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Supporting early years professional development to enhance high-quality conversational interactions in early childhood care and education settings: the ShREC approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the pertinent issue of effective evidence-based professional development (PD) to support high-quality adult-child conversational interactions in early childhood care and education settings. Research consistently shows quality adult-child interactions can improve young children's early learning and language development. The paper discusses the evolution of the Neighbourhood Early Language Project (NELP), involving the development and implementation of an early years PD programme. NELP aimed to improve the professional knowledge and practice of early years educators in using a range of pedagogical strategies to enhance adult-child interactions. It generated a bespoke pedagogical approach, named by the acronym 'ShREC', which describes four key, evidence-informed pedagogical strategies: 'Share attention, Respond, Expand and develop Conversation'. This guided educators in delivering high-quality interactions with children. This paper argues for a paradigm shift to a participatory, 'research-to-practice' translational approach to early years PD, making research relevant and informing the scaling-up of evidence-based practice.

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Early years; professional development; pedagogy; adult-child conversational interactions; early childhood care and education settings

Introduction

This paper discusses the pertinent issue of effective evidence-based professional development (PD) to support early years educators in delivering high-quality conversational interactions with young children in early childhood care and education (ECE) settings. The challenge is multifaceted, given the diversity of ECE settings and the complexities of translating evidence into everyday practice that is relevant to local needs. The discussion presents a critical analysis of an innovative research-to-practice, evidence-based early years PD programme – the Neighbourhood Early Language Project (NELP). The programme was developed and implemented over 10 months across 8 early years settings and 6 primary schools in a local borough of a large city in England. The programme aimed to support early years educators to develop the quality of their conversational interactions

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(henceforth referred to as ‘interactions’ in this article) with children, and thereby enhance children’s early communication and language development. The project sought to address the challenge of supporting the PD needs of early years educators in a sector where there is little or no funding for staff PD, resulting in most PD opportunities being accessed in an ‘ad-hoc’ way which makes it difficult to sustain pedagogical change.

As part of our approach, we used a translational research-to-practice approach to review the underpinning evidence-base and inform the development of the programme. A theory of change model ([Appendix 1](#)) sets out the potential impact of the programme for enhancing pedagogical strategies and the quality of adult-child interactions in everyday practice. As the programme evolved, it was evaluated by an independent research team. The evaluation findings demonstrated strong ‘evidence of promise, feasibility, and readiness for scaling-up’ (Husain et al. [2020](#), 12). Over 2 years, the programme was at first expanded to reach 60 settings in one large urban borough and subsequently scaled up to reach 112 settings across 32 boroughs in a large city in England.

What the extant research says

Research demonstrates that high-quality interactions – broadly characterised as responsive, socially meaningful ‘back-and-forth’ conversations between early years educators and young children – are the cornerstone of educational quality (Goble and Pianta [2017](#); Pianta, Downer, and Hamre [2016](#); Sylva et al. [2004](#)). High-quality adult-child interactions can make a significant difference to young children’s early learning and language development, especially during the early childhood phase from birth to 5 years (Goble and Pianta [2017](#); Law et al. [2017](#); Pianta, Downer, and Hamre [2016](#); Sylva et al. [2004](#)). In ECCE settings, which typically cater for children in early childhood from two- or three-year-olds to primary school, the evidence consistently indicates high-quality interactions are positively associated with children’s early language development and subsequent educational outcomes. However, conversely, the evidence also indicates that there is significant variability in the quality and level of input of adult-child interactions across diverse ECCE settings (Goble and Pianta [2017](#); Perlman et al. [2016](#)).

Additionally, evidence shows that quality interactions which support communication and language development during the early years are associated with better educational outcomes. A comprehensive evidence review by Law et al. ([2017](#)) showed that communicative development in the early years affected not only language learning but later academic attainment in school. The review found that a variety of strategies that support quality interactions, such as exposing children to a language-rich environment, interactive reading, and play and responsive talk and communication during everyday routines, can make a key difference to ‘optimise early development’ (Law et al. [2017](#), 4). However, delivering quality interactions is complex and challenging. It invariably depends on educators competently and intentionally supporting children to develop their early language skills, and nurturing children’s confidence to use language and engage in early learning effectively.

Critically, as Weisleder and Fernald ([2013](#)) assert, it is not just the quantity of language that matters, but also the quality of the interactions and ways in which early years educators interact and engage with the child. To this end, PD opportunities are vital for equipping early years educators with the complex skills and knowledge they need to deliver high-quality interactions well and confidently. A wealth of evidence shows that PD

and learning approaches in ECCE that are informed by research evidence, combined with coaching or peer-to-peer learning and opportunities for reflective practice, can impact positively on children's outcomes (Hamre et al. 2013; Mathers et al. 2022; Rogers and Brown 2023). A meta-analysis of the impact of in-service PD focused on the quality of adult-child interactions in preschool settings showed that improved early years practices maximised children's educational experiences and enabled them to reach academic goals (Egert, Dederer, and Fukkink 2020). A review of the research literature on early years PD established that effective in-service PD is vital for delivering high-quality early childhood education, but this is contingent on ECCE settings valuing continuous professional learning and development for all early years educators (Schachter, Gerde, and Hatton-Bowers 2019). Importantly, effective PD should be evidence-based and grounded in adult learners' interests (Schachter, Gerde, and Hatton-Bowers 2019). The extant research, therefore, points to a consensus on identifying the features of PD programs that can potentially make a difference to quality interactions and benefit children's learning and development in ECCE settings.

The English policy and curriculum context

To further contextualise the issue and extant research on early years PD as discussed in the earlier section, it is useful to consider the educational policy context in England. Supporting high-quality interactions in the early years has been a policy focus for well over a decade. In 2011, the UK government commissioned Clare Tickell to write an independent report on the English Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), the statutory regulations and curriculum framework for ECCE. In her report, Tickell recommended 'that the Government investigate urgently how the development of children's English language skills can be effectively supported and assessed' (Tickell 2011, 57). The Department for Education's 2013 policy paper, 'More great childcare' argued that 'we know what works in early years education ... Better-qualified staff offer higher-quality support for children age 30 months to 5 years in developing communication, language, literacy, reasoning, thinking and mathematical skills' (DfE 2013, 15). The Early Years Pupil Premium (EYPP), introduced in England in 2015 to improve the quality of early education for disadvantaged 3- and 4-year olds, was frequently spent on approaches 'to directly support the speech, language, and communication needs of children eligible for EYPP' (Roberts, Griggs, and Robb 2017, 8).

In 2017, the English government set out proposals for changes to Early Learning Goals, part of the assessment framework in the EYFS. The revised Early Learning Goals, placing a stronger emphasis on communication and language, were piloted in 24 schools in 2018/19, and the trial was evaluated by the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) (Husain et al. 2019). The evaluation found that 'the revised ELGs leant themselves to content focused on stories, group work, and discussion. This was viewed positively by teachers as it helped to support children's language skills and imagination' (Husain et al. 2019, 28). The EEF, which is part of the UK government's What Works Network, also published a guidance report titled 'Preparing for Literacy' (EEF 2018). This sets out a series of evidence-informed recommendations for early years educators to support the quality of adult-child interactions and enhance children's communication, language and early literacy.

Further rounds of consultation and piloting led to the 2021 revision of the EYFS (DfE 2021). The EYFS sets out the legally required standards for learning, development and care for children up to the age of five in early years settings and schools in England. The revised framework puts a much stronger emphasis on children's communication and language. Communication is described as underpinning all the other areas of children's learning and development. The statutory framework emphasises the importance of high-quality interactions and the conversations that children have with adults and peers. At the same time, the English Department for Education revised the non-statutory guidance to support the EYFS, 'Development Matters', and noted that the update 'includes more guidance about children's communication and language. Language is the foundation of children's thinking and learning' (DfE 2021, 5).

The regulator and inspector of early years settings in England, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted), highlighted research demonstrating that 'communication and responding to children is a particularly salient skill for early years practitioners, especially with the youngest children' (OFSTED 2019, 18). In turn, Ofsted's Early Years Inspection Handbook stresses the importance of practitioners' 'interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities, communicating and modelling language' (OFSTED 2021 n.p.)

This strong emphasis on classroom interactions and children's communication and language generated a need for high-quality PD. NELP was developed amidst this backdrop of continual policy development between 2011 and 2021. As the discussion later shows, the 'ShREC' approach, which NELP generated, was designed to help educators respond to the final changes in the English EYFS framework and inspection system in the school year 2021–22. Furthermore, embedding evidence-based early years PD that fosters and enables high-quality interaction would enhance early learning opportunities for young children, and in the longer term, enable educators and ECCE settings to work towards delivering more inclusive and equitable education for all young children (UN2030 Sustainable Development Goals, Goal 4).

The evolution of the neighbourhood early language project (NELP): taking a research-to-practice approach to early years professional development (PD)

Theoretical underpinnings

The project was informed by a participatory methodology (Ang 2015; Flewitt and Ang 2020) and co-led by researchers and a group of senior early years leaders and educators in a Research School (a school that is funded to support education research and use evidence to improve teaching practice and everyday classroom practice). We used a translational 'research-to-practice' approach, built on the close partnership between researchers and educators in a project team. This approach was intended to foreground the translation and application of the best available knowledge, derived from robust scholarly review methods, to deliver the PD program. The strategy of 'knowledge distillation' (Straus et al. 2009) guided the study throughout. Synonymously known as 'knowledge translation' (Graham et al. 2005) or 'translational research' (Graham et al. 2005), the method is prevalently used in the health sciences to describe a particular research approach which aims to 'translate' or move scientific discovery into health improvement

to produce more meaningful, applicable results that directly benefit end-users. Originating in the life and medical fields, the goal of translational research is to translate basic science discoveries more quickly and efficiently into practice for public health benefit.

Translational research is increasingly used in education as an emerging methodology to examine pedagogy and classroom practice. In the following section, we describe the project and provide concrete examples of multiple aspects of the research-to-practice process. The project was led and delivered by a maintained nursery school located in a large, diverse urban borough in the United Kingdom where a high proportion of residents (69.2%) are from ethnically diverse communities with the majority of Asian heritage (Office for National Statistics 2021).

The programme's focus was to improve the skills and expertise of early years professionals to support high-quality interactions and children's early language development in particular, two-year-olds from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing free early education. A comprehensive evidence review was conducted as a starting point to ensure the programme was anchored in the latest research and evidence-informed. Based on the theoretical underpinnings of translational research, a phased approach in the research-to-practice process guided the overall methodology. This is described in [Figure 1](#) below:

A weight of evidence review (Ang and Harmey 2019) was then undertaken to underpin the basis of the PD programme which showed strong evidence that quality interactions which attend to children's social and emotional well-being have a positive impact on early language development and learning experiences. The research reinforced the importance of prioritising the development of children's language and communication through socially meaningful conversations or communications. The key themes from the evidence review included the importance of social-emotional support and the need to engage children in diverse language-rich experiences (Ang and Harmey 2019).

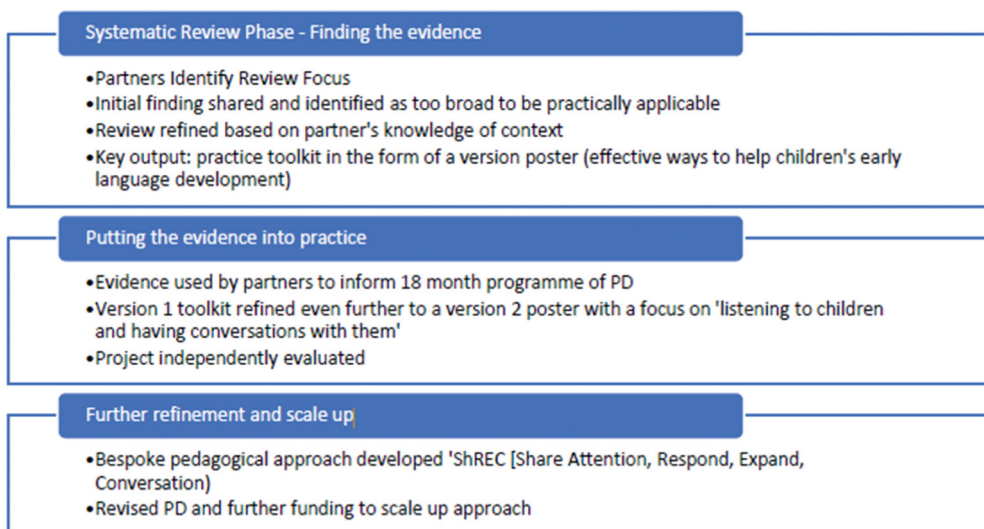


Figure 1. Phased approach to a participatory approach to reviewing the literature.

Importantly, the findings from the evidence review directly informed the genesis and design of the NELP program, which aims to place more emphasis on changing and then embedding new pedagogy in everyday practice to support high-quality interactions. The project was designed to address three research questions:

- (1) What do high-quality interactions look like as informed by the evidence-base?
- (2) What strategies for managing interactions with young children are associated with positive outcomes in teacher practices and children's early language and communication?
- (3) How can early years educators be supported to deliver high-quality interactions and sustain them in everyday practice?

Objective and aims

The overarching objective was to create sustained pedagogical change through the creation of an adaptable, scalable and contextually relevant approach that early years educators could apply to improve their every practice. The aims were two-fold: firstly, to take a research-informed approach to 'weigh up' the best available evidence of what works to support early language and communication for young children; and secondly, to enhance the PD of early years educators by translating and applying research into practice. Participants were provided with targeted guidance on listening to and developing effective communications with children using five key strategies that were developed from the evidence-review findings: i) responsive and socially meaningful conversations, ii) interactive book-reading, iii) using songs, rhymes, and stories to support expressive language, iv) print referencing to support emergent literacy, and v) listening to sounds.

The programme was delivered across 8 early years settings and 6 primary schools through a series of PD training sessions. A whole-setting approach was taken, involving all senior leaders and educators, to support the implementation of the programme and thereby promote quality interactions to enhance children's early language development. The training was delivered in two stages: a full day launch conference event and a full day of tailored training at each participating setting. The launch event consisted of presentations about children's language and communication development, group discussions and the use of videos to demonstrate key skills focused on the central aims of NELP. Early years educators viewed short video clips of children interacting with adults, and then practised their own techniques for listening and developing conversations. During the PD sessions, educators had the opportunity to observe each other's practice, reflect on their own practice, and give each other feedback to identify effective pedagogical strategies. In taking a research-to-practice approach, the sessions covered key topics including discussion of the findings from the evidence review, expectations of the training, specific pedagogical techniques when interacting with children, and importantly, participants' views and impressions on the usefulness, barriers and challenges for delivering pedagogical strategies and changing their practice.

The design of the programme was, in many ways, typical of early years PD in England at the time. The programme was delivered by specialist independent consultants with a strong track-record of delivering training in early years practice. Following the launch, each setting had bespoke training delivered by the two specialists. To support ongoing

implementation, there were monthly group coaching sessions and termly mentor visits, and a 'champion' for the programme was nominated in each setting. This approach was intended to create an early years 'hub' or community of mentors and educators, with participants encouraged to share both successes and barriers to implementation in the coaching sessions. However, a linear research-to-practice journey, from genesis to implementation and then to scale-up, is not straightforwardly achieved. Challenges inevitably arose and required a constructive response. These challenges are analysed and addressed in the following discussion.

Ethics

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the researchers' university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who were mainly early years educators and managers of ECCE and school settings. Participants were fully briefed on the nature and purpose of the research, including the research design, methodology, as well as the time commitment involved. Participants were reassured that the data would be used primarily for research and academic purposes, and to inform professional practice. No personal or individual-level data was used in the reporting of the findings.

A translational methodological approach

Throughout the project, we sought to apply the principles of a translational methodological approach to translate the evidence and provide the participants with direct access to research to inform their professional practice. We worked on the premise that the distilling of knowledge from research-to-practice is fundamental. This maximises the opportunities and ensures there is traction for the uptake of evidence which early years educators can put into practice. The research reinforced the notion that knowledge translation is not simply a linear procedure but involves multiple processes and interactions with researchers and knowledge users. In NELP, we conceptualised and applied the principles of 'translational research' to turn evidence into targeted classroom practice and improve the professional development and learning for educators. We took a practice-oriented focus to bridge the gap between often-polarising areas of expertise – research and practice. This ensured that the research evidence was relevant and applicable for classroom practice to improve pedagogy and teaching behaviour.

However, there were inevitably challenges. The seeming 'linearity' of a research-to-practice methodological approach can often lead to gaps in thinking and, as Carnine (1997) argued, these gaps can include 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 (p. 513). 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. Likewise, it can obstruct organisations' learning about how researchers could usefully inform their practice. This is certainly the case with our study, as exemplified by the outcomes and lessons learned in the following sections.

An evidence-based outcome: a new pedagogical approach to improve the quality of interactions

Through the close collaboration between the researchers, early years leaders and educators, and using a research-to-practice translational approach as described in the previous section, an iterative cycle of dialogue and feedback was embedded over a 10-month period across the NELP training sessions. This led to the development of two iterations of a practice toolkit, produced in poster format, to distil the key information from the evidence review and translated into practice. The evidence review informed the development of a first poster, 'Effective ways to help children's early language development', and subsequently an updated version on 'Shared book reading' and 'Listening to children and having conversations with them'. The updated posters featured enhanced graphics and pictorial images, highlighting the key strategies for supporting quality interactions ([Appendix 2](#)).

The outcomes from our study point to the need for a more nuanced and bespoke model of programme delivery to enable early years educators to take full advantage of the PD learning opportunity. First, the project revealed the importance of taking an adaptable, tailored and culturally relevant approach to embed and contextualise the intended changes to early years practice that reflect the needs of the local community. The formative evaluation of NELP, conducted by an independent evaluator, assessed the feasibility and acceptability of the programme (Husain et al. 2020). The evaluation revealed that early years educators were more reflective of their own practice than before being part of the programme, were finding opportunities for one-to-one interactions with children based on NELP techniques, and reported improvements in children's language and communication. The evaluation also showed evidence which indicated that educators were more engaged in conversations with children and felt more confident in doing so (Husain et al. 2020). At the same time, however, there were complex challenges with the fidelity and implementation of the program. The NELP project was a messier and more problematic programme than either its design, or evaluation, suggest. For instance, tensions arose when concerns were raised about the custom of some educators referring to each other as 'aunty'. There were differences of opinion among the programme team about whether this was appropriate, even though the reference to 'aunty' was a cultural norm among the local Asian community. As a result, there was a lack of consensus in the project team which raised complexities with the implementation of the programme. It also highlighted the issue of cultural dissonance and the importance of taking into account the cultural diversity and local context of ECCE settings when implementing a PD programme.

Additionally, the mentor visits highlighted an unexpected consequence from the project's focus on language and communication. Staff were observed trying to deploy the pedagogical strategies they had been taught through the NELP programme, on occasion at the expense of reassuring children – many new to the settings – and offering them emotional support. This led to well-intentioned staff prioritising efforts to focus on language and conversation at times when the children needed soothing and support with managing their emotions. At other times, staff were observed attempting to implement another pedagogical strategy – the 'Observe-Wait-Listen' ('OWL') approach – without adequate contextualisation of the diverse needs of the children. 'OWL' derives from the

evidence-informed Hanen programme to support children with delayed speech and language, and it was a central part of the training (Hanen 2016). However, this approach did not readily transfer to diverse, busy urban ECCE settings. Mentors noticed that in some cases, educators were spending their time observing, waiting and listening and, as a result, not focusing on meaningful engagement and interaction with children who only spoke only a little English. A subsequent guidance report (EEF (2021)) on effective PD retrospectively illuminated the need for a continuous cycle of evaluation and reflection. In particular, the project team reflected that a higher level of consistency was needed in the research-to-practice process, from translating evidence to programme design, training, mentoring and implementation. Concurrently, PD needed also to be culturally relevant and contextualised for the early years educators in the local community.

Second, and closely related to the first outcome, are the complexities and practicalities of translating research into practice to support effective PD. The perspectives of early years educators were elicited throughout the project cycle. This was intended to enable better understanding of how the early years educators perceived the enablers and challenges in delivering quality interactions and implementing change to improve their everyday practice. The findings showed that while participants recognised the importance of quality interactions, translating research into practice can be complex and challenging. At an individual level, the programme found that some early years educators lacked confidence and knowledge about appraising research, and this prevented them from implementing research knowledge in their everyday practice. At a setting level, a key challenge was time and capacity for managers and early years educators to acquire the skills required to implement changes consistently. The practical realities of a busy ECCE setting mean that educators must balance a demanding workload of activities and responsibilities. This makes it difficult for them to sustain the momentum of their professional learning and embed new practices to deliver quality interactions.

Third, the overall study reinforced the complexities and challenges of improving practice and pedagogical behaviour in a sustained way, during and beyond the life of the project. Participants of NELP found that the application of the full set of strategies espoused through the PD programme (as illustrated in Appendix 2) to be daunting. The independent evaluation showed keen interest among early years educators in learning new ways of improving interactions and supporting children's language and communication. However, the challenge was to apply a technique or approach that was adaptable and sustainable for embedding in everyday practice (Husain et al. 2020). Through a continuous cycle of active dialogue and collaboration with the early years educators, it was agreed that focusing specifically on responsive, socially meaningful conversational techniques was more feasible and easier to apply than the full set of strategies as set out in the original NELP design. As a result, a new evidence-based pedagogical approach was created – the **ShREC** approach (Figure 2).

'ShREC' is an acronym coined to describe four key, evidence-informed pedagogical strategies: **'Share attention, Respond, Expand and develop Conversation'**. The aim of the mnemonic was to remind early years educators of the effective adult-child communication strategies they could use in daily practice. Informed by the evidence-review, key features of the approach include multi-turn conversations and decontextualised talk with a focus on vocabulary. ShREC provided guidance to early years educators to highlight the importance of 'serve and return' interactions and socially meaningful conversations

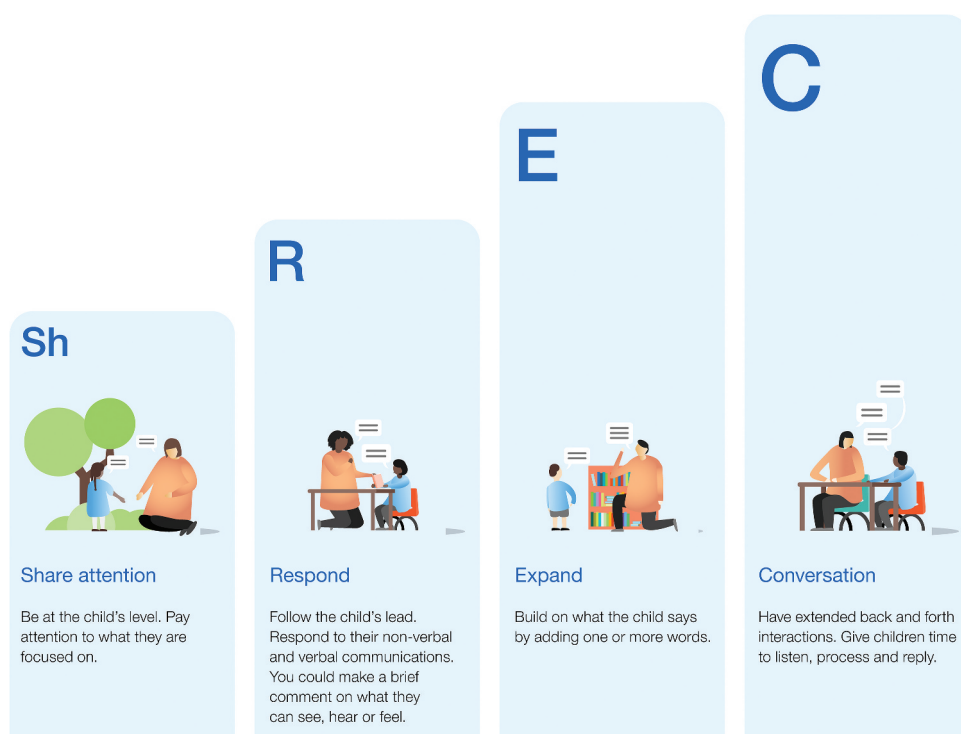


Figure 2. The ShREC approach.

between adults and children. 'ShREC' yoked together established evidence, practice, and the need for an easy-to-remember mnemonic to guide practice (Baldwin 2014; Masek et al. 2021; Tomasello and Farrar 1986):

- 'Share attention' reminds practitioners of the importance of showing interest in children's play, or creating an interesting play opportunity for children, rather than standing back. It also emphasises the research finding that communication depends on shared attention.
- 'Respond' reminds practitioners of the importance of being attuned to the child and making a contingent response to their communication.
- 'Expand' reminds practitioners of the importance of building on what children say for example, turning a two-word expression into a short phrase. When the child says 'red car', the practitioner might reply 'the red car is going fast'.
- Finally, 'Conversation' reminds practitioners of the importance of back-and-forth conversation in children's early language development.

Discussion and lessons learned for research and practice

Embedding evidence-based PD to improve early years practice that fosters high-quality interactions to support language and communication is an area of considerable importance in early childhood education (Hamre et al. 2013). Equally important is translating evidence to early years practice that is relevant and targeted to educators' interests and

directly addresses gaps in their knowledge and skills (Schachter, Gerde, and Hatton-Bowers 2019). The translation and application from research to practice is a complex task. This is particularly challenging when evidence shows the quality of adult-child interactions in ECCE settings can be highly variable and low-quality pedagogy is often common (NICHD ECCRN 2005).

The research-to-practice approach lies at the heart of the NELP and the development of the ShREC approach. Our findings are multi-faceted and point to the importance of taking account of *contexts*, the complexities of translating research to practice, and the challenge of sustaining change. Given that research has shown continuous PD can significantly shape the quality of interactions and learning opportunities for young children we believe our findings are important. However, we also found that researchers and educators alike contend with challenges related to translating research into effective practice in ways that are relevant and applicable to the realities of early years settings. To address these challenges, we identified early years educators who were ‘champions’ in leading and implementing the new pedagogical strategies, thereby encouraging educators to take ownership and exercise agency in their own PD. We also recognised the vital role of mentors and the importance of fostering close relationships between mentors and mentees through a variety of channels such as ‘mentor hubs’, instant messaging such as WhatsApp and online communications, individualised support, mentor visits, modelling and reflection. Over the course of the project, the mentor hubs became communities of learners where early years educators grew in confidence and knowledge, in a collegiate environment with a shared focus on enhancing pedagogical behaviour through the ShREC approach. These mentor hubs and communities that emerged through the NELP align with existing research which shows that creating ‘a community of learning’ and ‘culture of learning’ are crucial elements of effective PD programs (Schachter, Gerde, and Hatton-Bowers 2019, 6).

Research also suggests that highly responsive educators who are well versed with extending children’s thinking and conversations are key to effective early education (García-Carrión and Villardón-Gallego 2016). Early years educators around the world are expected to provide responsive, meaningful interactions consistently throughout their working day, while carrying out a variety of tasks and activities in their settings. However, as our project revealed, there are barriers and challenges to the conduct and translation of research evidence to deliver high-quality interactions. The participants in our project found that while quality interactions may seem easy to enact, implementing more nuanced strategies of listening to children and engaging them in meaningful, sustained back and forth conversations is not easy to do well. It can be difficult for early years educators to articulate and implement the strategies and reasoning behind evidence-informed pedagogical practices in order to support quality interactions. This resonates with established research which exemplifies the dissonance or incongruence between practitioners’ intentions (what they wish to do) and actions (what they actually do) (Argyris, Putman, and McLain Smith 1985; Delaney 2015).

A key learning is that to embed long-term sustainable change to pedagogical practice and behaviour, effective PD needs to involve a paradigm shift to move beyond simply focusing on knowledge building. In order to change practice, effective PD also needs to offer educators space and time to examine new knowledge and reflect on the application of their knowledge and learning independently and together. In this process, it is

important to challenge and adapt our own assumptions of the research-to-practice approach to the local realities of ECCE settings. This involves ensuring that research evidence is distilled and conceptualised in contextually and culturally appropriate ways. In our study, we addressed this by providing a simple and memorable set of specific, evidence-informed strategies that can be easily implemented in everyday practice in diverse ECCE settings. In doing so, we wanted to ensure that the new pedagogical ShREC approach would become ‘a way of being’ for early years educators to challenge and improve their practice. In theorising professional learning in education, the academic Wiliam describes the concept of creating a ‘culture of improvement’, where all educators believe they need to improve ‘not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better, there is no limit to what we can achieve’ (William 2019).

Despite challenges with its design and implementation, the overarching findings of our research points to the centrality of attending to quality interactions in ECCE settings through effective PD. We argue for the importance of employing a participatory research-to-practice ethos and ‘bottom-up’ perspective to PD (Harmey, Ang, and Grenier, 2022). This entails embedding a continuous cycle of evidence-review in PD to ensure that contextually relevant knowledge and evidence, derived from robust scholarship methods, are successfully translated into everyday practice. However, delivering high-quality interactions with young children in a sustained way and at scale remains a challenge. Early years educators need to be supported in becoming critical research users is using evidence where it is available and relevant to inform their practice and professional learning. Essentially, the lessons learnt from NELP and deploying the ShREC approach suggest that quality interactions with children can potentially be improved through targeted and sustained PD support which:

- (1) Identifies and supports the adoption of best evidence-informed practice and pedagogical strategies that are contextualised, culturally appropriate and targeted to the professional needs of early years educators.
- (2) Encourages and promotes PD communities of learners among early years educators that offer spaces for collaboration and peer-to-peer learning.
- (3) Draws on the perspectives and expertise of early years educators who are engaged in shaping their own PD needs and in determining the application of pedagogical strategies that will improve and change practice in a sustained way.
- (4) Considers the background knowledge, beliefs and practices that early years educators bring with them to the professional learning and development context.
- (5) Moves beyond simply distilling knowledge and evidence to engender a shift of paradigm in the way a participatory translational approach is adopted from a ‘bottom-up’ perspective where early years educators’, rather than researchers’, assumptions are taken as a starting point in designing PD programmes.

Limitations and further research

At the time of writing this paper, the NELP project has evolved into a larger intervention study. The results from the project showed evidence of promise and it was scaled up as the ‘Early Years Conversation Project’ (EYCP) in 2023. However, as with most studies, the findings and learnings discussed here are not easily generalisable and need to be

contextualised within the settings that participated in the project. Although the evidence that underpins the ShREC approach is robust, further research and evaluation is needed to understand the wider impact and feasibility of the approach as it is rolled out at scale across settings. Further research is also needed to examine the extent to which the pedagogical strategies from the toolkits and ShREC approach are applicable for different types of early years provision and settings.

Conclusion

High-quality interactions can significantly benefit children's early learning and educational achievement. The evidence shows that maximising children's potential by engaging them in rich and socially meaningful interactions, with practitioners providing social and emotional support, can greatly enhance communication and language development. Research shows promising impact on children's early learning experiences through tailored PD and contextually appropriate pedagogical strategies. However, the quality of ECCE settings is dependent on early years educators' competency and adeptness in delivering quality adult-child interactions. The translation of the best available knowledge and evidence derived from robust scholarly methods must ultimately form the basis of driving early years practice, decisions and change to improve the way we deliver care and education for our young children.

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Appendix 1

Neighbourhood Early Language Project (NELP) logic model

Listening to children and having conversations with them


CPD activities	Manager knowledge and skills outcomes	Practitioner knowledge and skills outcomes	Practitioner strategies	Practice outcomes	Child level change	Impact
Launch day for managers	Increase in knowledge about how a whole-setting approach can promote all children's language development	Increase in knowledge about promoting language development (including bilingual children's)	Opportunities for talking: OWL – Observe, Wait, Listen Four Finger rule – four comments to every question 10 second rule – give children time to process	More episodes of adult/child joint attention	Increase in vocabulary	Improvement in how practitioners promote children's early communication and language
Bespoke day for setting				Longer conversations with children (rather than asking questions)	Increase in amount children say	
Coaching sessions for managers				Increase in opportunities to have 1:1 or small group conversations		
Mentor visits	Improve practice in accurate self-evaluation and action-planning	Improve skills in establishing episodes of joint attention with children	Developing children's language: Expand on what children say, recast, and model wider vocabulary Interactive book reading Use books as a way of starting conversations	Increase in use of expressive language and in range of vocabulary	Increase in number of conversational turns	Improvement in the support, implementation and ongoing evaluation of changes to practice
					Increase in complexity of conversation	
	Improve practice in developing peer observation, monitoring staff and developing their skills	Improve skills in becoming 'sensitive' and 'supportive' communication partners		More accurate assessment and greater focus on children with delayed language		Better management and team work leading to more consistent practice
	Network with peers for support and challenge	Improve skills in listening to children and developing extended conversations		More accurate assessment and greater focus on children with delayed language		Proxy measure of impact: improved ITERS-3 scores



Appendix 2

Manor Park Talks

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?'

Listening to children and having conversations with them



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





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Appendix 3

Listening to children and having conversations with them

Sh

Share attention
Be at the child's level.
Pay attention to what they are focused on.

R


Respond
Follow the child's lead.
Respond to their non-verbal and verbal communications.
You could make a brief comment on what they can see, hear or feel.

E

Expand
Repeat what the child says and build on it by adding more words to turn it into a sentence.

C

Conversation
Have extended back and forth interactions. Give children time to listen, process and reply.



Comment more, question less

Oh! I can see Spot hiding in the basket.

Encourage conversations.

10 second rule

Give children time to listen, process and reply.

Interactive book reading

Lion!
It's a fierce, scary lion!

Supporting inclusive practice: every child, every day...

The benefits to your child of learning more than one language are huge.

Talk and play with your child in the language you feel most confident and comfortable using.

You can use the ShRtEC approach with any language including British Sign Language.

The ShRtEC approach supports all forms of communication children use, including signs and symbols.

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