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Research article

A participatory approach to embedding evidence in practice to support early language and communication in a London nursery school

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Abstract

IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK) has a long tradition of engagement with schools to support young children's learning and co-produce knowledge through research–practice partnerships. From the first demonstration schools in the early 1900s to engagement with contemporary research schools, the vital importance of linking theory and practice in education through schools has been an integral part of the IOE's values and ethos. One way to link theory to practice is to utilise participatory research methodologies to embed evidence in practice. This article discusses the research project Manor Park Talks, undertaken in collaboration

with IOE and a leading partner, a head teacher and IOE alumnus of the East London Teaching and Research School. The aim of the project was to support early language and communication in a cluster of early years settings in Newham, London, and it involved a process of co-production in the design of a systematic review to assess the evidence-based pedagogical strategies that can be used to inform teaching practices to enhance the professional development of early years education practitioners (to include teachers, classroom assistants, childcare workers and other ancillary staff). The research aimed to evaluate a community of practice for early years practitioners to support young children's early language development and communication, and to inform an evidence-based practice tool to guide teaching practices in early years settings. A commentary on the review findings and methodological innovation of the study in using a participatory approach to review the evidence is provided in this article.

Keywords participatory research; early education; early years education; language and communication; intervention; research–practice partnerships

Introduction

IOE (Institute of Education), UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (University College London, UK) has a long tradition of engaging with and influencing early years education policy and practice both locally and nationally through its long-standing partnerships with schools nationally. This article presents a critical discussion of one such relationship, which involved a participatory approach to translating and embedding evidence-informed practice in eight early years settings in East London. The research project Manor Park Talks was undertaken between 2019 and 2021 in collaboration with researchers from the IOE and a head teacher and education practitioners from East London Teaching and Research School. The project aimed to enhance the professional development of early years education practitioners in a cluster of eight early years settings to support young children's language development and communication.

In this article, we start by discussing the historical tradition of partnerships between schools and the IOE. We then consider the nature of successful research to practice partnerships. We describe the case of our project, Manor Park Talks, with particular attention to describing the methodological innovation of the project and implications of the findings on education practitioners' professional development and early years practice. We conclude by discussing the broader implications of research-informed practice in partnerships between researchers and practitioners.

The tradition of school–IOE partnerships

When the London Day Training College (now known as IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society) was established in 1902, one of the prime purposes of the college was to provide 'well-trained teachers for service to London's elementary school' (Alrich and Woodin, 2021: 12). The link between the IOE and London schools has been at the heart of the IOE since its inception. Over time, partnerships have evolved and taken on different forms. First, the IOE provides academic courses for teachers, ranging from short courses to postgraduate levels. Placements for teachers in Postgraduate Certificate in Education programmes have also been provided by a network of London schools. Professional development opportunities are also available – for example, through National Professional Qualifications in Leadership and the Early Career Framework, which supports early career teachers and their mentors. The connection between schools and the IOE in these cases provides a physical context in which learning can take place, either within the university or in the school, and offers an avenue for knowledge exchange and learning from each other. This type of relationship fosters the bringing together of university and school-based expertise to create and embed knowledge and theory to evidence-based practice. At the IOE, this relationship has been built over many decades through the many research–practice partnerships that

exist between academics, schools, teacher educators and school leaders nationally and from around the world to develop a rich experience of translating evidence into practice.

Initiatives to improve education

Improving life chances through education is a common aim of both schools and universities. There have been various initiatives in recent years which aim to fund innovative programmes (for example, the Investing in Innovations [i3] funds in the United States) at various points of their development (pilot, validation or scale-up), and which aim to improve student outcomes (Centre for Public Impact, 2019). In the United Kingdom, the Educational Endowment Foundation (EEF, 2022) is part of the government's What Works Network and aims to identify, fund and evaluate projects that will raise attainment of children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Despite the movement towards establishing what works in practice, the interventions or knowledge in question tend to lose their efficacy when they move beyond the pilot stage. Sheard and Sharples (2016: 669) argue that 'sometimes the knowledge reaches educators, sometimes the educators might use the knowledge', but that 'overall, the relationship between research evidence and educational provision and practice is tenuous and controversial'. Oates and Bignell (2019) suggest that the partnership between school and university is critical for facilitating collaborative learning and enquiry, and improving educational practice for student teachers, but this can be fraught with difficulties and tensions in practice. Part of the challenge for organisations such as the EEF is to find pragmatic solutions to bridging the research to practice gap. Bridging the gap between research and application is a complex problem, and Carnine (1997: 513) argues that these gaps occur for many reasons, including, but not limited to: no direct application of research to practice, researchers' pursuit of 'esoteric topics with limited anchoring in the real world' and little to no involvement of practitioners in research decisions. Often, the 'linearity' of the research process (conducting research prior to dissemination results) can obstruct researchers learning from organisations about what they need to know and organisations from learning about how researchers could usefully inform their professional development and practice. It is important, therefore, to explore the possibilities for research and problem solving when researchers and organisations engage together. This research–practice partnership lies at the heart of our project, Manor Park Talks.

Socio-economic context of the study

The partnership between our school and IOE emerged from a collaborative project between researchers and a leading teaching and research school in Newham, London, to provide evidence-informed professional development for early years practitioners working with young children to support their early communication and language development. The project partners were two researchers from IOE, the head teacher of the school and the early years practitioners working with children, both in Sheringham Teaching and Research School and in other early years settings in the borough of Newham. The socio-economic context of the local community is a distinct feature of the project. The London Borough of Newham is the third-largest borough in London, with a rich and diverse community including minority ethnic groups making up 73 per cent of the local population. The majority of children are from Indian (14.9 per cent) and Bangladeshi-heritage (12.5 per cent) families with English as an additional language (Newham Council, 2022). Of the neighbourhoods in Newham, 8 per cent are described as highly deprived, and the borough is ranked 20th in the United Kingdom in terms of local authorities with the highest levels of unemployment and income deprivation (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2015).

Research context

It has been well established by extant empirical research that language development in the early years for children of two to five years old is associated with cognitive development and later educational attainment (Law et al., 2017). The development of communication skills is mediated by the environment to which children are exposed, both in and outside the home (Weigel et al., 2007). Understanding the quality of engagement and input that children receive in early years settings, and how this is applied in

practice, is therefore vital in supporting language development and communication. There have been various initiatives in recent years that aim to translate research evidence about strategies to support language development to improve education outcomes (Centre for Public Impact, 2019).

The socio-economic and research context outlined above informed the overarching objective of the research, which was to embed evidence-based practices in supporting language into action, with the specific intention of improving the life chances and educational outcomes of disadvantaged children. The research drew on a practice-focused participatory approach in the co-production of the research design, methodology and application of the findings in a close collaboration between the IOE researchers and practitioners in the East London research school.

The aims of the project were:

- to improve the outcomes of disadvantaged two-year-olds accessing free early education entitlement and to take a research-informed approach to ‘weigh up the evidence’ of what works to support early language and communication
- to enhance the professional development of local education practitioners to translate this research into practice. The evidence from the systematic review was used to inform bespoke, context-specific professional development materials.

The initial overarching research question that guided the enquiry between researchers and practitioners was: *What strategies are associated with positive outcomes in teacher practices and children’s early communication and language development?*

Methodology

The research was based on a systematic review design using a participatory approach conducted in two phases in partnership with project partners: headline themes and refined review. Using a participatory approach, our project sought to break ‘the linear mould of conventional research’ (Cornwall and Jewkes, 2010: 794) by engaging closely with adults, in this case education practitioners, as key stakeholders in the translation and application of theory and evidence to early years practice. Cornwall and Jewkes (2010) describe this approach as being characterised as:

- driven by local people and local priorities
- a methodology chosen to empower learning
- a research process that engages participants.

Participatory research is a common methodology often adopted in education and the wider social sciences that is applied on the principle that the research or study is co-constructed in collaboration with participants or key stakeholders who have direct knowledge and experience of a particular phenomenon, and should have greater authority in the enquiry process than any others (Flewitt and Ang, 2020).

Ang (2015: 4) argues that such an approach can help participants to ‘make sense of their own situations’, and requires researchers to adopt a critical stance in the implementation and operationalisation of research design. Cumbo and Selwyn (2021) discuss the increasing use of participatory design approaches in educational research that can benefit school-based research partnerships. Adopting a participatory approach through a school–university collaboration therefore provides an important impetus for researchers and school stakeholders to derive mutual understanding and consensus about a shared research purpose, and encourages communications about the ways in which professional development and teaching practices can be understood from a variety of standpoints and perspectives in a rich and meaningful way. In the next section, we describe Manor Park Talks as an example of such an approach.

Manor Park Talks: a participatory approach

Headline themes

Earlier in this article, a challenge to which we alluded in terms of translating research into evidence is the linearity of the process. In other words, typically researchers conduct research and ‘deliver’ it to their partners. A major disadvantage of such an approach is that project partners must wait until the

'product is delivered' – which can limit the amount of time children can benefit from an intervention in the case of defined project timelines. Another disadvantage is that it assumes a unidirectional flow of information from expert to novice, rather than a bidirectional discussion, with the educational expertise of practitioners having as much importance as the research expertise of the academics.

To counteract the delay, and to facilitate an ethos of collaboration and participation that supported a bidirectional flow of expertise, a review of evidence was undertaken by the research team that allowed the project partners in the Manor Park Talks project to commence shaping the professional development for early years education practitioners, trial some practice and begin to feedback and refine the lines of enquiry that would be jointly pursued. To ensure this review was evidence informed, we discussed and co-designed the search strategy, keywords, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and overall review design. This involved a process of discussing the steps in conducting a systematic review, clarifying the research questions and ascertaining the relevance of studies. It also demanded an acknowledgement that the process would be iterative. In a sense, this ensured that the review was evidence informed or, more specifically, informed by evidence that matched the project partners' expectations. Together, the researchers and school partners summarised key approaches with empirical evidence of efficacy from a recent review, *Early Language Development: Needs, provision, and intervention for preschool children from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds* (Law et al., 2017). From this summary, the Manor Park Talks team co-produced a poster for practitioners to support use of the approaches (see Table 1 for a summary of the contents of the poster). Working jointly, the poster highlighted key approaches to support language development with a focus on the professional development of early years education practitioners in three key themes:

1. Contextual and organisational supports:
 - a. combination of child-managed and adult-directed activities
 - b. focus on combinations of free play and free choice versus teacher directed and managed
 - c. opportunities created to engage children in language-rich opportunities through organisation
 - d. using grouping to facilitate language opportunities (small groups)
 - e. professional development opportunities.
2. Managing interactions/conversational responsiveness:
 - a. emotional and instructional support – focus on providing warm encouraging support
 - b. inferential questioning – using this type of questioning to support children to infer or evaluate
 - c. dialogically organised talk
 - d. conversational responsiveness by facilitating communication (commenting, questioning, facilitating peer-to-peer conversation, pace, pausing)
 - e. conversational responsiveness by taking turns or using turn-taking strategies.
3. Instructional focus:
 - a. dialogic reading
 - b. phonological awareness activities
 - c. interactive shared reading
 - i. story props
 - d. practices targeting literacy skills (concepts about print and print referencing).

Drawing on the key themes from the evidence base, the research team and school partners then prepared a bespoke professional development programme to support practitioners to implement and trial the three core areas (contextual and organisational supports, managing interactions and conversational responsiveness, and instructional focus) outlined previously. This process allowed the IOE researchers to commence the systematic review of the literature in an iterative way. The methodological innovation of this approach was that it allowed the educational professionals to 'test the water', so to speak, and to provide input to the research team at the IOE on the specific areas that they wanted to prioritise, and that they conceptualised as most important and relevant to their context. This participatory approach worked to counteract the linear research approach described by Cornwall and Jewkes (2010).

Table 1. Contents of Poster 1 (Source: authors)

Strategies associated with positive outcomes	What we will notice children doing	What adults could do	What adults could provide
Conversational responsiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increasing the amount they say. Increasing the number of turns they can maintain a conversation for. Increasing the complexity of their conversation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus our attention where the child's attention is. Notice the child's communication (verbal and non-verbal). Comment/narrate/describe. Wait – give children more time to process and respond when we say something to them. Add a word or two, recast or extend. Respond using our knowledge of the individual child. Limit questions. Display active listening by maintaining eye contact, nodding or smiling. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Time to talk – not always being busy doing other things. Spaces which promote conversation – not noisy. Comfortable places to sit and talk. Engage children with expressive language in daily routines and naturally occurring situations.
Interactive book-reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking and engaging actively with the book, not just sitting quietly and listening. Making individual comments about the book. Making links between the book and their own ideas and experiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Comment – modelling literal and inferential responses. Use questions sparingly, with type and focus dependent on child's development. Give children time and opportunities to share their own ideas about the book. Embed prompts for children to talk at both a literal and inferential level about vocabulary in the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enticing spaces for individual curling up with a book and for sharing books. Small group and 1:1 reading time. A wide range of books which match the many different interests of the children in the setting.
Using songs, rhymes and stories to support expressive language	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Singing or talking to themselves using the rhythm and some of the words of familiar songs and rhymes. Acting out familiar stories on their own or with others. Singing and acting out rhymes and stories using props. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use songs and rhymes throughout the day and during everyday activities. Model how you can change the words and still rhyme. Make songs, rhymes and stories personal to individual children. Model the use of props in songs, rhymes and stories. Support children to 'replay the story' using props at story times and throughout the session. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A shared repertoire of songs, rhymes and stories. Small world play, puppets, dressing-up clothes, trips and other resources/activities linked to popular songs and books. Provide props that will help to support understanding of key concepts. Engaging environmental print. Musical instruments and other resources which promote careful listening.
Print referencing to support emergent literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talking about their interpretation of a poster, a picture, the illustrations in a book. Talking about the features of print: for example, a brand they recognise or a letter from their name. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Talk about book illustrations and words. Point out familiar print when out in the neighbourhood or meaningful print in the setting, for example, names. Use activities to develop phonological awareness through rhymes, music and so on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Displays of print in the environment through songs, rhymes and stories.

Table 1. Continued.

Strategies associated with positive outcomes	What we will notice children doing	What adults could do	What adults could provide
Listening for sounds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Displaying beginnings of sound awareness. • Associating sounds with familiar objects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage children to listen for sounds in the environment and letter sounds. • Engage children in activities that associate a variety of objects and toys with letter sounds. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Games and play that encourage listening for sounds. • Everyday activities that help support sound association and differentiation.

The systematic review search of the literature was restricted to articles published between 2008 and 2018, in peer-reviewed journals only and written in English, which focused on the three focal areas described above: 4,081 titles were scanned, and 311 articles were kept for an abstract review. Following the abstract review, 181 articles were kept for full review and coding according to content; 60 articles focused on context or organisation, 72 focused on managing interactions and conversational responsiveness, and 130 focused on instructional focus. It was at this point that we moved into the next phase of the systematic review.

Weight of evidence review

The project team of researchers and school partners engaged in regular meetings and correspondence about the review process as we reflected collectively on the key themes. As a collaborative project, we maintained continuous dialogue throughout the research process to explore and agree the scope and focus of the research. We narrowed the scope of the review as the project partners identified that they intended to focus on the ‘managing interactions and conversational responsiveness’ strategy as the key focus of the project, as a means to support young children’s language and communication. The refined review question was then derived: What strategies for managing interactions with young children are associated with positive outcomes in teacher practices and children’s early communication and language development?

We then focused on the 72 articles on managing interactions and conversational responsiveness (see Figure 1 for a full summary of the process). We used the ‘weight of evidence’ (WOE) technique as suggested by Cordingley in Basma and Savage (2018) to address the jointly decided refined research question. In a weight of evidence review, the studies are rated on three WOE criteria, and then assigned an overall rating.

WOE A: fidelity

Did the report findings in the study answer the study question, and was it internally consistent? If the rating was low for this, then B and C were also rated low. Gough (2007) advises that this is a generic non-review specific judgement about the evidence presented. Cordingley et al. (2007) suggest that the study had to report triangulated evidence and, normally, a benchmark for comparison (a comparison group and/or pre-test post-test results). The authors also had to report explicitly on the implementation of the intervention, and on attempts to establish validity and reliability.

WOE B: rigour

Is the research design appropriate for the review question? Gough (2007: 223) states that this is a ‘review specific judgement about the appropriateness of that form of evidence for answering the review question and the fitness for purpose of that form of evidence. For example, the relevance of certain research designs such as experimental studies for answering questions about process.’

WOE C: focus

Was the evidence relevant to the review question? Gough (2007) describes how this judgement relates to the focus of the evidence collected. For example, the reviewer must consider if the sample or the context aligns with the review focus. Gough also suggests that these criteria also relate to the extent to which the research conducted aligned with ethical guidelines.

WOE D: overall rating

What is the overall quality of the paper in terms of how it provides evidence to answer the review question (Gough, 2007)? Based on the judgements of WOE A, B and C, the studies were then assigned an overall rating of high, medium or low. The decision to assign an overall rating was based on the combination of results from all three areas. There were 21 studies that were assessed to meet high ratings and included in the final review (see Figure 1), and we divided the findings into three themes (see Table 2).

Figure 1. Review flow diagram (Source: authors)

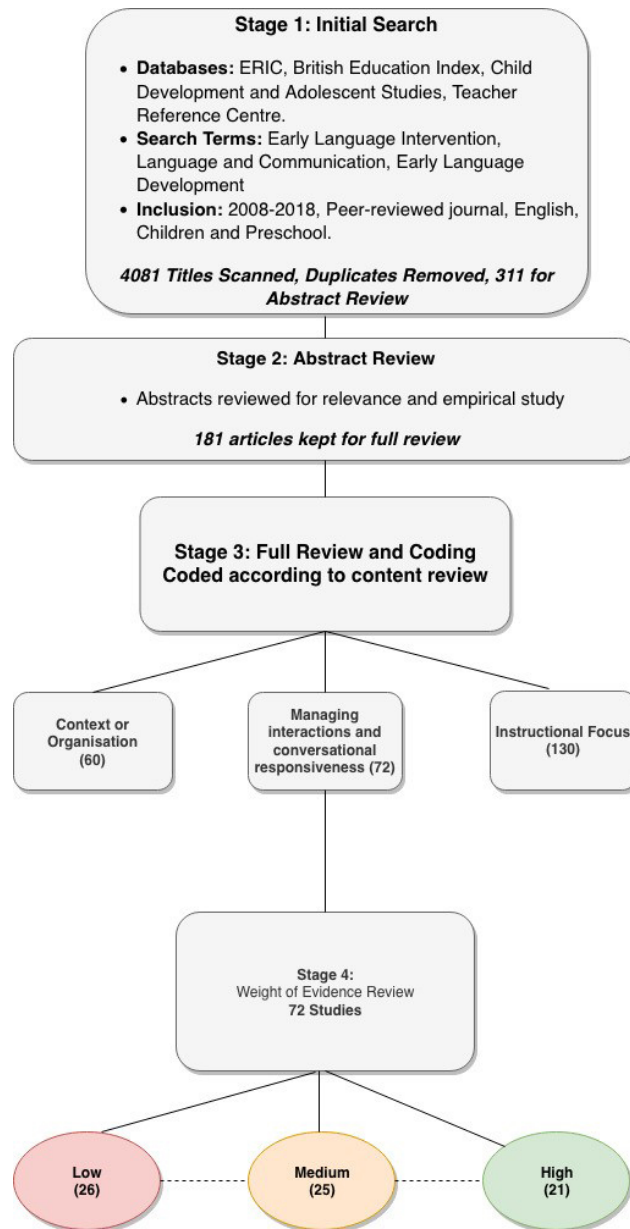


Table 2. Key themes from review findings (Source: authors)

Theme 1: attend to social and emotional development	An overarching finding was that attending to children’s social and emotional well-being has positive effects in promoting language and communication. As [Bierman et al. (2008: 1812)] suggest, language skills and social and emotional skills are intertwined, and ‘language skills enhance the child’s capacity to regulate emotions’.
Theme 2: adults as active partners in the conversation process	A large proportion of the studies reviewed examined how adult caregivers can effectively shape conversations to promote language development. <i>The adult needs to be an active partner in the conversation process – modelling, scaffolding, listening and creating spaces for joint engagement.</i>
Theme 3: value the complexity, diversity and duration of language experience	We found that a proportion of studies described the complexity of language (in terms of vocabulary and conversation), the diversity of language (in terms of context) and the duration or time spent involved in language lessons or intervention. <i>Density and diversity of language including, but not limited to, vocabulary for prolonged periods matters.</i>

In applying the weight of evidence ratings, we used the following criteria:

- those practices which are explicitly documented with clear outcome measures by which efficacy is established
- those practices which show promise – lack a clear outcome measure, but articulate why this approach might work and contribute to theory building or improving practice in this way
- those practices which do neither of the above
- those practices which provide information and data from a primary study, not from a literature review.

At the end of the analysis, we rated 26 studies as low overall, 25 as medium and 21 as high. Figure 1 provides a synopsis of the search process. These results were shared in a report (Ang and Harme, 2019) with the project partners, and used to inform a poster of teaching strategies that formed the basis of professional development for early years education practitioners (see Figure 2).

The project in action: the school context

Sheringham Nursery School and Children’s Centre is a maintained nursery school serving the communities in the Manor Park and Little Ilford areas of Newham. Sheringham leads a network of early years settings in the neighbourhood: private and community nurseries, which are generally small, under-funded and housed in non-purpose-built accommodation such as church halls or former shop units. As a maintained school, Sheringham has a larger budget for professional development. The school made a strategic decision to allocate part of the budget for joint professional development, so that projects could be on a larger scale and reach more children. As part of this strategy, the school, in collaboration with the IOE, made a successful funding application for Manor Park Talks. The funding was awarded from the EEF, and the project was externally evaluated by NatCen (see EEF, 2020 for the full evaluation of the project).

In Manor Park and Little Ilford, the housing crisis is particularly acute. On home visits, nursery school staff regularly meet families crammed into very small flats, often with four or more children in each bedroom. The high rate of child poverty, and the extreme stress on parents trying their best in very difficult circumstances, can combine to make the home environment less than optimal for children’s language development. Research suggests that in areas of social and economic disadvantage, between 40 per cent and 56 per cent of children start school with language delay (Law et al., 2011; Locke et al., 2002).

Figure 2. Poster 2 (Source: authors)

SHARED BOOK READING
Think about this as sharing books with children, not 'reading to children': you can use books as a way of starting conversations.

PEER FRAMEWORK

1. Prompt the child to say something about the book.
2. Evaluate their response.
3. Expand their response by rephrasing or adding information to it and;
4. Repeat the prompt to help them learn from the expansion.

Prompts you might use...

- Leave a word out – Humpty Dumpty sat on the ...
- Ask children about the pictures: 'I wonder what the caterpillar is doing now?'
- 'Is this Spot under the box?'

CONVERSATIONS WITH CHILDREN

Playing with children, following their interests and drawing their attention to interesting things (developing 'joint attention')

Four finger rule:
Aim for four comments to every question.

Ten second rule:
Give children time to process what you've said and reply.

Develop longer conversations:
Like a serve, return and rally in a game of tennis.

Listen and wait until the child is ready to speak, then recap or add one or two words.

Make time for conversation:
make sure you aren't always busy and rushing from one thing to the next.

HOME LEARNING
Set aside 10 minutes every day to play with and listen to your child, avoid distractions, turn off mobiles, tablets, music and TV's for quality time together.

Remember: It's important to keep up your child's mother tongue

Talking and sharing a story together
Talking and playing together
Talking and doing things together

Sheringham Nursery School & Children's Centre
UCL Institute of Education
Education Endowment Foundation
Contact: www.eley.sp.co.uk

The initial conception of the project to inform a professional development programme was premised on an ethic of community development: that the school would work collaboratively with parents and practitioners to enhance children's early development. The project was also conceived on the shared understanding that supporting children's language development is not only the responsibility of parents and families, some of whom live in harsh and difficult social and economic conditions, but also the responsibility of education practitioners and educators in the early years settings. As such, the project design took the approach that a model of 'disseminating' effective practice in the nursery school to the smaller nursery settings in the local area had to be delivered in a collaborative partnership with researchers, education practitioners and the research school.

In designing the study, we drew on the following key principles:

- taking responsibility for all local children in the borough, not just the minority who attend Sheringham Nursery School
- positioning the teaching team at Sheringham as learners, working alongside other local early years educators to improve practice together
- working with IOE research partners to use the best available evidence, maximising the likelihood of success
- contextualising that evidence through professional dialogue with the participants, drawing on their expertise
- working with researchers to review practice and generate improvements together, rather than merely providing a site for academic research
- using evidence to inform, not dictate, changes in practice (see Nelson and O'Beirne, 2014).

The project focused on promoting a list of evidence-informed pedagogical strategies as part of a professional development programme for education practitioners to employ when playing and interacting with children. The target population was children between two and three years old from low-income families who were accessing a free nursery place. The programme focused on:

- promoting children's language development
- applying evidence-informed pedagogical strategies that could be rehearsed in the education practitioners'. professional development training, and then used regularly in the education practitioners'. interactions with the children in order for the strategies to become embedded as part of everyday practice.

Discussion and reflections

The project revealed opportunities and also unexpected challenges. As part of the iterative cycle of implementing the professional development programme, an independent evaluation team from NatGen (EEF, 2020) worked with the project team at Sheringham and IOE to review and evaluate the project at particular stages of its implementation. Two key findings from the formative evaluation were:

- The project focused on young children's language interactions. However, a few practitioners noted that children's emotional well-being was important and required equal attention. As a result, this informed further refining of the review protocol to ensure the project team reviewed the evidence base to draw more attention to the importance of practitioners supporting children emotionally at the same time as encouraging language and communication.
- Many practitioners found the list of five strategies challenging to implement in their daily practice. They did report that focusing on conversational responsiveness was easier to apply in practice. As a result, the strategies were streamlined, and replaced with a single, clearly stated objective. The project was all about 'listening to children and having conversations with them'. Under this umbrella was a much shorter list of strategies. These are summarised on a poster (see Figure 2), which practitioners co-designed as part of the project.

The education practitioners involved in the Manor Park Talks project found that they could put the new strategies into practice regularly, and that these new practices were manageable within their busy days. The team at Sheringham Nursery School reflected on further learning points at the end of the programme. These included:

- The project arguably put too much emphasis on conversation and conversational turns, and not enough emphasis on vocabulary. Since the project ended, practitioners at the nursery school have continued to use the strategies, together with an increased focus on introducing children to new vocabulary through both explicit and implicit means (for example, highlighting new words in books they are sharing with children, and taking care to introduce richer vocabulary while playing with children).
- The emphasis on conversation may also have not given due weight to the importance of different modes of communication. Practitioners now take more care to ensure that some conversations are 'beyond the here-and-now'. There is more emphasis on imaginative discussion ('I wonder if ... ') and conversation that develops thinking and reasoning ('I wonder what might have happened if ... ').
- The project assumes that improving the quality of interactions with children as they play, learn independently, and take part in guided, playful activities will be beneficial to all children. Closer analysis of children's learning at Sheringham suggests that even when the overall climate is more supportive of language development, some children are still at risk of missing out. This informed the decision to timetable regular, adult-guided small-group times for children to talk about wordless picture books, building on the findings of Dockrell et al. (2010).

Conclusion

The project and implementation of the professional development programme showed that there is clear evidence of the importance of supporting early language and communication (Law et al., 2017). Research indicates that instructional practices, implemented with fidelity, can potentially improve children's academic and social progress (Castro et al., 2017). Through a systematic review, we identified key instructional practices that have been described in well-designed, rigorous empirical studies. As a school–university partnership, the project reinforced the importance of adopting a methodological approach that involved stakeholders from the conception of the enquiry to the application of the findings to inform a practice tool for education practitioners in an iterative manner. The project also offered an

opportunity for critical reflection for both researchers and school partners in the collaborative process of translating and embedding evidence into practice. It sparked discussions around what counts as evidence and embedding research-informed strategies to support children's learning, which in turn revealed the opportunities, as well as the challenges, encountered in the research cycle.

We argue for a conceptual, theoretical model that breaks through the 'linearity' of research in favour of a participatory approach where the researchers and participants co-construct, collaborate and engage in a community of research, practice and shared enquiry to improve practice, rather than just to disseminate or impart knowledge.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors declare that research ethics approval for this article was provided by UCL Research Ethics Committee Office for the Vice Provost Research Project ID 10611/004.

Consent for publication statement

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Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

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