, location and format (e.g. online or in-person) of activities.**[14] Grantees reflected that local partners can help provide insight into what works for local parents, as well as listening to parental feedback.

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[13] Birth to 5 Matters - 'Parents as partners' - https://birthto5matters.org.uk/parents-as-partners/
[14] Education Endowment Foundation – 'Early Years Toolkit, parental engagement' - https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/parental-engagement

> ➤ **Ensuring that resources are simple enough and appropriate** for everyday life and can be incorporated into parents' routines at low or no cost. It is important to think about the unique needs and challenges of target groups of parents, and how resources can be tailored accordingly. [15]

> ➤ **Ensuring that the language of resources is appropriate** for the target group of parents, for example providing resources in several languages and ensuring that the language is simple.[16] One grantee, delivering a literacy intervention, found that it was important to have a diverse range of books on offer so that parents could select a level of language that they were comfortable with reading to their child.

> ➤ **Taking a steady approach to delivering activities** to gradually build parents' skills and confidence so as not to intimidate them and reinforce existing anxieties around education and learning. It takes time to build parents' trust to secure their willingness, or even simply their availability, to participate in an intervention/programme and to maintain that participation.

> ➤ **Celebrating and recognising parents' engagement** to empower them and help them to understand their value.

3.29 In considering the enablers above, grantees noted that there is **no one-size-fits-all approach** to parental engagement. Listening to parent feedback regarding what does and doesn't work for parents is important. Several grantees highlighted **the role of co-production** in helping them to design their programme and incorporate the enablers listed above:

"Parents are being involved in co-production in the beginning. It means that …we're listening to what will work for parents in terms of the design of the programme. And this immediately increases the engagement of parents. We understand how sessions work for parents and we can make sure they benefit. Because we involve co-delivery volunteers in the project, it means that there are one or two parents in each session alongside the workshop leader, and that creates a really nice welcoming environment for parents. And those parents themselves are gaining confidence and skills."

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[15] Education Endowment Foundation – 'Early Years Toolkit, parental engagement' - https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/early-years/toolkit/parental-engagement

[16] Early Years Alliance – 'Involving parents in their children's learning' - https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/involving-parents-their-children%E2%80%99s-learning

Figure 0-3: Enablers of parental engagement

What role does/can technology play in helping parents to engage?

3.30 Grantees provided examples of how technology has been used as part of parental engagement activities. It was noted that whilst the use of technology has positively supported parental engagement overall, it should nevertheless be used with caution because technology cannot

replace in-person engagement, as explained in the examples listed below. Technology can however supplement or enhance parental engagement in the following ways:

- **To market initiatives to parents.** A few grantees had worked with the Media Trust, as part of Mercers' support package, to produce short films aimed at parents.

- **To provide parents with digital resources to support their child's learning at home**. For example, one grantee had used Padlet to create a series of online resources. Another had created online resources that could be accessed by parents via a QR code. Digital resources were considered to be a powerful way to assist parents to take part in learning activities at home. However, grantees were conscious that online resources are not accessible to everyone:

"Most parents these days will have a phone, but it's also being aware that there will be some people who are digitally excluded."

Furthermore, it was noted that digital resources should support parents to do activities *with* their children and not be intended for children to use technology alone*:*

"I think there are lots of good ways it [technology] can be used but it's helping parents to understand that you don't want them staring at their phone and ignoring their child. It might be using the phone to provide something that the parent can do together with the child, for example a recipe that they can cook or things like '50 things to do before you're five', so then they think what can they go out and do this weekend."

- **To communicate with parents.** Apps such as FAMLY and Tapestry were used by some settings to communicate to parents. This took the form of sharing resources, sending pictures, and informing parents of what their children have been doing. This was seen to be valuable in supporting the continuity of learning for children between settings and the home environment and a mechanism that grantees were able to 'hop on to' to share their own resources with parents. Grantees noted, however, that digital communication should not replace face-to-face interaction with parents. Building real relationships with parents is a key component of effective parental engagement.

- **To support initiative attendance**. Grantees reported the use of telephone calls, e-mails and text messages to remind parents of upcoming programme activities.

- **To deliver initiative activities online.** Some grantees had started to deliver activities online because they had found this to be more accessible for parents, helping to overcome barriers such as the time and cost associated with travelling to in-person activities, and parents' confidence to attend. Again, grantees noted that face-to-face engagement is preferable, not only to maximise learning and impact, but also to help facilitate the relationships that are crucial in effective parental engagement.

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- **To support monitoring and evaluation.** Some grantees had used technology to engage parents in monitoring and evaluation activities, for example by asking parents to fill out online surveys or taking recordings of children and their parents at the beginning and end of their programme to measure progress. However, several grantees noted that it is often easier to collect monitoring data from parents in-person, such as by sitting down with them to fill out a physical copy of a survey.

Impact of the Initiative (so far)

Summary

- Light touch monitoring data was collected to provide an indication of the impact of the Initiative so far, focusing on progress against targets and six overarching categories: Early Years practitioners; families, parents and carers; volunteers; children; settings; the Initiative; and resources.
- At the end of June 2025:
    i) An estimated 5,890 children had benefited from the Initiative, including 2,587 from disadvantaged backgrounds.
    ii) 486 Early Years practitioners, 562 parents and carers, and 292 Early Years settings had been engaged in Initiative activities.

4.1 This chapter presents the headline findings from the analysis of the light touch monitoring data, which provides an indication of the impact of the Initiative so far. The data is presented in line with the overarching categories in the data collection framework (Table A-1) and summarised in an Initiative-level infographic.

4.2 The purpose of this exercise is to capture the Initiative's high-level impact; it is not to compare the grantees or 'judge' performance. We acknowledge that the grantees' work is very different, and that more is not necessarily better. Rather, the measures are designed to capture cumulative and aggregated impact across the board.

Progress against targets

4.3 Grantees set a wide range of targets for the year, ranging from launching new projects in a single setting to expanding existing programmes across multiple locations. Focus areas included developing, implementing, and delivering sessions in specific contexts (e.g. nurseries, staff training, community outreach), refining existing practices, and implementing systems for feedback and impact evaluation. Stakeholder engagement was also key, with some organisations aiming to strengthen communication with parents and create meaningful opportunities for their involvement. Targets varied in type, from numeric goals (e.g. number of children or settings reached) to strategic aims such as expanding initiatives or improving school readiness. Overall, the targets balanced tangible outcomes with broader developmental goals, tailored to each initiative's context and stage.

4.4 All grantees reported good overall progress, with many achieving or surpassing their annual targets. Key accomplishments included:

- **Extensive reach:** Reaching as many as 900 children across London (by one initiative).

- **Engagement and recruitment:** Increased involvement from schools, with active recruitment of practitioners, tutors, and childminders.

- **Implementation:** Successful delivery of work plans in nurseries and community-based sessions.

- **Programme refinement:** Identification of areas for improvement, leading to enhanced programme quality.

4.5 In some cases progress fell short of expectations. Grantees reported withdrawals from certain settings, often due to resource and timing constraints. Engagement levels fluctuated across geographical areas and delivery contexts, while unforeseen circumstances occasionally led to delays. Despite these challenges, sessions continued to be delivered, engaging children, parents, and practitioners. This is explored in more detail below.

Early Years Practitioners

4.6 At the end of June 2025, **345 practitioner sessions** had been run, **engaging 486 practitioners**. These sessions included practitioner training, engagement meetings, observational opportunities to see Early Years initiatives in action, and information-sharing sessions. The types of practitioners attending these sessions varied from Early Years staff and leaders to health professionals and childminders. These sessions mostly took place in person but some were held online, typically in the form of webinars. There was recognition that practitioner engagement in these sessions may be affected by staffing constraints within certain settings and competing demands on resources. In some cases, feedback from practitioners who attended sessions was used to shape the planning and delivery of future sessions to increase impact.

Families, parents and carers

4.7 Several programmes across Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 incorporate sessions specifically for families, parents and carers in their delivery model. At the end of June, these programmes had delivered **307 sessions** of this nature, engaging **562 parents/carers**.

4.8 The sessions featured a range of parent and carer engagement activities, including information workshops and celebratory events for children. Some also invited parents to participate as stakeholders in co-producing activities.

4.9 Feedback from parents, as reported by some grantees, indicated that those who attended the sessions gained a better understanding of their child's development. They also expressed increased confidence in supporting their children at home.

4.10 For grantees who work directly with families, parent and carer involvement is naturally embedded in their delivery model, often resulting in significantly higher engagement

numbers than those grantees focused on supporting third parties such as practitioners and childminders who then engage with families. The latter model does not allow for direct measurement of parental impact but is anticipated to create secondary benefits for parents and carers through these intermediaries.

4.11 Although most grantees did not formally collect demographic data, anecdotal evidence suggests that attendees were predominantly mothers or grandmothers. Of the five grantees who tracked this information, mothers attended at nearly twice the rate of fathers.

Volunteers

4.12 While many of the programmes do not adopt a volunteer-based delivery model, some actively engaged volunteers. At the end of June 2025, a total of **75 volunteers** had been engaged across the Initiative. In several cases, volunteers were also key stakeholders—such as local parents—who supported delivery by leading specific components of the programme.

Children

4.13 At the end of June 2025, an estimated **5,890 children** had benefited from the Initiative, including **2,587 from disadvantaged backgrounds**. Incomplete demographic data means that the proportion of children from disadvantaged backgrounds is likely to be higher than this figure, especially given that many of the grantees operate in some of the most deprived areas of London.

4.14 The ways in which children benefited from the programme varied, from regular, face-to-face learning sessions to self-guided online activities.

Settings

4.15 In total **292 Early Years settings** had been engaged by the Initiative at the end of June 2025. These varied across grantees and included primary schools, nursery schools, children's centres, family hubs, and Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) settings. In addition to Early Years settings, **220 community venues** had been engaged, such as libraries, museums and festivals.

Initiative

4.16 **Around 25 people, from across both cohorts, attended the Learning Seminar** that was held in-person at Mercers' on 9th June.

4.17 13 individuals took part in the Action Learning Sets.

Resources

4.18 Most grantees produced new resources for the delivery of their programmes. At the point when grantees submitted their data, it was estimated **130 new resources** had been created. These resources were aimed at all stakeholders involved in Early Years, including practitioners and parents. Physical resources included promotional material, newsletters, guides for parents, and practitioner toolkits. Digital resources included short films, social media adverts and story reading videos.

4.19 Including existing resources, an estimated **6,564 resources had been disseminated**. In cases where the resource was central to the delivery of the initiative (i.e. a book), the level of dissemination tended to be much higher.

4.20 Data available for some online resources indicated a total of **6,690 page views and downloads**.

Infographic

4.21 An infographic summarising the analysis of the light touch monitoring data is shown in Figure 0-1.

Figure 0-1: Impact of the Early Years Special Initiative Phase 2 – June 2025
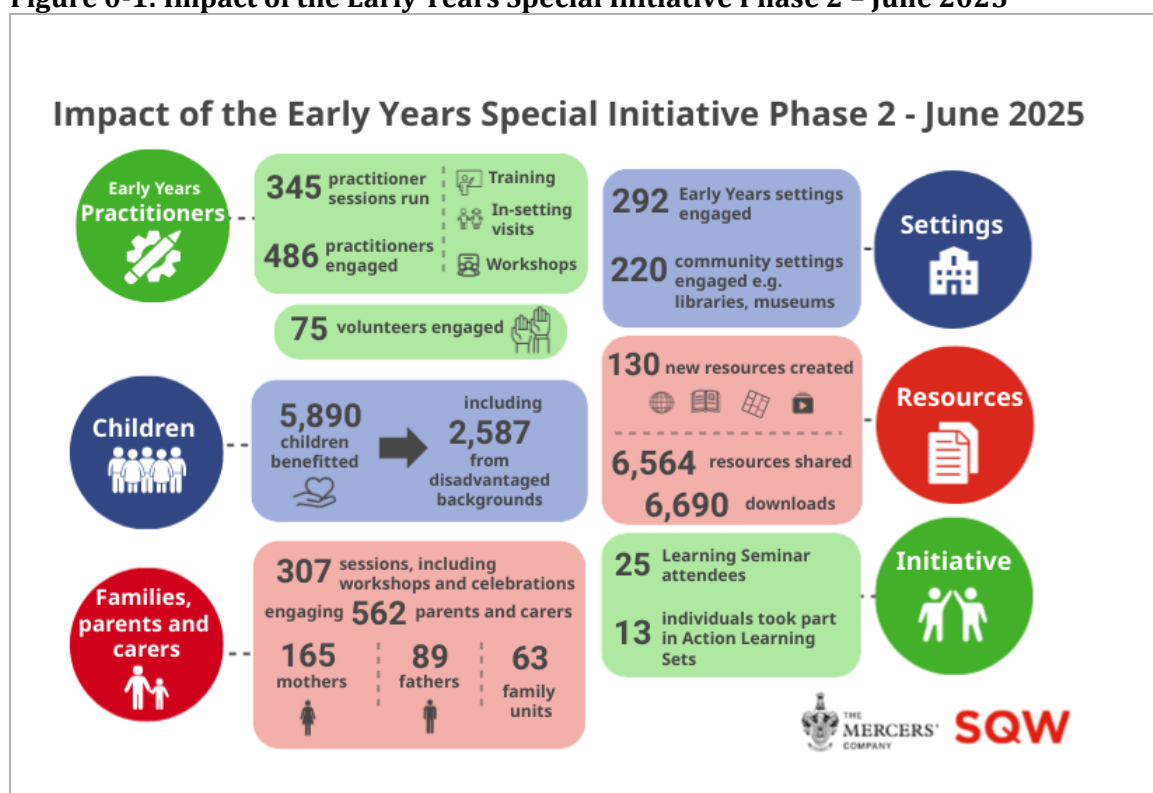
Source: SQW graphic created using analysis of light-touch monitoring data

Insights from the Action Learning Sets

Summary

- Three Action Learning Sets took place across the year for Cohort 1, and four for Cohort 2.

- Participants discussed challenges and received peer support to identify solutions.

- Participants reported that the Sets provided a supportive space to be open and share learning, helped them feel more empowered and inspired, and supported relationship-building.

- Action Learning was considered more effective when delivered face-to-face, notwithstanding travel and time constraints. As circumstances differ across Sets, it is important to strike a balance that reflects each group's specific needs.

- From Year 3, the Action Learning Sets will move to a self-facilitated format. Participants received training and a facilitation guide during the final session of Year 2 to support this transition.

5.1 This chapter presents the insights from the Action Learning Sets. The dates and format of the Action Learning Sets in Year 2 are presented in Table 0-1, below.

Table 0-1: Dates and format of Action Learning Sets in Year 2

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
- Tuesday 19th November 2024 10am-1pm (online) - Wednesday 15th January 2025 2pm-5pm (online) - Wednesday 4th June 2025 2pm-5pm (in-person at Mercers')	- Friday 25th October 2024 2pm-5pm (in-person at Mercers') - Friday 13th December 2024 10am-1pm (online) - Friday 14th March 2025 10am-1pm (online) - Monday 23rd June 2025 2pm-5pm (in-person at Mercers')

5.2 The Action Learning Sets themselves are confidential but participants provided feedback on the process for this report, which is shared below. All quotes are from Action Learning Set participants.

Topics discussed

5.3 As explained in Chapter 2, Action Learning is an effective way to help people and organisations develop and solve real problems with support from their peers. At each Action Learning Set, one or two participants presented on a situation or challenge of their choosing. Examples of topics discussed included:

- **Time management** – how can I manage the Mercers' project in addition to my other work commitments?

- **Securing buy-in** - How can I empower my team to buy into and deliver the Mercers' project on top of their existing roles?

- **Funding –** How do we (as an organisation) navigate a challenging funding landscape, and how can I (as an individual) stay motivated when experiencing a lot of knockbacks?

- **Networking** – How can I use networks to share information and raise awareness and reach of the intervention?

- Engagement and retention

  - How can I support our partners to engage in the project, given their competing priorities?

  - How can I retain the enthusiasm and engagement of practitioners in the months and years after initial training?

Reflections on the process

5.4 During the in-person Action Learning Sets in June, participants shared feedback about their experience of the Sets in Year 2, to help inform delivery in Year 3. Participants were also asked about their experience of the Sets in the feedback survey.

In what ways did participants find the Action Learning Sets beneficial?

5.5 Participants spoke very positively about the Action Learning Sets, and highlighted a number of ways they found them beneficial. For example, participants described how the Action Learning Sets have been a supportive space to be open and share learning:

"For me, the standout has been being able to speak openly and honestly. That has been important for me because I am the only person in my role in my organisation, so it is an opportunity to share things, get opinions, and get clarity on what I probably already know. I come away from the Sets feeling lighter."

"The space is very supportive. I am in a different place to where I was when it started. It is good to have the time to reflect, to think about where we are, to consolidate learning and improve relationships."

"They were simply great - it's such a simple process, really, but it helped us all to find our own solutions to issues. I particularly appreciated how the Action Learning Sets were a safe space to voice our worries, challenges or frustrations, and that there was just a real focus on supporting each other to progress through them. I genuinely felt privileged to be part of the group."

5.6 Participants described how the Action Learning Sets had made them feel empowered and inspired:

"It is easy to not see the wood from the trees with my day job, but Action Learning reinforces we all have the answers within ourselves. It's also good to have that accountability and be inspired and meet inspiring people."

"I am naturally an introvert. The Action Learning Sets have reaffirmed how energising it can be to put yourself out there, to be in the presence of other people and open yourself up."

5.7 Participants remarked on the relationships and connections they have built through taking part in the Action Learning Sets:

"It feels like we are part of something together."

"The benefit has been deepening relationships and connections professionally and personally."

"I find the candour of the space refreshing. Initially the space felt quite vulnerable, but now it feels like a different professional space, I am looking forward to the relationships we have in the Set growing."

"Brilliant for connecting, networking, problem solving, relationship building."

"They connect us as a cohort."

5.8 One participant noted that the 'funder-sponsored' nature of the Action Learning Sets helped protect their time, enabling them to prioritise space for reflection within their schedule.

How, if at all, have the Action Learning Sets influenced participants' work?

5.9 Participants gave examples of the ways in which the Action Learning Sets had influenced their work:

- Two participants had experimented with working from new locations to enhance motivation

- One participant reported that they now think further and deeper about their challenges, whilst another reported that they now ask themselves open questions to help find their own solutions to problems

- One participant reported feeling more confident in asking awkward questions

- One participant had applied Action Learning techniques within their own organisation, whilst two further participants said they had plans to use Action Learning techniques with their colleagues/team

- One participant noted that following their involvement in the Sets, their organisation had introduced group supervision.

Was there anything that participants did not like about the process? Why?

5.10 Participants were asked if there was anything they didn't like about the Action Learning process. One participant reported that they struggled with the bidding round as they found it difficult to describe their challenges. Another participant reported that the Action Learning Sets were more difficult to engage in when delivered online.

Looking ahead to next year, is there anything that could be changed or improved?

5.11 Two participants reported that they would like the Action Learning Sets to be in-person. One participant expressed apprehension about how the Action Learning Sets will run when self-facilitated (see below).

Self-facilitation process

5.12 During the in-person Action Learning Sets in June, our Associate La Toyah McAllister-Jones outlined how the Sets will transition to self-facilitation from Year 3 and distributed a guide to support participants. The guide included an overview of Action Learning principles, the typical meeting structure, sample questions, and suggestions for what participants might bring to each session. Facilitation will rotate among participants, with SQW continuing to attend in an observational capacity.

Looking ahead to Year 3

5.13 In July 2025, SQW diarised the Sets for Cohorts 1 and 2 in Year 3 and coordinated with Mercers' to book rooms for in-person sessions. Confirming dates as early as possible will help participants protect time in their diaries and minimise non-attendance.

5.14 Cohort 1 will continue to meet three times annually - twice online during the Autumn and Spring terms, and once in person during the Summer. While some participants expressed a desire for more face-to-face interaction, this was not a shared preference across the group. For those based outside London, increased in-person meetings would pose accessibility and inclusion challenges due to travel requirements.

5.15 Cohort 2, by contrast, will shift to three in-person Sets (one per term), reflecting a shared belief that face-to-face meetings would be more effective for the group dynamic and learning. With all but one member based in London, this arrangement was considered both practical and a fair balance in terms of time commitment.

5.16 The dates and format of the Action Learning Sets in Year 3 are presented in Table 0-2.

Table 0-2: Dates and format of Action Learning Sets in Year 3

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
- Monday 20th October 2025, 10am-1pm (online) - Wednesday 28th January 2026, 10am-1pm (online) - Wednesday 20th May 2026, 2-5pm (in-person)	- Monday 13th October 2025, 2-5pm (in-person) - Wednesday 21st January 2026, 2-5pm (in-person) - Wednesday 13th May 2026, 2-5pm (in-person)

Insights from the Learning Seminar

Summary

- The Learning Seminar was held at Mercers' on 9th June 2025, serving as both a celebratory and knowledge-sharing event.

- The event comprised a short presentation by SQW on activities undertaken in Year 2, followed by an in-cohort learning session, and a cross-cohort learning session on parental engagement. A live illustrator captured the key messages from the discussions in two engaging visual resources.

- Cohort 2 grantees were proud of their progress but discussed challenges such as engagement of settings, practitioners, and parents and children, often related to limited resources, capacity and attention.

- Cohort 1 grantees, one year further into delivery, reported that the flexibility and duration of Mercers' funding has supported progress by allowing opportunity to refine delivery approaches and respond to challenges. They viewed ongoing learning and reflection as important to achieving their goals.

6.1   This chapter presents the insights from the Learning Seminar, which was held at Mercers' on 9th June 2025. The internal Learning Seminar was both a knowledge sharing event and celebration of grantees' achievements in Year 2 of the Initiative.

Format of the day

6.2   The Learning Seminar began with a short presentation by SQW on the activities undertaken in Year 2. This was followed by an in-cohort learning session, where the grantees split into their respective cohorts for facilitated discussions structured around the following questions:

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
- We are almost at the halfway stage of the Initiative now, how far have you come and what has helped your progress so far? - Do you think you are going to get to where you want to be at the end of the Initiative? What might stop you from reaching your goals? - Do you need to do anything differently to get there?	- What was your biggest success this year? - What was your biggest challenge? - What was your biggest surprise? - What are you most looking forward to next year?

6.3   The second half of the Learning Seminar was a cross-cohort learning session on parental engagement. The aim of this learning session was to continue conversations initiated during

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the Special Project interviews and the emerging findings workshop. During the session, two grantees – one from each cohort - with expertise in parental engagement presented for 10 minutes on an topic of their choice and then took questions from the audience. The grantees who presented were Campaign for Learning and Peeple.

Insights from the in-cohort learning session

6.4   As outlined above, the Cohort 2 discussions centred on grantees' experiences and reflections from their first year participating in the Initiative. A summary of these discussions is presented in the table below. It is notable that grantees were proud of progress so far but were dealing with some significant challenges, notably regarding engagement, whether of settings, practitioners or parents and children, often related to limited resources, capacity and attention.

Table 0-1: Summary of Cohort 2 discussions

Question/ Response Theme	Engaging children	Engaging settings	Engaging parents and families	Engaging practitioners	Resources	Evaluating	Other
What was your biggest success this year?	Getting the programme off the ground and receiving referrals Surpassing the target for the number of children engaged in the programme Hearing the thoughts and feelings of children on the programme and seeing them progress	Operating in numerous settings Engaging bigger settings e.g. V&A, WonderWorks Nursery at Warner Bros	Receiving lots of interest and positive feedback from parents regarding the use of Padlet	Successfully recruiting and training childminders, and offering both online and in-person training sessions Seeing practitioners become more experienced in delivering the programme	Producing high-quality resources, including training videos for practitioners and parents, story building sessions Programme resources being effectively utilised by partners Receiving positive feedback on resources	Partnering with an external evaluator to enhance capacity for impact evaluation Developing a monitoring and evaluation framework Conducting home visits to assess children's outcomes	
What was your biggest challenge?	Many schools have falling numbers of children on role – manageable for now but could pose more challenges in the future	Negotiating limited capacity of Early Years settings Engaging schools in feedback activities	Recruiting parents – difficult given competition from other initiatives. Having to engage parents through childminders also adds another layer of complexity Engaging parents in feedback activities	Engaging childminders in feedback activities	Striking the right balance – e.g. ensuring resources facilitate interaction with the child, rather than being the central focus of the interaction	Coordinating different elements of data collection (e.g. group sessions with practitioners and home visits with families) Having to start the evaluation work later than planned and only collecting qualitative data so far	The length of the programme (5 weeks) presents challenges, as it ends just as it is gaining momentum Increases in the cost of postage (to send out resources) Navigating rights issues regarding the recording of books

Question/ Response Theme	Engaging children	Engaging settings	Engaging parents and families	Engaging practitioners	Resources	Evaluating	Other
What was your biggest surprise?	Recruitment being more challenging than expected	Strength of partnerships built with settings	A family's enthusiasm to feature in a training video	Level of involvement and enthusiasm of practitioners	Level of need in schools for the resources		Disruptive behaviour of some of the children involved in the programme
What are you looking most looking forward to next year?				Co-creating with childminders and leveraging their experience and ideas		Gathering more feedback from parents and practitioners Incorporating new assessment measures (e.g. language scheme assessments)	Experimenting with new techniques (e.g. to do water based learning) Building on the learning from this year and refining the programme

6.5 As Cohort 1 were approaching the half way point of the Initiative, discussions centred on reflecting on their progress so far and identifying what they hoped to achieve by the end of the Initiative and how they would get there. A summary of these discussions is outlined below.

We are almost at the halfway stage of the Initiative now, how far have you come and what has helped your progress so far?

6.6 Cohort 1 were pleased with progress made at the halfway stage of the Initiative. Grantees reported being on track to meet delivery targets and shared several positive examples of qualitative feedback received so far.

6.7 Cohort 1 reported that the flexibility and length of Mercers' funding has enabled progress. In particular, the flexibility of the fund has allowed grantees to respond to challenges. For example, one grantee increased the scale of delivery in a borough where engagement was stronger; this supported them to reach their delivery targets. Meanwhile, the length of the fund (four years) has given grantees space to refine their delivery approach. Several grantees in Cohort 1 highlighted the value of having a 'set-up' year in Year 1, which laid a strong foundation for future delivery.

6.8 Other enablers of progress included building good relationships with partners, stakeholder buy-in at several layers (e.g. from local authorities, settings and practitioners), and continually reflecting on and implementing learning.

Do you think you are going to get to where you want to be at the end of the Initiative? What might stop you from reaching your goals?

6.9 Cohort 1 discussed securing funding opportunities at the end of the programme, as well as how to make their programmes sustainable without additional funding.

6.10 Within this context, grantees discussed potential risks. These included low buy in from delivery partners (e.g. local authorities) and wider challenges in the Early Years sector, such as staffing issues, low levels of self-efficacy amongst practitioners and a lack of time for training and CPD. Intervention fatigue was also cited as a risk: grantees had observed that more deprived boroughs tended to have more interventions being delivered in them, leading to capacity issues and burn-out.

Do you need to do anything differently to get there?

6.11 Cohort 1 emphasised that continuous learning and reflection through the rest of delivery will be important to achieve their goals.

6.12 One grantee shared that they were working to understand how their initiative could be sustainable without funding by considering the 'core' elements of their project (i.e. the elements which are essential for impact). They said that this will support them to strip back

their initiative so that it can be delivered at a much lower cost and be financed by local authorities, without compromising on quality.

6.13 Grantees also discussed their goal to capture qualitative insights, including stories of success. They discussed how stories are what connect people to their work and that this would help to create buy in for their initiatives beyond the Initiative.

Insights from the cross-cohort learning session

6.14 In the first presentation, the representative from Campaign for Learning shared their Parent Powered Learning campaign, which aims to raise awareness of the importance of parental engagement in learning. They showcased the short film 'It's You', created with the Media Trust, and highlighted resources available on their website for families and practitioners.

6.15 In the second presentation, the representative from Peeple presented on the ORIM Framework. ORIM stands for Opportunity, Recognition, Interaction and Modelling, and illustrates four practical ways that parents and carers support their children's learning and development.

Live illustration

**6.16** Our live illustrator Pete Morey joined the Learning Seminar to capture discussions in a visual resource. He produced two illustrations, one depicting the in-cohort learning session (Figure 6-1) and one of the cross-cohort learning session on parental engagement (Figure 6-2).

Figure 6-1: Live illustration – in-cohort learning session

Figure 6-2: Live illustration – cross-cohort learning session
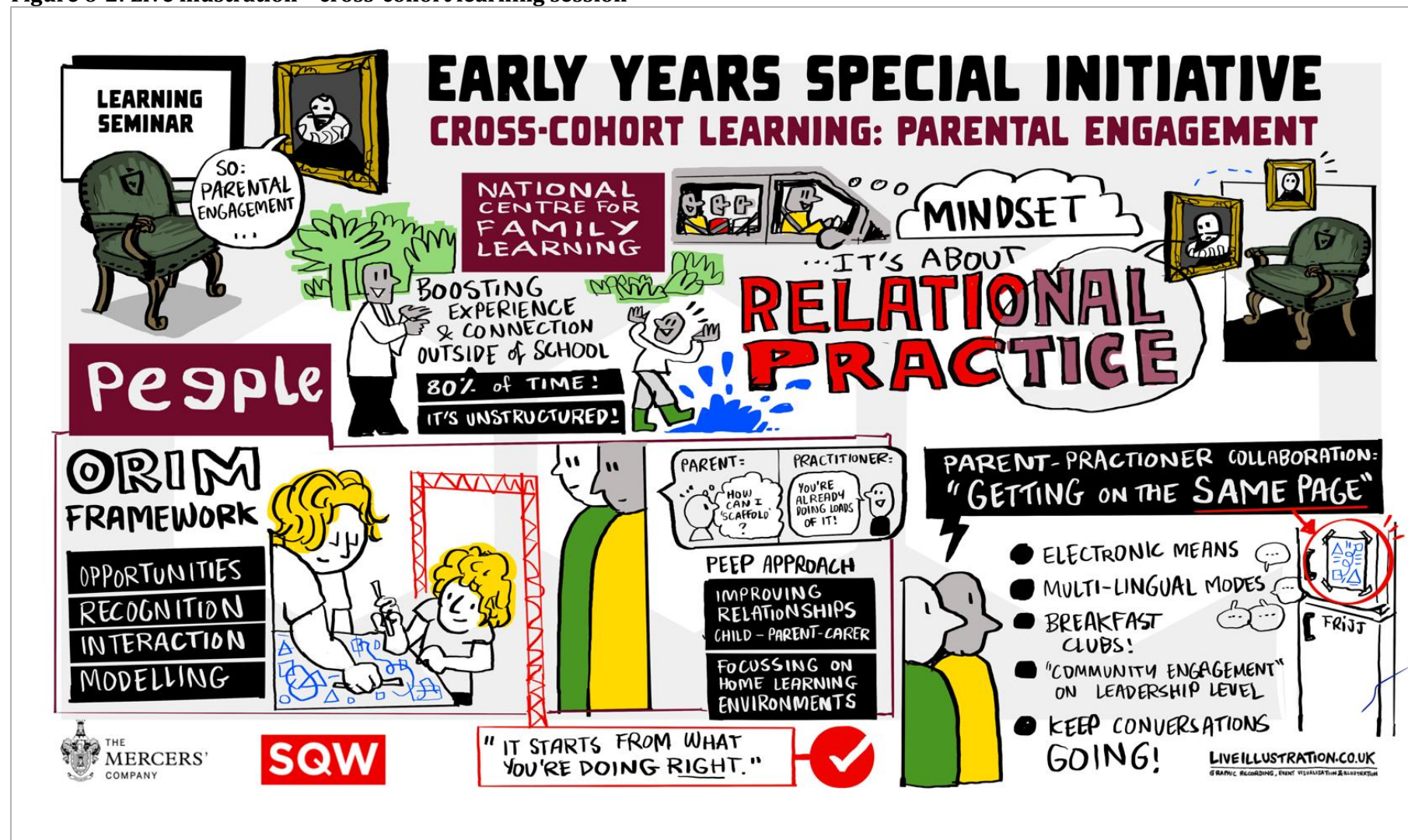
Feedback from the grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities

Summary

- **Events:** Grantees enjoyed the Learning Seminar, appreciating the opportunity to connect in-person and engage in open and reflective discussions with their peers. Some grantees requested more in-person and cross-cohort opportunities.
- **Special Project**: Grantees found the Special Project, focused on parental engagement, helpful and informative. They found it useful for reflecting on their own practices and valued learning from others at the Special Project workshop.
- **Light touch data collection:** Grantees welcomed the straightforward and consistent approach to light-touch data collection.

7.1 This chapter presents the feedback from grantees on SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 2. This includes the Learning Partner events in Year 2 (i.e. the Learning Seminar and SQW's inputs at the Cohort 2 kick-off workshop), Special Project, and light touch data collection. Feedback on the Action Learning Sets is included in Chapter 5.

Feedback on the Learning Partner events in Year 2

7.2 The grantees who responded to the feedback survey valued the opportunity to network and connect with other organisations in-person. For example, one grantee described Learning Partner events as a *"rare platform to be open and honest in a group of professional peers",* whilst another said that they valued the learning and reflection that arose from speaking to other grantees: *"the learning seminar changed my view of what a challenge is - it's not a negative".*

7.3 With regards to next year, of the grantees who responded to the feedback survey, some said they would like more in-person Learning Partner events, whilst others said that the blend of online and in-person events was appropriate. One grantee said that they would like more cross-cohort opportunities to be facilitated and another grantee said that they would like more small-group discussions, as they find it hard to hear others when in a larger group.

Feedback on the Special Project

7.4 The grantees who provided feedback on the Special Project felt that the research on parental engagement was helpful and informative. This was for several reasons, including that it

prompted them to consider how they might improve their own parental engagement processes and that it was an opportunity to hear about other grantees' ideas and experiences.

7.5 Two grantees acknowledged that although the topic of parental engagement was not directly relevant to their Mercers' funded project, it is a topic of importance within Early Years more broadly.

7.6 Looking ahead to next year, one grantee proposed that the Special Project topic be chosen to directly inform and support the final stages of project delivery.

Feedback on the light touch data collection

7.7 The grantees who responded to the feedback survey said they liked that the data collection was light touch and straightforward. One grantee said they appreciated that the format was consistent with the light touch data collection in Year 1 and asked that this consistency be maintained next year.

Reflections and recommendations

8.1   This chapter presents reflections on the second year of the Special Initiative plus recommendations for SQW and the grantees in Year 3.

Reflections

8.2   Overall, the grantees are making good progress. The monitoring data indicate that they are doing well in terms of reaching children, parents, practitioners and settings, and producing and distributing resources, while qualitative feedback shows they have been reflecting on delivery and addressing challenges, for example Cohort 2 grantees were thinking about engagement in resource-constrained contexts. The process of reflection is enabling learning about how to design and implement Early Years programmes and, at least in terms of the Cohort 1 grantees, informing planning for future funding or other means of sustainability for interventions.

8.3   The learning approach, which combines knowledge generation and knowledge sharing, has continued to be well received by the grantees. The Action Learning Sets provide opportunities to consider specific challenges while also developing reflective practice skills among grantees, increasing confidence and building relationships that can outlast the Special Initiative. It will be important to understand how the Sets function in Year 3 when they become self-facilitated.

8.4   The Special Project has added a different dimension to the learning activities through bringing in some external knowledge (via the document review) but considering that in light of the experience and expertise of grantees. The topic for Year 3 should be chosen carefully, especially as Cohort 1 are thinking harder about sustainability beyond their funded period.

8.5   The value of the Learning Seminar echoes that of the Action Learning Sets in terms of it being an opportunity to share thinking and specific practical ideas or suggestions but also strengthening relationships among the cohorts and building confidence through peer engagement.

Recommendations for SQW

- Monitor how the self-facilitated Action Learning Sets function in Year 3 and flag any issues in a timely manner.

- Consider how the Special Project can support the final stages of project delivery, especially for Cohort 1 grantees, ensuring grantees feel supported through completion.

- Retain the Special Project online workshop to support early insight-sharing.

- Consider how to maximise in-person engagement, balancing this with practical constraints and accessibility issues.

- Consider opportunities for more cross-cohort engagement to strengthen peer learning and collaboration.

- Use smaller groups during the Learning Seminar to help ensure all participants can hear and contribute to discussions effectively.

- Maintain the current light-touch monitoring data framework to reduce administrative burden while capturing useful insights.

- Continue to communicate regularly with grantees while striking a balance so as not to overload inboxes.

- Continue diarising events with plenty of advance notice to support grantee planning and participation.

Recommendations for grantees

- Consider the Special Project's findings on parental engagement, especially the barriers and enablers, and apply insights where relevant.

- Consider what topics might be most useful for the Year 3 Special Project.

- [For Action Learning Set participants] Commit to the Year 3 Action Learning Set schedule and actively engage with the self-facilitation process to support collaborative learning.

Annex A: Detailed description of Learning Partner activities

Inception and scoping

A.1 At the start of the scoping phase in Year 2, SQW participated in the Cohort 2 kick-off meeting held at Mercers'. During the meeting we explained our approach to the Learning Partner role to the new grantees (which included a video of our Associate La Toyah McAllister-Jones introducing Action Learning).

A.2 Subsequently, we reviewed the Cohort 2 organisations' application forms and held introductory meetings with each of the new grantees. Through this, we learnt about the grantees' work, their plans for their internal evaluations, and their ideas for the Special Project in Year 2. We also requested access to any relevant programme documentation, such as theories of change or internal programme and evaluation documents.

A.3 Using the insights from the Cohort 2 introductory meetings and review of programme documentation we updated the high level logic model for Phase 2 of the Initiative and the light touch data collection framework.

A.4 During the scoping phase we also held 30-minute catch up calls with each of the Cohort 1 grantees to find out how their projects were progressing and their plans for delivery in Year 2. We also asked if they had any suggestions for the focus of the Special Project.

A.5 The main output of the inception and scoping phase was a proposed learning plan for Year 2, which was shared with, and signed off by, Charlotte Nugent at Mercers' in January 2025.
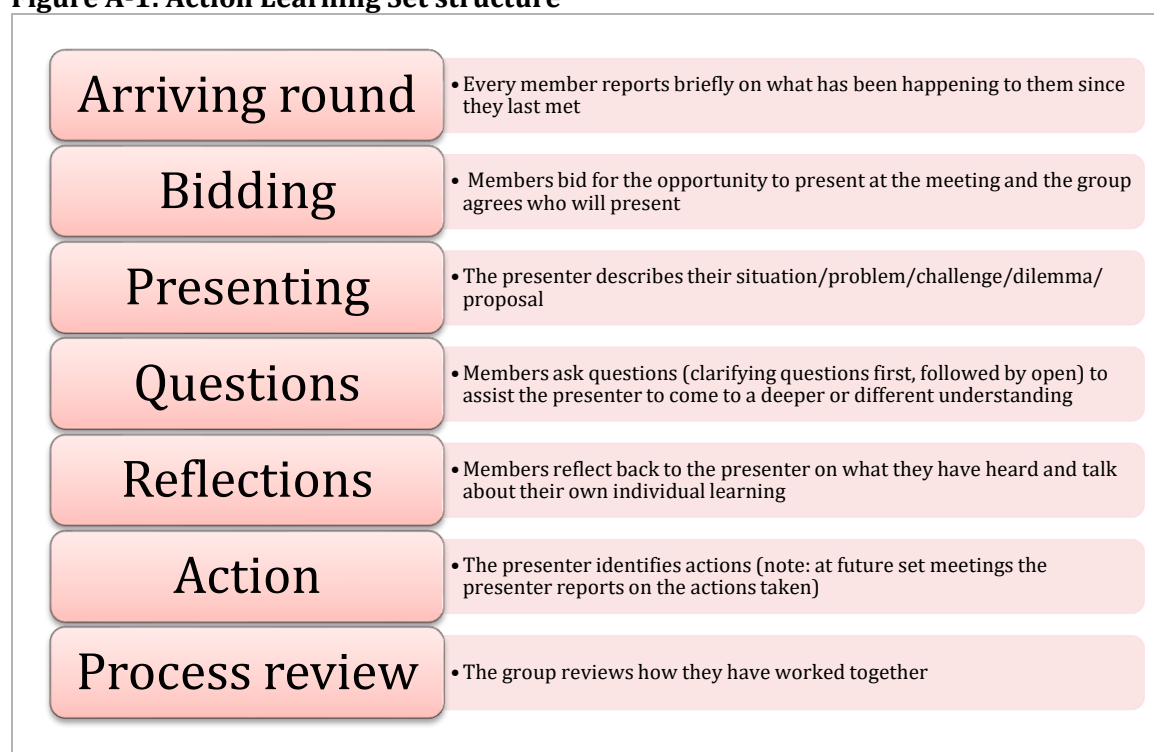
Knowledge generation

Action Learning Sets

A.6 Action Learning is an effective way to help people and organisations develop and solve real problems with support from their peers.

A.7 Each grantee organisation nominated one individual (or two in the case of Early Education) to take part their Cohort's Action Learning Sets throughout Year 2 of the Initiative. We liaised with the participants and our Action Learning facilitator La Toyah to diarise the Sets.

A.8 As with Cohort 1 in the first year of the Initiative, Cohort 2's first Action Learning Set began with participants spending ten minutes reflecting on their origins, and sharing with the group what they had been influenced by and what mattered to them. This aim of this exercise was to build trust amongst participants and create a safe space to share challenges.

A.9 The Sets followed a set structure, as outlined in Figure A-1.

Figure A-1: Action Learning Set structure

Arriving round	• Every member reports briefly on what has been happening to them since they last met
Bidding	• Members bid for the opportunity to present at the meeting and the group agrees who will present
Presenting	• The presenter describes their situation/problem/challenge/dilemma/ proposal
Questions	• Members ask questions (clarifying questions first, followed by open) to assist the presenter to come to a deeper or different understanding
Reflections	• Members reflect back to the presenter on what they have heard and talk about their own individual learning
Action	• The presenter identifies actions (note: at future set meetings the presenter reports on the actions taken)
Process review	• The group reviews how they have worked together

Source: Action Learning Associates

A.10 All participants had the opportunity to present on a situation or challenge of their choosing.

A.11 In the first meeting of each group, participants were asked what they wanted to get out of the Action Learning Sets in Year 2; in the final meeting participants reflected upon this, and shared feedback about their experience of the Sets to help inform delivery in Year 3.

Special Projects

A.12 The Special Projects are 'deep dives' into themes or topics of interest and relevance to the grantees. One Special Project is conducted in each year of the Initiative, in the Spring.

A.13 During the Cohort 1 catch up calls and Cohort 2 introductory meetings, we asked grantees if they had any suggestions for the focus of the Special Project in Year 2. They mentioned a range of themes, including:

- Parental engagement in Early Years interventions and children's learning more generally

- Sustainability (following on from the Special Project on scalability) e.g., how to fundraise, form partnerships

- Evaluation, in terms of methods and approaches and how to implement evaluation in Early Years settings

- How charities should use artificial intelligence

- How to provide online training

- How to market initiatives to practitioners

- How to influence policy.

A.14 In the absence of a unanimous view, we endeavoured to identify a 'best fit' theme that would apply to all the grantees in different ways. Parental engagement was proposed by several grantees and was also considered as a focus for the Special Project in Year 1. Additionally, during the presentations at the Year 1 Learning Seminar, some Cohort 1 grantees highlighted challenges related to engaging parents and families in their initiatives. Consequently, it was decided that parental engagement would be a suitable and relevant theme for the Special Project in Year 2.

A.15 The Special Project on 'Parental Engagement' was structured around the following research questions:

- What types of parental engagement exist across Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative?

- Why might grantees seek to involve parents in their activities?

- What are the perceived, and realised, benefits of engaging parents?

- What are the barriers and enablers of parental engagement?

- Which groups of parents are more or less likely to engage with Initiative activities?

- What role does/can technology play in helping parents to engage?

A.16 These research questions were explored through a rapid review of existing evidence and interviews with Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 grantees. Following completion of the fieldwork, a one hour emerging findings workshop was held online to give grantees the opportunity to explore the findings and implications for their work in advance of the Year 2 report.

Light touch monitoring data

A.17 We collected light touch monitoring data from grantees to identify the collective impact of Initiative. The metrics map onto the outputs listed in the logic model, which were updated following the introductory meetings with Cohort 2 grantees. In Year 2, we also included two additional questions relating to progress against targets, in response to feedback we received from Mercers' on the Year 1 final report. The data collection framework is presented in Table A-1.

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Table A-1: Framework for light touch data collection

Categories	Metrics
Progress against targets	• What were your targets for this year? • What progress have you made towards these?
Early Years Practitioners	• Number of practitioner training/networking/mentoring/support sessions run • Number of practitioners who have attended training/networking/mentoring/support sessions

Families, parents and carers	• Number of family/parent/carer training/support/guidance sessions run
	• Overall number of people (parents/carers) who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions
	• If you are able to tell us, of those who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions, what was the number of:
	   ➢ Mothers
	   ➢ Fathers
	   ➢ Carers
	   ➢ Family units

Volunteers	• Number of volunteers engaged in the programme
Children	• Number of children benefiting from the programme • Number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting from the programme
Settings	• Number of Early Years settings engaged • Number of community settings engaged (e.g. libraries)
Initiative	• Number of (and attendance at) Learning Seminar • Number of (and attendance at) Action Learning Sets
Resources	• Number of new resources created • Number of resources disseminated • Number of resources accessed (e.g. page views, downloads etc)

Source: SQW

A.18 The data were collected via a short online survey that was live for four weeks between 2nd June 2025 and 30th June 2025. Where grantees did not have data or a metric was not relevant to their work, they were not expected to submit data. Following each question there was an open text box for grantees to provide additional information or context for their data entry, if they so wished. The data were analysed in Excel.

Knowledge sharing

A.19 We hosted the Year 2 Learning Seminar at Mercers' on 9th June 2025. Around 25 people attended the event, which ran from 10am to 1pm, followed by a networking lunch.

A.20 The Learning Seminar began with a short presentation by SQW on the activities undertaken in Year 2. This was followed by an in-cohort learning session, where the grantees split into their respective cohorts for facilitated discussions structured around the following questions:

Cohort 1	Cohort 2
• We are almost at the halfway stage of the Initiative now, how far have you come and what has helped your progress so far? • Do you think you are going to get to where you want to be at the end of the Initiative? What might stop you from reaching your goals? • Do you need to do anything differently to get there?	• What was your biggest success this year? • What was your biggest challenge? • What was your biggest surprise? • What are you most looking forward to next year?

A.21 The second half of the Learning Seminar was a cross-cohort learning session on parental engagement. The aim of this learning session was to continue conversations initiated during the Special Project interviews and the emerging findings workshop. During the session, two grantees with expertise in parental engagement – Campaign for Learning and Peeple - presented for ten minutes on a topic of their choice and then took questions from the audience.

A.22 A live illustrator attended the event to capture the key messages from the learning sessions in an engaging resource, which is presented in Chapter 6.

Additional activities

A.23 We asked grantees to provide feedback on their experience of SQW's Learning Partner activities in Year 2 to inform planning for Year 3. The feedback was collected via a short online survey that was live between 26th June and 7th July 2025. The survey included specific questions for individuals who had taken part in the Action Learning Sets.

Annex B: Logic model for Phase 2 of the Early Years Special Initiative

Context: The Mercers' Company's Early Years Special Initiative provides grants to organisations in London that use evidence-based interventions to increase young children's numeracy, literacy and language skills, and their school readiness (personal, social and emotional development). Phase 2 of the Initiative was launched in 2023 and will run until 2028. During this time two cohorts of grantees will receive funding for four years of delivery.

Inputs

The Mercers' Company
Grant funding (up to £300,000 per organisation)
Learning Partner support provided by SQW (includes the delivery of Action Learning Sets and Special Projects)
Access to (optional) capacity building support through trusted partners (e.g. Media Trust, Cranfield Trust)
Free hire of Mercers' Hall to all grantees
Mercers' staff time
Mercers' Committee time

Grantee organisations
Staff time
Equipment and resources

Other partners involved in delivery (not directly receiving Mercers' grant funding) *(includes organisations delivering or supporting the delivery of the intervention, local evaluators, Early Years settings, etc.)*
Staff time
Equipment and resources

Other
'In-kind' support (including volunteer time and Early Years provider time)

Activities

Cohort 1 organisations

Coram Family and Childcare
'Increasing parental confidence to develop emergent literacy skills in the home environment'
Working with parents to co-design, co-market and co-deliver a series of fun courses for parents and their children in community settings, to spark a love of reading so that it becomes a habitual activity in the home.

Campaign for Learning
'Early Years Maths Through Storytelling'
Family numeracy programme designed with families, maths experts and Early Years providers that seeks to teach parents to build maths concepts (e.g. numbers, patterns, spatial reasoning) into story telling activities with their children.

Early Education
"Supporting Pedagogy, Arts and Creativity Everywhere (SPACE) to Flourish"
Bespoke coaching and mentoring for early years practitioners, inspiring practitioners to incorporate arts-based approaches and creativity into learning and teaching. Uses 'Thinking Spaces' to develop a sustained reflective community, alongside the creation of new resources.

Fatherhood Institute
'FRED: Fathers Reading Every Day'
Equipping Early Years practitioners with evidence-based techniques for successful father-engagement in their child's development, through the creation of resources to support annual implementation of FRED, and the training of a 'Dad Squad' of local male volunteers to support settings' promotion, outreach and evaluation activities.

National Day Nurseries Association
'Early Years Maths and Language & Communication Champions'
Online training for Early Years Practitioners on embedding maths and literacy learning into play-based activities and using auditing tools to assess learning. Champions then use audits to evaluate current practice and the competence levels of staff in their setting. Audit results are used to create an action plan, which is implemented by Champions with online support.

Youth Sport Trust
'Healthy Movers'
Training Early Years practitioners to integrate play-based learning through the delivery of physical activity sessions. In addition, parents will be engaged through 'Stay and Play Clubs', and Healthy Movers Ambassadors (practitioners and local authority staff) will be recruited and trained. Mentoring for practitioners will be delivered in settings to establish/sustain programmes. Virtual networking for practitioners will support cross-setting engagement and identify support requirements.

Cohort 2 organisations

Auditory Verbal UK
'Sound Futures - transforming outcomes for deaf children aged 2-5 in London'
Providing highly specialised training for professionals coaching parents with deaf children to develop auditory techniques and strategies that are implemented into daily home life in order to develop children's hearing and spoken language.

Chickenshed
'New Botanics - Urban natural teaching initiative'
Running a series of co-designed workshops for children in nursery settings over the course of 5 weeks. Workshops combine the arts with outdoor learning, using music, movement, sign and puppetry to support learning and improve school readiness. Nursery staff will also be upskilled to be able to embed creative and outdoor learning into their settings.

Discover Children's Story Centre
'Sensory Storytelling: reading engagement activities plus training for Early Years practitioners and parents/carers'
Co-creation of a sensory storytelling session for 2-5 year olds, working in partnership with the staff, parents and children of a nursery in Newham. The programme will then embed Discover's Story Builders as resident storytellers in 12 settings across East London, to deliver the co-created session. Practical training for parents and Early Years staff in Discover's play and storytelling methodology will also be provided.

Home-Start London
'Big Hopes, Big Future'
Tailored school readiness programme that will deliver enhanced training to staff and volunteers covering the key Early Years Foundation Stage framework areas. Trained staff will assess each referred family to identify children whose development is behind expected milestones, and then work with the family to agree an individual package of support, such as practical support, weekly home visits, digital and physical resources, weekly groups and outings.

National Literacy Trust
'Early Words with Childminders'
Providing high quality training for childminders to embed language supporting strategies in their daily practice and strengthen their relationships with parents/carers. Also involves facilitating networking opportunities for childminders, as well as providing free resources and support.

Peeple
'Exploring Together - The Foundations of STEM; from pilot to practice'
Delivery of a training programme for Early Years teachers and parents in STEM that builds on a successful pilot, funded by Phase 1 of the Early Years Special Initiative. Children will be supported in settings and at home via everyday activities that are linked to early STEM skills to improve literacy, language, curiosity and confidence.

The Children's Literacy Charity
'Story Lab'
Language and communication intervention that uses storytelling to support children's literacy and social development. Specialist tutors deliver fun, engaging, twice-weekly storytelling sessions for groups of five children. The storytelling sessions involve modelling strategies and a diverse range of picture books to support children's engagement and therefore a range of literacy outcomes.

Outputs

Early Years Practitioners
Number of practitioner training/networking/mentoring/support sessions run
Number of practitioners who have attended training/networking/mentoring/support sessions

Parents and carers
Number of parent/carer training/support/guidance sessions run
Overall number of people (parents/carers) who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions
Number of mothers, fathers, carers and family units who have attended the training/support/guidance sessions

Volunteers
Number of volunteers engaged in the programme

Children
Number of children benefiting from the programme
Number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds benefiting from the programme

Settings
Number of Early Years settings engaged
Number of community settings engaged (e.g. libraries)

Initiative
Number of (and attendance at) Learning Symposia
Number of (and attendance at) Action Learning Sets

Resources
Number of new resources created
Number of resources disseminated
Number of resources accessed (e.g. page views, downloads etc)

Outcomes

For Early Years Practitioners
Improve practitioner understanding of Early Years pedagogy
Improve practitioners' motivation to deliver effective pedagogy
Improve practitioners' confidence in delivering effective pedagogy
Improve practitioners' ability to reflect/evaluate own work
Improve relationships with parents

For parents and carers
Increase parental/carer understanding of the role they can play in children's learning
Increase parents'/carers' confidence in supporting their children's learning
Increase parental/carer engagement in children's learning
Improve relationships with EY settings

For volunteers
Improve volunteers' skills in supporting children and families

For children
Increase children's engagement in learning
Increase children's engagement in learning in community settings
Increase children's access to quality arts-based learning
Increase children's access to quality play-based learning
Improve children's health and wellbeing

For settings
Increase breadth of pedagogy in Early Years setting
Improve quality of teaching in Early Years settings
Improve cross-organisational partnerships

For grantee organisations
Increase the resilience of grantee's programmes
Increase the scale of grantee's programmes
Increase grantee's ability to identify and incorporate ongoing improvements to delivery

For the wider Early Years sector
Increase awareness of effective models for supporting children's literacy and numeracy
Increase understanding of how the strategies in the Initiative can influence outcomes of children's development and practitioners in Early Years settings

Assumptions:
- Children and families are able to engage in the programme
- The individual programmes have strong theoretical grounding and can reasonably be expected to lead to impact
- The individual programmes will broadly be delivered as planned throughout the Initiative, acknowledging adjustments in light of feedback and experience
- The programmes require initial buy-in from target beneficiaries and then ongoing, sustained engagement by these groups

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Impacts

For children
Increase in children's numeracy skills
Increase in children's literacy and language skills
Improvements in children's school readiness (personal, social and emotional development)

For grantee organisations
Organisations in receipt of Mercers' funding are better able through improved knowledge and capacity to deliver high impact work

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