

# Research report - Empowering educational professionals to create strong language provision in early and primary school settings.

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1 Background to the project

A significant number of children now enter formal education with reduced levels of proficiency in oral language. Children who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and who are English language learners (ELL) are at high risk of limited oral language skills which impacts on later educational achievement and socio-emotional functioning. In addition, significant concerns are raised about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and prolonged periods away from early years settings has had on children's language skills (Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2020; Speech and Language UK, 2022).

The current research project aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme called Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC). SSLiC is designed to support educational professionals to make changes across their setting to enhance children's oral language. SSLiC is an evidence-informed programme developed in 2016 at the Centre for Inclusive Education (UCL Institute of Education) as a result of the Better Communication Research Programme (2009-2012), a national research programme commissioned in response to the Bercow review of services for children and young people with speech, language and communication needs (Bercow, 2008). The current research report details the evaluation findings from the implementation of the SSLiC programme in a number of early years settings and primary schools across two local authorities in the academic year 2022-2023.

## 1.2 Current Research Context

### 1.2.1 Research Rationale

Well-developed oral language skills are strongly associated with academic achievement (Spencer et al., 2017), support literacy development (Snow, 2016) and are an important tool for learning across the curriculum (Alexander, 2013). The importance of oral language extends beyond academic success, impacting on social, emotional, and mental health (Bakopoulou & Dockrell, 2016) and during later life (Schoon et al., 2010). Oral language is, thus, a foundation for learning and achievement.

However, many children struggle to develop oral language skills. At school entry in the United Kingdom, an estimated 7.58% of children have clinically significant language disorders (Norbury et al., 2016). In economically deprived areas, more than 40% of children are reported to have

delayed language (Law et al., 2011), with the most economically deprived experiencing the most marked delays (Law, Todd et al., 2011). Furthermore, school closures arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic have widened the 'language gap' (Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group, 2020; Speech and Language UK, 2022) with half of teachers across primary schools reporting that school closures negatively impacted the language development of pupils receiving free school meals.

The number of children requiring support in a context of limited resources has placed strain on the traditional models of individualized identification and treatment of children with language-learning needs by speech and language therapists (SLTs). These high levels of need are reported to outstrip capacity (Bercow, 2008). Many children requiring support are not being identified (Norbury et al., 2016), with inconsistencies in access to speech and language services long highlighted (Longfield, 2019). Alongside these challenges, a tension is reported in educational practice about how support for children's language learning needs aligns with the requirements of the English classroom curriculum. Schools are increasingly driven by attainment targets, and this shapes how much teachers prioritise communication in the classroom over specific curriculum activities (Dockrell et al, 2015; Law et al., 2019).

Within the school system, special education provision, including for those children with language difficulties, is provided through a multi-tiered approach (or graduated response), whereby the degree of support is graduated in line with the level of need of the particular child (SEND Code of Practice, 2015; Ebbels et al., 2019). Within this multi-tiered approach, the first step involves providing universal evidence-informed support (Tier 1) before providing more targeted (Tier 2) and specialised support (Tier 3). A multi-tiered approach offers the potential to support children who do not respond to quality first learning opportunities with additional targeted support (Dockrell, Bakopoulou, Law, Spencer, Lindsay, 2015).

This multi-tiered model is also frequently used as a means of delivering language interventions within school (Law et al., 2013) with interventions such as group language programmes, individual language programmes and speech and language therapy predominantly provided at Tiers 2 and 3 (Ebbels et al., 2019). Although there is an established and increasingly growing evidence base of interventions which successfully support language through Tiers 2 and 3 delivery (Law et al., 2017), there is paucity of evidenced-based interventions and approaches which are designed to be implemented at a universal level. Universal support of language difficulties has been found to be an effective means of improving language for children (Dockrell et al., 2023; Leydon, Stackhouse and Szczerbinski., 2011) and there is an overall agreement of the importance

of ensuring that *all* children are provided with evidenced-informed universal language support when they enter formal education (Dobinson & Dockrell, 2021). However, for universal interventions to be effective, it is imperative that staff are highly trained and well-supported (Ebbels et al., 2019). Indeed, the necessity of a highly skilled workforce has been frequently referred to (Bercow, 2018;), yet there continues to be a wide variability in practitioner understanding and confidence in supporting language learning needs (Oracy All-Party Parliamentary Group [APPG], 2021; Dockrell et al., 2017). Whilst there is a request from practitioners for more training (ibid), there are a number of complex factors as to how to translate training into more effective practice. There is a clear need for interventions which are informed by evidence of effective professional development and learning as well as speech, language and communication development and pedagogy.

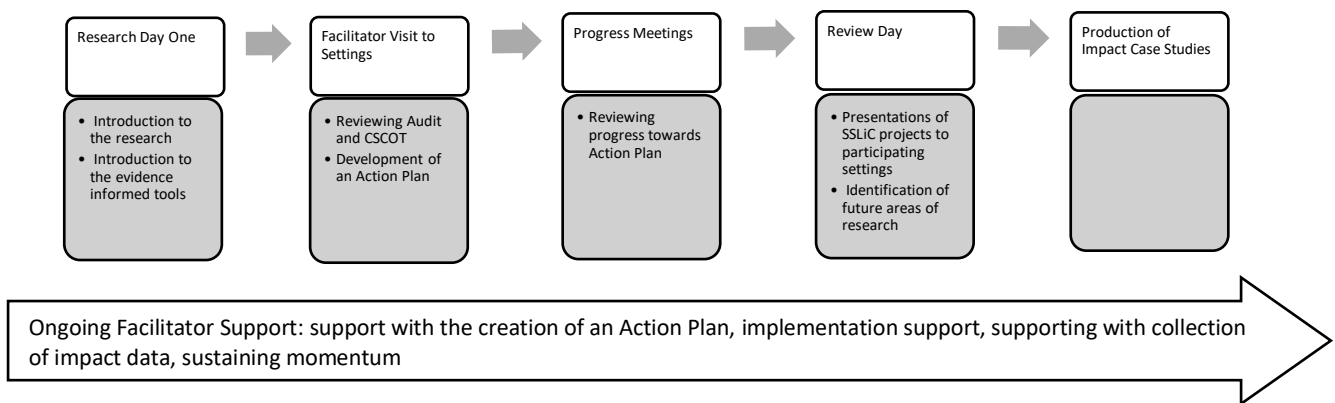
### **1.2.2 The Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom (SSLiC) Programme**

Embedded within a knowledge exchange framework, the Supporting Spoken Language in the Classroom Programme (SSLiC) aims for researchers and educational practitioners to work collaboratively to investigate how the evidence base related to communication and oral language that does exist, might be applied to individual schools' particular setting. The aim of SSLiC is to also investigate how the collective knowledge of researchers and educational practitioners might be used to inform the wider community of 'what works' in schools to support children's oral language. The SSLiC Programme was developed as part of a series of knowledge exchange programmes by researchers at UCL Institute of Education Centre for Inclusive Education (including the author of this report) and sought to provide a forum for knowledge exchange between practitioners and researchers.

To support this process, the SSLiC Programme has identified five evidence-informed domains around which educational settings can focus professional development and learning: Language Leadership; Staff Professional Development and Learning; Communication Supporting Classrooms; Identifying and Supporting Speech, Language and Communication Needs; Working with Others. The SSLiC Programme includes training that introduces practitioners to the evidence base available for supporting spoken language for all children in the early years and primary schools, as well as providing evidence-based and evidence-informed tools to audit the practitioner setting's current strengths and areas for development. Materials and tools include the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT) (Dockrell et al., 2012) and an

evidence-informed audit requiring settings to identify their perceived strengths and areas for development across a range of domains. The CSCOT has been recognised as a valid and reliable tool for informing practice for both professionals in schools such as SLTs and psychologists (Dockrell et al., 2015) as well as classroom teachers (Law et al., 2019). Utilising the tools and supported by a SSLiC facilitator, the settings create an action plan which identifies a SSLiC project to undertake in their setting.

The SSLiC Programme aims to utilise the educational practitioners’ knowledge and their specific contexts as it is recognised that successful change occurs in a unique context and system. The SSLiC Programme consists of a number of activities over a sustained period of time and the structure of the programme is illustrated in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1 - Structure of the SSLiC Programme**

As Figure 1 illustrates, the final phase of the SSLiC Programme involves the production of case studies for each of the participating settings, which aim to inform educational practice and to add to the wider evidence base of ‘what works’ in educational settings to support children’s oral language development.

### 1.3 Research Aims, Research Questions and Outline of Data Collection

As the SSLiC Programme has a unique approach of being embedded in the knowledge exchange framework and given the imperative need to promote oral language in educational settings, at a time where there is paucity of universal language interventions, this study aimed to evaluate the implementation of universal language interventions in the context of the SSLiC Programme. The project had three main objectives:

1. To implement the SSLiC Programme in a number of early years and primary school settings and evaluate its effectiveness on educational professionals’ knowledge and



confidence in supporting children's language learning needs, the language learning classroom environment and children's learning engagement.

2. Investigate what factors influence implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings and what factors influence continued implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings.
3. Inform local and national decision making about how educational settings can provide effective universal language provision and support.

The project achieved these aims through focused knowledge exchange and dissemination activities to influence the developing policy-response to the development of spoken language as a foundational skill in education, the long-term support required for educational practitioners and disseminate good practice around universal language support.

We adopted a pre and post mixed-methods research design to provide a more detailed evaluation of the SSLiC Programme to enable us to document change over time and from different perspectives.

Our research questions were:

1. Does participation in the SSLiC Programme impact on pupils' engagement in learning?
2. Does participation in the SSLiC Programme impact on the language learning classroom environment of participating settings?
3. Does participation in the SSLiC Programme impact on educational professionals' knowledge and confidence in supporting children's language learning needs?
4. What factors influence implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings?
5. What factors influence continued implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings?

Data collection took place in two stages: Stage 1 took place at the beginning of the Autumn Term 2022 before the implementation of the SSLiC Programme commenced in participating settings (September and October 2022); Stage 2 took place in the Summer Term 2023 at the end of the SSLiC Programme (May 2023).

Our methods of data collection were selected to evaluate the SSLiC Programme at different levels and were as follows:

- *At pupil level:* A sample of children from each setting were observed using a child learning engagement measure (developed by Speech and Language UK).
- *At setting level:* Classroom observations were completed to assess the quality of the language learning environment using the Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (Dockrell et al., 2012).
- *At practitioner level:*
  - Staff were asked to fill in brief end-of-programme online questionnaires developed as part of the SSLiC Programme assessing practitioner confidence in supporting language needs and their views about the SSLiC Programme, and any changes to knowledge and understanding of language and communication and practice.
  - At the end of the programme (Stage 2), key staff were interviewed about their views of the SSLiC Programme and facilitating factors and barriers to successful implementation.

## 2. Results from Setting Observations

### 2.1 Details of Setting Observations

To examine differences in classroom environments and pupil engagement before and at the end of the SSLiC Programme, setting observations were conducted in 20 settings drawn from 2 different local authorities, Plymouth and Bristol. We observed Nursery classes (N = 13), Reception classes (N = 12), Year 1 classes (N = 11) and Year 2 classes (N = 12) from participating settings.

Two measures were used:

- *Communication Supporting Classrooms Observation Tool (CSCOT) (Dockrell et al., 2012)*

The CSCOT includes three dimensions: Language Learning Environment (LLE); Language Learning Opportunities (LLO); Language Learning Interactions (LLI). We also calculated a CSCOT total score by adding the total scores of each dimension. Each dimension of the CSCOT resulted in different total numbers of scores (Language Learning Environment – 19, Language Learning Opportunities = 25, Language Learning Interactions = 100). To account for the different numbers of items across the three dimensions, proportion scores were created. Proportion scores were derived by dividing the actual number of observations by the total number of possible observations. These proportion scores range from 0 (not recorded) to 1 (maximum possible numbers of occurrences), where items were rated on the basis of a maximum of five occurrences. In this report, we report on median proportion scores and interquartile range (IQR) for non-parametric, skewed data.

- *Pupil Engagement Measure (Speech and Language UK).*

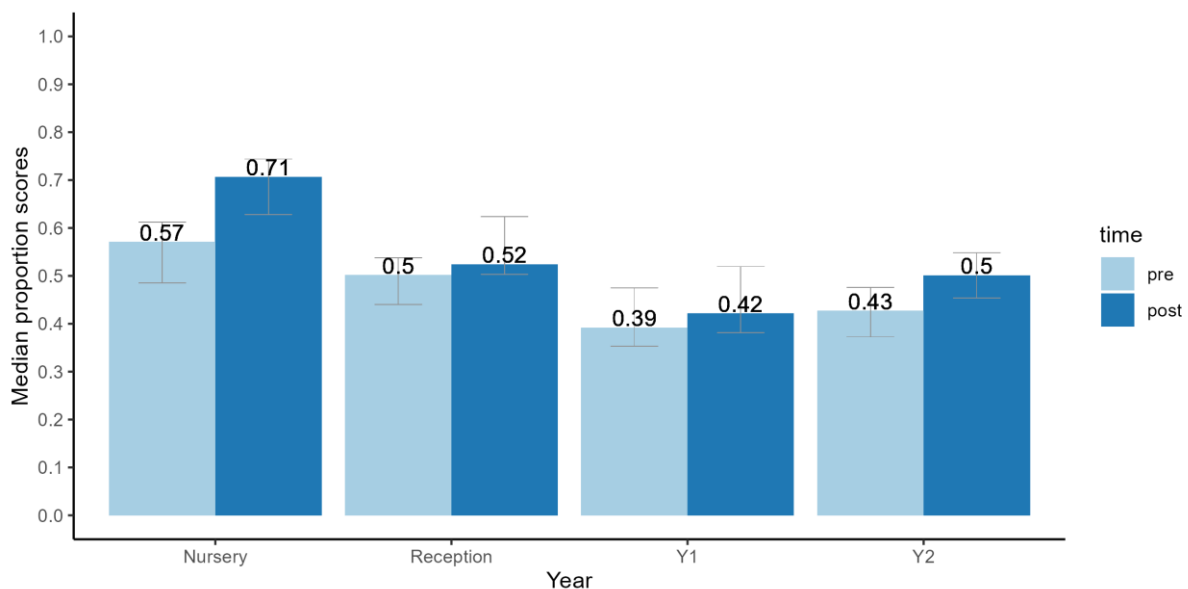
A random sample of six children per year group in the participating settings were observed to determine their level of engagement with the activity taking place in the lesson. Each child was observed for approximately 5 minutes using the Pupil Engagement Measure developed by Speech and Language UK, an organisation which works with families and educational settings to support children with language-learning needs. There are two versions of the Pupil Engagement Measure, an early years and a primary age version, which were used accordingly based on which classrooms were observed. The measure rates a pupil's engagement in learning on a scale from 0 (No engagement) to 5 (High engagement).

For the purpose of this research report, we focus on differences observed in classroom environments and pupil engagement before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme, for all settings as a whole and across the two local authorities.

## 2.2 Results from Setting Observations

### 2.2.1 Differences Observed in Classroom Environments

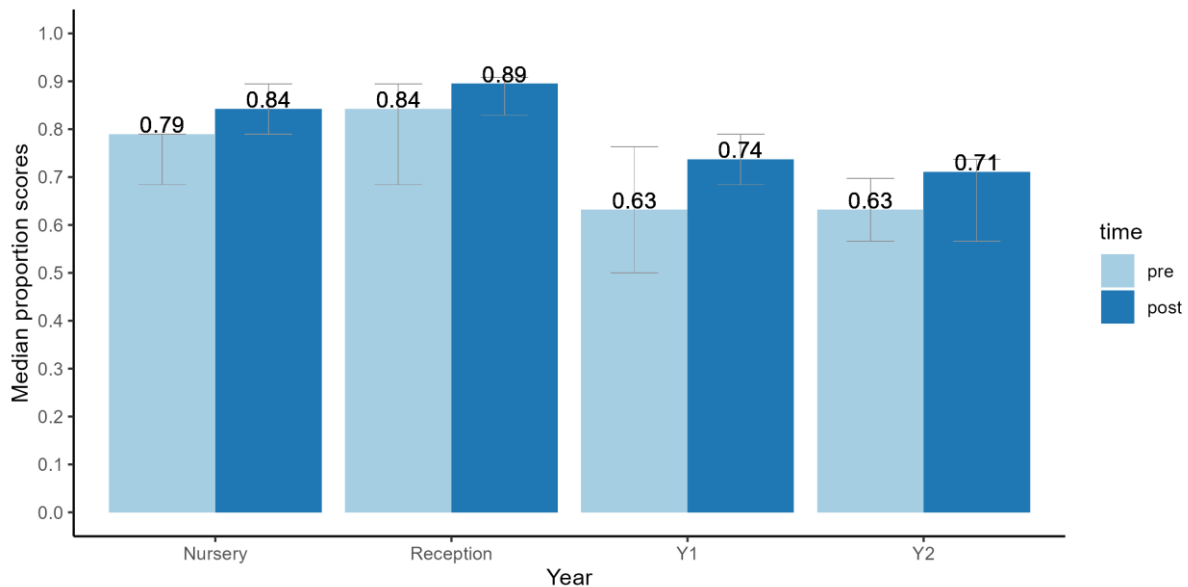
We first examine differences in scores before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme across the three dimensions of the CSCOT – *Environment, Opportunities and Interactions* – and then differences across the four year groups (Nursery, Reception, Year One and Year Two). Figure 2 presents the median proportion scores and interquartile range (IQR) for the CSCOT Total Score. To explore for differences between pre and post SSLiC Programme median scores, we used the Wilcoxon Signed Rank test for non-parametric, skewed data. To account for multiple comparisons, we adjusted the p-values of the test results using the False Discovery Rate (FDR) method described in Benjamini & Hochberg (1995) with FDR = 0.05. As Figure 2 shows, post-test median scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test median scores in Nursery ( $Z = -3.81, p < .02$ ), but were not statistically significantly higher for any other year group (Reception  $Z = -1.96, p = .14$ ; Year One  $Z = -1.06, p = .38$ ; Year Two  $Z = -1.80, p = .14$ ).



**Figure 2 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for CSCOT Total Score for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC**

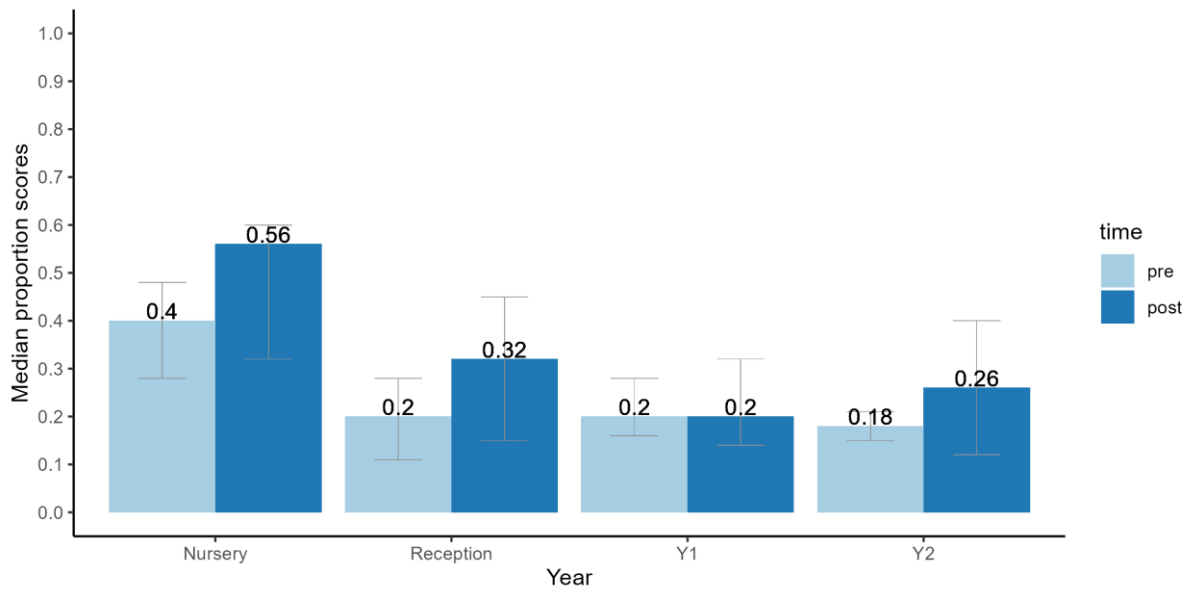
Furthermore, we examined whether there were any differences across the four year groups in the different CSCOT dimensions. Figure 3 presents the median proportion scores and IQRs for the

dimension of *Language Learning Environment* across the four year groups (Nursery, Reception, Year One and Year Two). A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test showed a statistically significant difference for the dimension of *Language Learning Environment* in Nursery ( $Z = -2.68, p < .04$ ) and in Reception classes ( $Z = -2.58, p < .04$ ) but not in Year One ( $Z = -2.01, p = .14$ ) or Year Two classes ( $Z = -1.34, p = .28$ ).



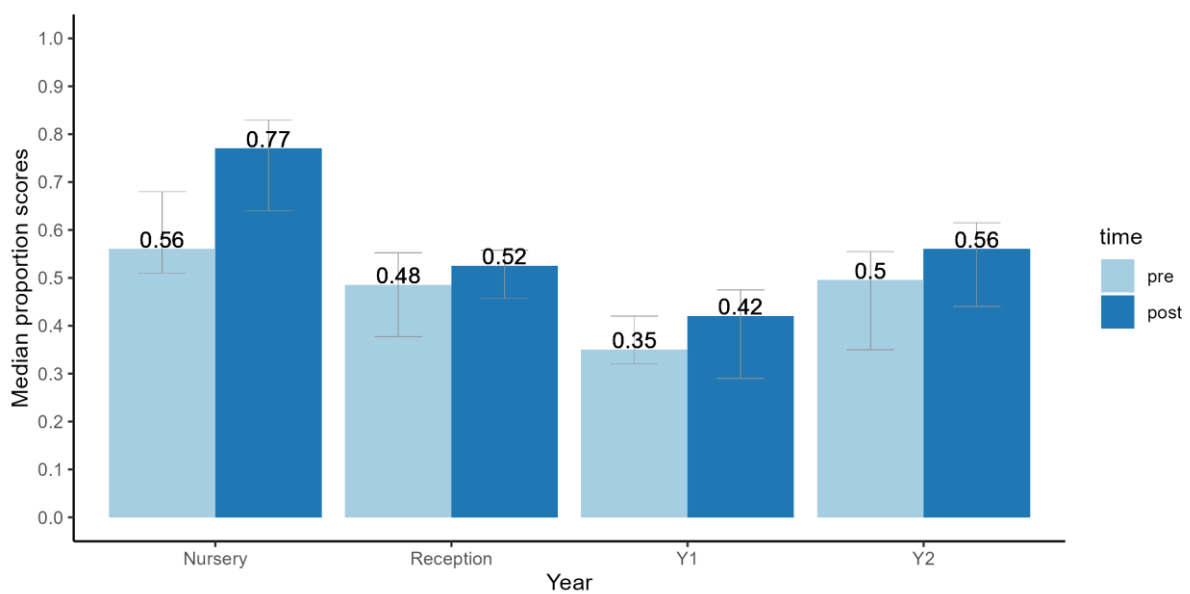
**Figure 3 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Environment Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC**

Figure 4 presents the median proportion scores and IQRs for the dimension of *Language Learning Opportunities* across the four year groups (Nursery, Reception, Year One and Year Two). A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test showed no statistically significant difference for the dimension of *Language Learning Opportunities* across any of the year groups (Nursery  $Z = -1.82, p = .14$ ; Reception  $Z = -1.14, p = .36$ ; Year One  $Z = -0.44, p = .68$ ; Year Two  $Z = -1.83, p = .14$ ).



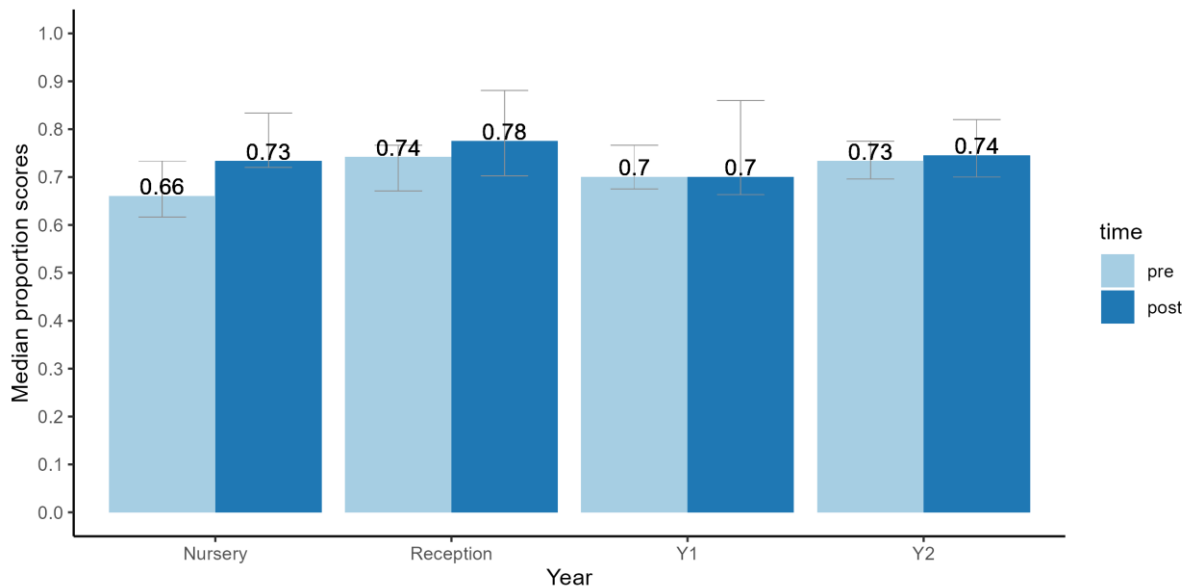
**Figure 4 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Opportunities Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC**

Finally, Figure 5 presents the median proportion scores and IQRs for the dimension of *Language Learning Interactions* across the four year groups (Nursery, Reception, Year One and Year Two). A Wilcoxon Signed-Ranks Test showed a statistically significant difference for the dimension of *Language Learning Interaction* in Nursery ( $Z = -2.90$ ,  $p < .03$ ) but not for any other year groups (Reception  $Z = -1.33$ ,  $p < .28$ ; Year One  $Z = .67$ ,  $p = .59$ ; Year Two  $Z = -0.58$ ,  $p = .61$ ).



**Figure 5 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Interactions Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC**

We then explored differences in Pupil Engagement scores across the four year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. Figure 6 below shows that there was an overall increase in scores but no statistically significant differences were observed (Nursery  $Z = -2.41$ ,  $p = .06$ ; Reception  $Z = -1.76$ ,  $p = .14$ ; Year One  $Z = -.93$ ,  $p = .43$ ; Year Two  $Z = -.35$ ,  $p = .72$ )



**Figure 6 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Pupil Engagement for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC**

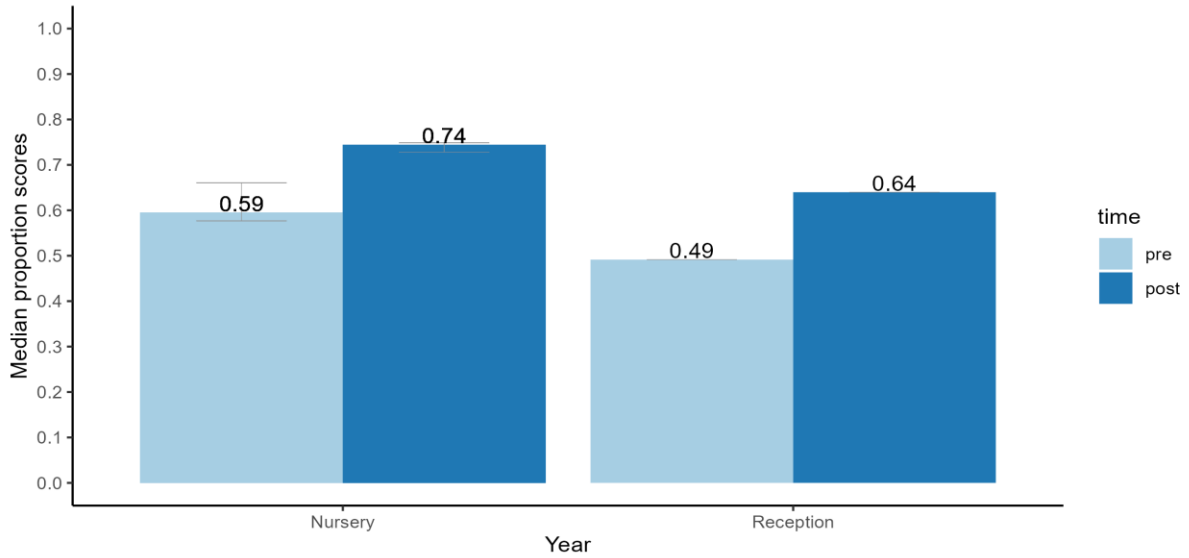
## 2.3 Results from Setting Observations in Plymouth

### 2.3.1 Plymouth Early Years Settings Demographics

In addition, we examined differences in scores across the two local authorities. 7 early years settings took part in the SSLiC Programme across the academic year 2022-2023: 6 nurseries and 1 early years provision of a primary school, in which the Nursery and Reception classes were observed.

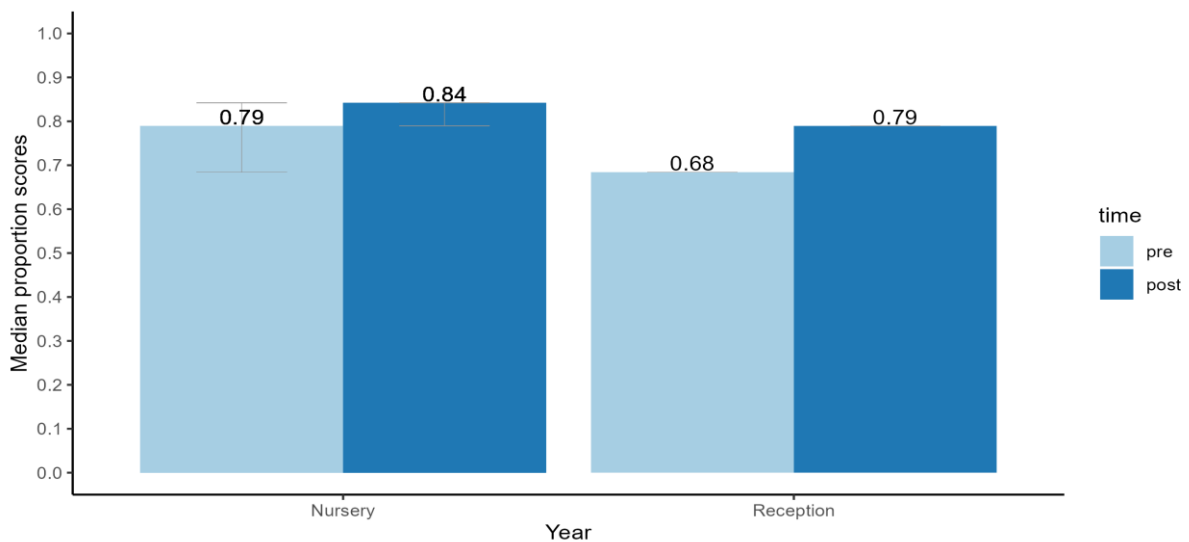
### 2.3.2 Differences Observed in Plymouth Classroom Environments

Figure 7 below presents the median proportion scores for the CSCOT total score in Nursery and Reception classrooms in Plymouth. Results indicate that post-test median scores were statistically significantly higher than pre-test median scores in Nursery ( $Z = -2.36$ ,  $p < .04$ ), but were not statistically significantly higher for Reception ( $Z = -1$ ,  $p = .31$ ).



**Figure 7 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for CSCOT Total Score for the Two Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Plymouth**

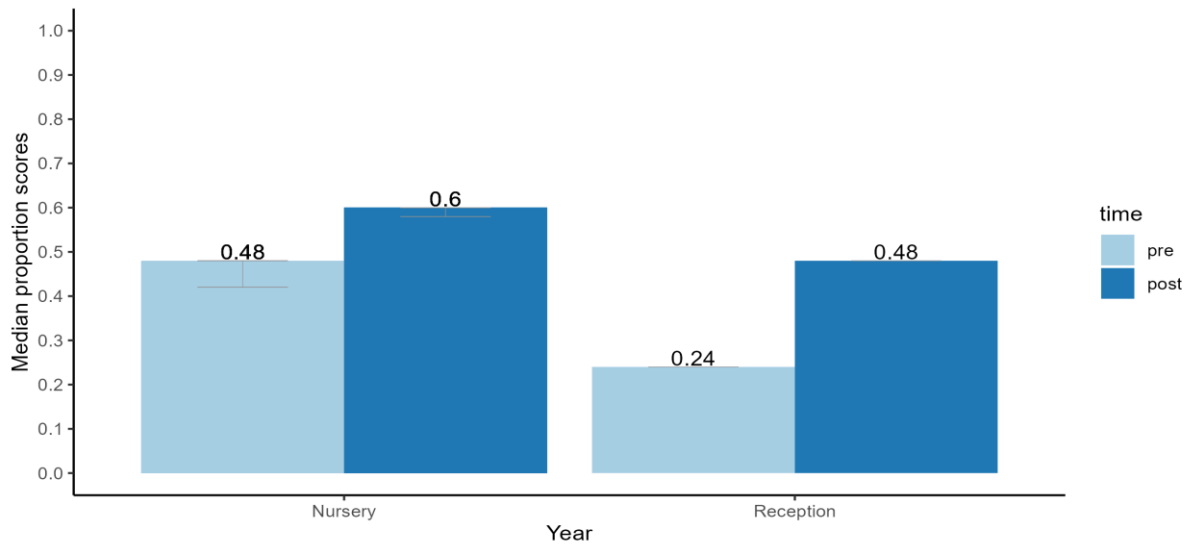
We then explored the differences in scores of the three CSCOT dimensions. Figure 8 below presents the median proportion scores and IQRs for the dimension of *Language Learning Environment* across the two year groups (Nursery and Reception). No statistically significant difference was observed for the dimension of *Language Learning Environment* in Nursery ( $Z = -1.36, p < .31$ ) or in Reception classes ( $Z = -1, p > .31$ ).



**Figure 8 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Environment Dimension for the Two Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Plymouth**

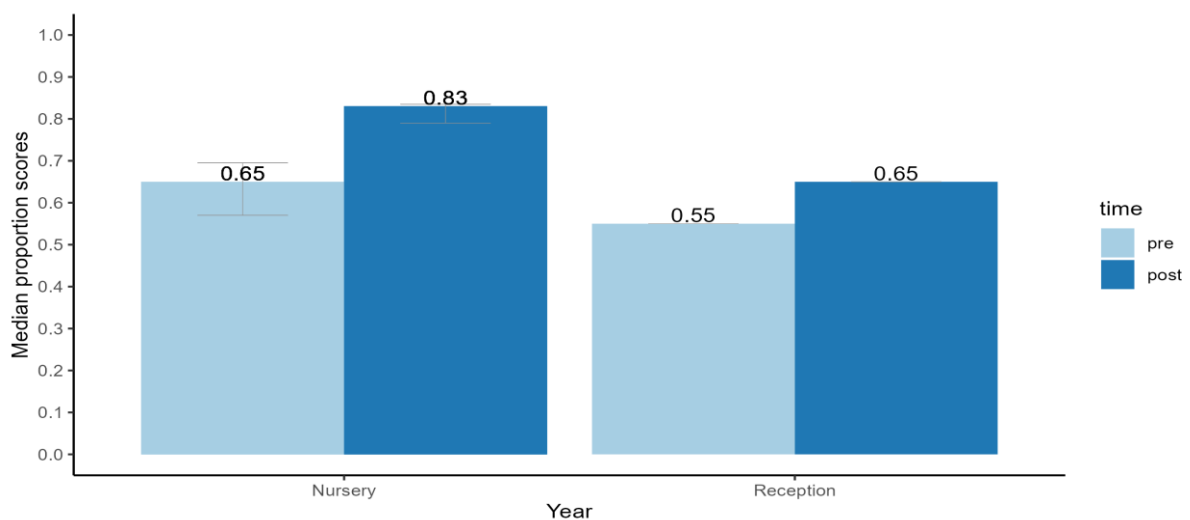


When looking at differences in scores of the *Language Learning Opportunities* dimension, Figure 9 below reports on the median proportion scores and shows that a statistically significant difference was observed in Nursery classrooms ( $Z = -2.38, p = .04$ ) but not in Reception ( $Z = -1, p = .31$ ).



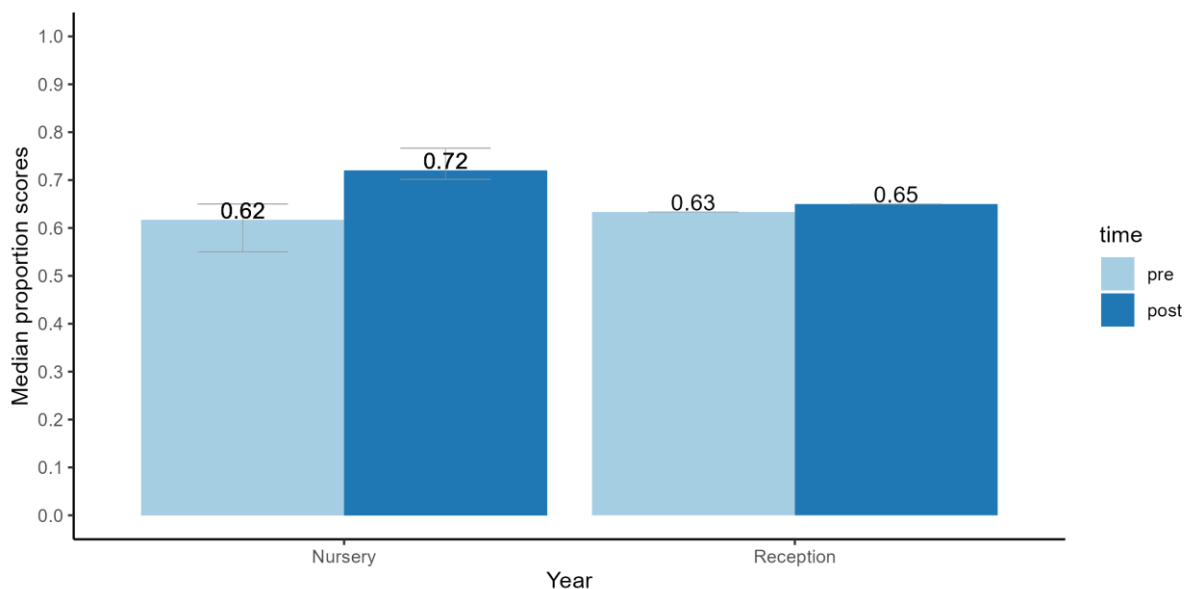
**Figure 9 – Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Opportunities Dimension for the Two Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Plymouth**

Figure 10 reports on the differences in the median proportion scores and IQRs for the Language Learning Interactions dimension across the two year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme.



**Figure 10 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Interactions Dimension for the Two Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Plymouth**

Finally, we examined differences in Pupil Engagement scores across the two year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. As shown in Figure 11, there was a statistically significant difference in median proportion scores observed in Nursery ( $Z = -2.37$ ,  $p = .04$ ) but not in Reception class ( $Z = -1$ ,  $p >.05$ ).



**Figure 11 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Pupil Engagement for the Two Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Plymouth**

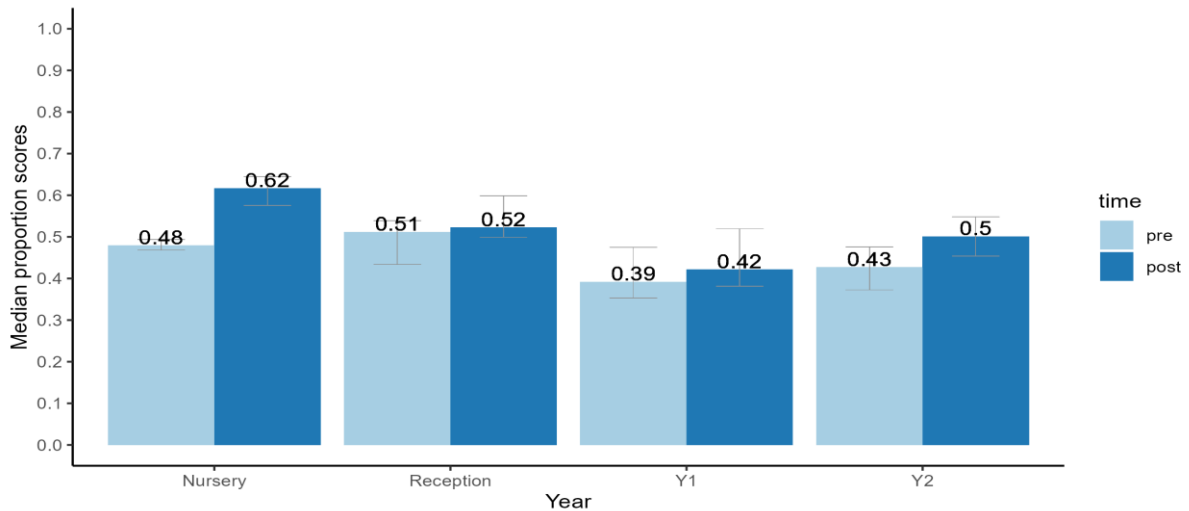
## 2.4 Results from Setting Observations in Bristol

### 2.4.1 Bristol Early Years and Primary School Settings Demographics

In Bristol, 13 settings took part in the SSLiC Programme across the academic year 2022-2023: one early years setting and 12 primary schools. In total, we observed classrooms in Nursery (N=6), Reception (N=11), Year 1 (N=11) and Year Two (N=12).

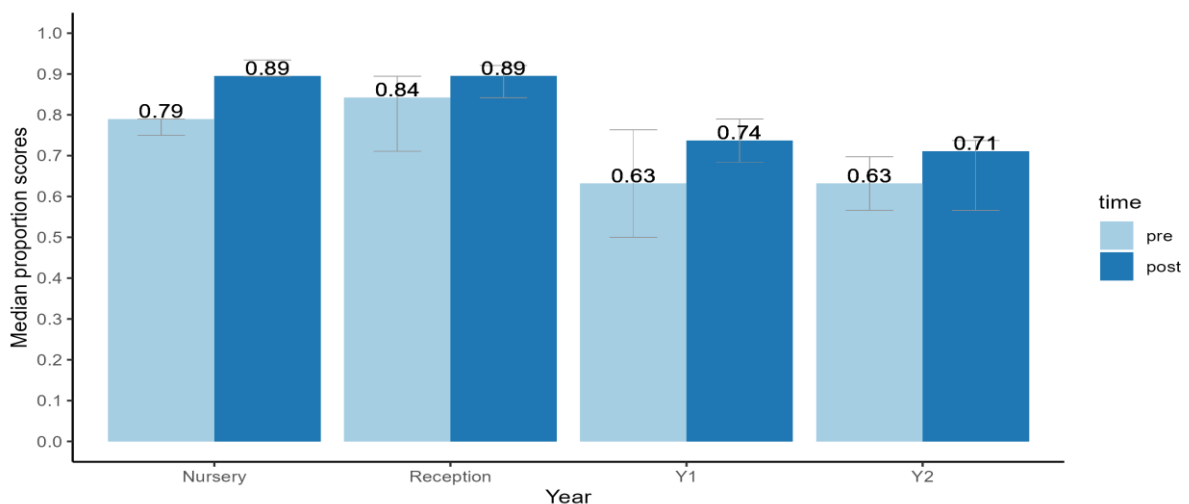
### 2.4.2 Differences Observed in Bristol Classroom Environments

Figure 12 presents the median proportion scores and IQR for the *CSCOT Total Score* in classrooms in Bristol across the four year groups. Analysis showed that, although there was an increase in the post-test median scores across all year groups, there were no statistically significantly higher than pre-test median scores in any year group (Nursery  $Z = -2.20$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Reception  $Z = -1.69$ ,  $p >.05$ ; Year One  $Z = -1.06$ ,  $p >.05$ ; Year Two  $Z = 1.80$ ,  $p >.05$ ).



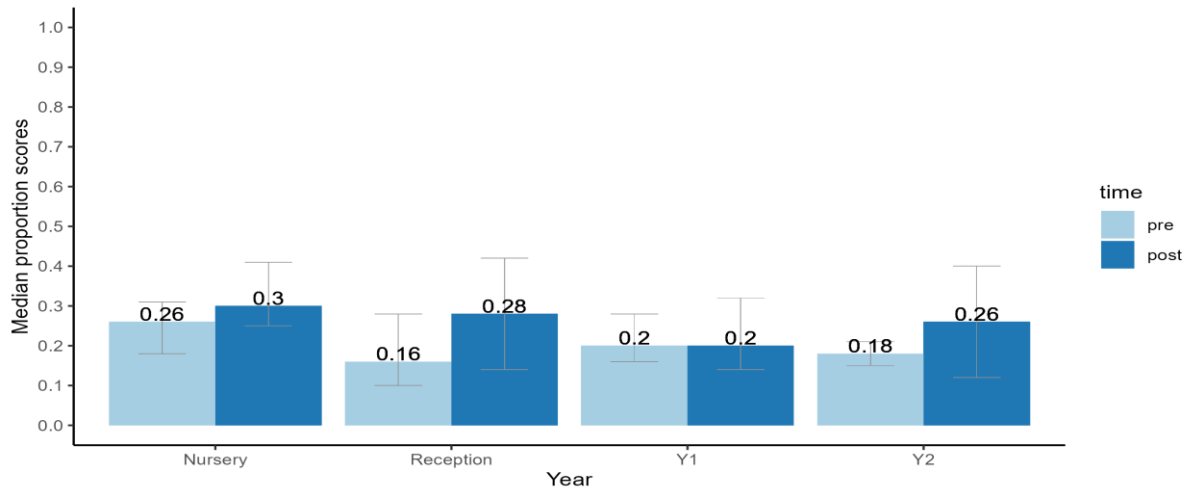
**Figure 12 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for CSCOT Total Score for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Bristol**

We then explored each dimension of the CSCOT separately for differences across the four year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. Figure 13 shows the median proportion scores and IQRs for the *Language Learning Environment* dimension across the four year groups. Results showed an increase in scores across all four year groups but no statistically significant differences were observed in any year group (Nursery  $Z = -2.23$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Reception  $Z = -2.40$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Year One  $Z = -2.01$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Year Two  $Z = -1.34$ ,  $p > .05$ ).



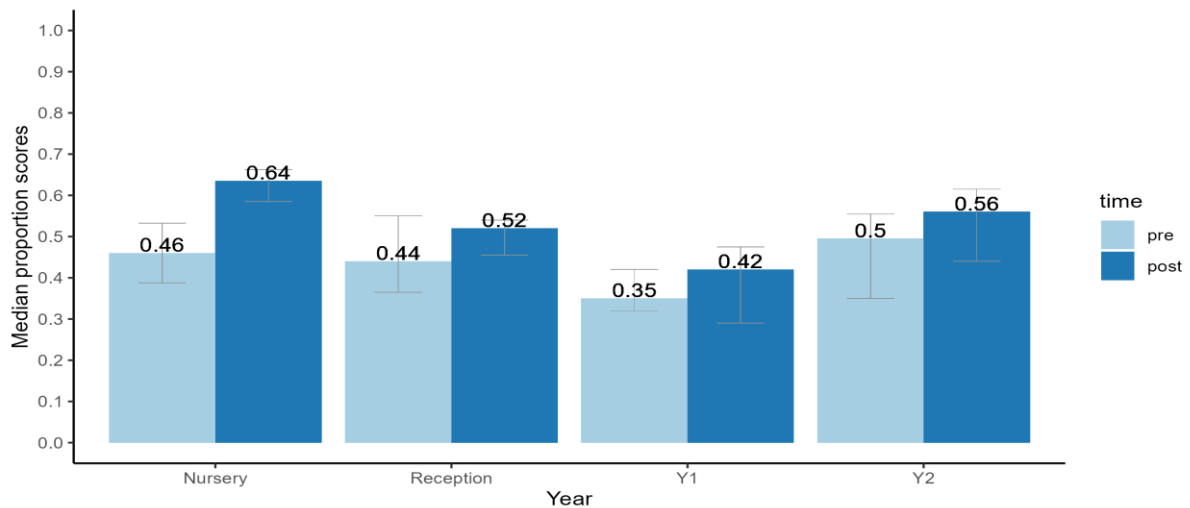
**Figure 13 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Environment Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Bristol**

Next, we examined the differences in scores for the *Language Learning Opportunities* dimension of the CSCOT. Figure 14 reports the median and IQRs and shows that, although there was an increase in scores, there were no statistically significant differences observed in the post-median scores in any year group (Nursery Z = -.53, p > .05; Reception Z = -.76, p >.05; Year One Z = -.44, p >.05; Year Two Z = -1.81, p >.05).



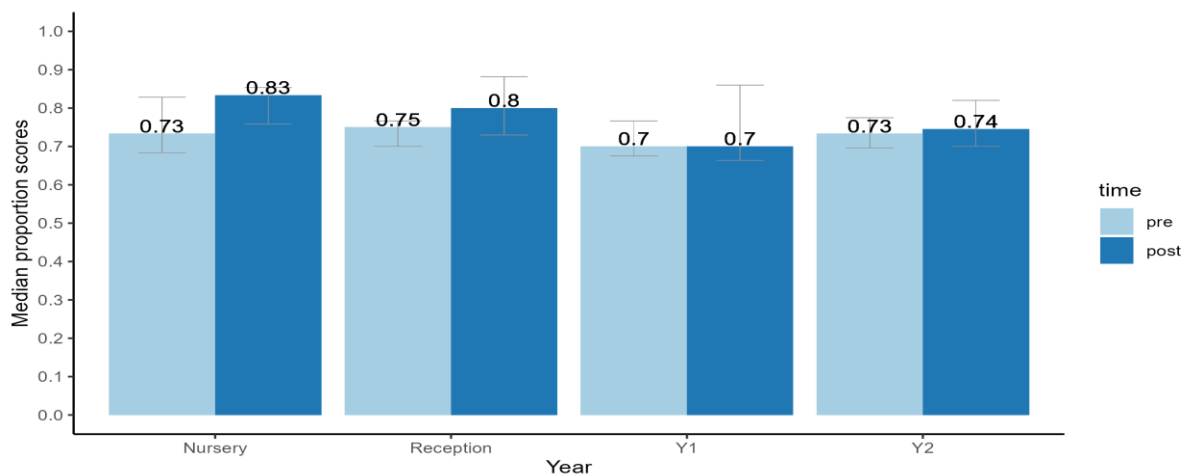
**Figure 14 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Opportunities Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Bristol**

We then examined the differences between the median proportion score of the last dimension of the CSCOT, Language Learning Interactions, across the four year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. Figure 15 shows that, despite an increase in scores before and after the SSLiC Programme implementation, there were no statistically significant differences observed across any year group (Nursery Z = -1.57, p > .05; Reception Z = -1.20, p >.05; Year One Z = -.67, p >.05; Year Two Z = -.58, p >.05).



**Figure 15 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Language Learning Interactions Dimension for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Bristol**

Finally, we examined differences in the Pupil Engagement scores across the four year groups before and after the implementation of the SSLiC Programme. As shown in Figure 16, there was an increase in pupil engagement median proportion scores (the highest difference observed was in Nursery) but no statistically significant differences were observed across any year groups ((Nursery  $Z = -.73$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Reception  $Z = -1.64$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Year One  $Z = -.93$ ,  $p > .05$ ; Year Two  $Z = -.35$ ,  $p > .05$ ).



**Figure 16 - Median (+/- IQR) Proportion Score for Pupil Engagement for the Four Year Groups Pre and Post-SSLiC Bristol**

## 3. End of Programme Survey Results

### 3.1 Survey Participants Demographics

The end of programme online survey was completed by 23 educational professionals across participating settings. There were 8 respondents from Plymouth early years settings and 15 respondents from Bristol early years and primary school settings.

### 3.2 Survey Results – About the SSLiC Programme

At the first part of the survey, participants were asked their views on the SSLiC Programme, its' overall structure and materials and support offered as part of the programme. Using a 5-point Likert scale (from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree), participants were asked to rate the programme's overall structure and materials as well as support provided by the SSLiC Facilitator. Table 1 below shows that participants were overwhelmingly positive about the SSLiC Programme's structure and materials. Respondents were particularly positive about the support received from the SSLiC Facilitator and enabled practitioners to achieve the targets set out in their action plans.

*Table 1. Percentages of Participant Ratings of the SSLiC Programme*

Evaluation statement	Strong Agree	Agree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The content and structure of the Evidence Day met the aims of the day	57% (N=13)	43% (N=10)			
The content and structure of the Review Day met the aims of the day	65% (N=15)	35% (N=8)			
The SSLiC Handbook provided an informative summary of the main evidence base	61% (N=14)	39% (N=9)			
The SSLiC Audit allowed me to appraise the level of provision in my setting and identify areas for improvement	65% (N=15)	35% (N=8)			
The CSCOT allowed me to profile the language learning environment in my setting	74% (N=17)	26% (N=6)			
The SSLiC Case Studies presenting the development work of other settings have inspired development work in my setting	57% (N=13)	43% (N=10)			
The support from the SSLiC Facilitator enabled us to achieve the targets set out in the Action Plan	70% (N=16)	30% (N=7)			

### 3.3 Survey Results – Changes in Knowledge and Practice

Using the same Likert-scale, participants were also asked to rate any changes in their knowledge and practice as a result of taking part in the SSLiC Programme. Table 2 below reports participants' views on positive changes to their knowledge and understanding of how to improve the language provision in their setting, facilitators and barriers to implementing changes in their setting's language provision as well as overall positive changes in their and their colleagues' everyday teaching practice in relation to supporting children's language and communication. Most of the respondents also either strongly agreed or agreed that taking part in the SSLiC Programme has given them a better understanding of how to measure changes in their setting's language provision and evaluate the impact of their work. Interestingly, most of the respondents (87%) also strongly agreed or agreed that, although the aim of the SSLiC Programme was to develop practice, they reported that taking part in the SSLiC Programme facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes.

*Table 2. Percentages of Participant Ratings of Changes in Knowledge and Practice*

<b>Evaluation Statement</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neither Agree nor Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
Taking part in the SSLiC Programme has increased my knowledge and understanding of how to improve the language provision in my setting	35% (N=8)	65% (N=15)			
Taking part in the SSLiC Programme has given me a better understanding of facilitators and barriers to implementing changes in our setting's language provision	48% (N=11)	52% (N=12)			
Taking part in the SSLiC Programme has supported positive changes in my practice	35% (N=8)	65% (N=15)			
Taking part in the SSLiC Programme has supported positive changes in the practice of colleagues	48% (N=11)	52% (N=12)			
Although the aim of the SSLiC Programme was to develop practice, taking part in the SSLiC Programme facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes	26% (N=6)	61% (N=14)	13% (N=3)		
Taking part in the SSLiC Programme has given me a better understanding of how to measure changes in our setting's language provision and evaluate the impact of our work	48% (N=11)	48% (N=11)	4% (N=1)		

### **3.4 Survey Results – Overall Evaluation of the SSLiC Programme**

Lastly, participants were asked to rate the SSLiC Programme overall. 11 respondents rated the SSLiC Programme as 'Excellent' (48%), 11 respondents rated it as 'Very Good' (48%) and 1 respondent rated it as 'Good' (4.3%). When asked whether they would recommend the SSLiC Programme to other settings, 15 respondents 'Strongly Agreed' (65%), and 8 respondents 'Agreed' (35%).



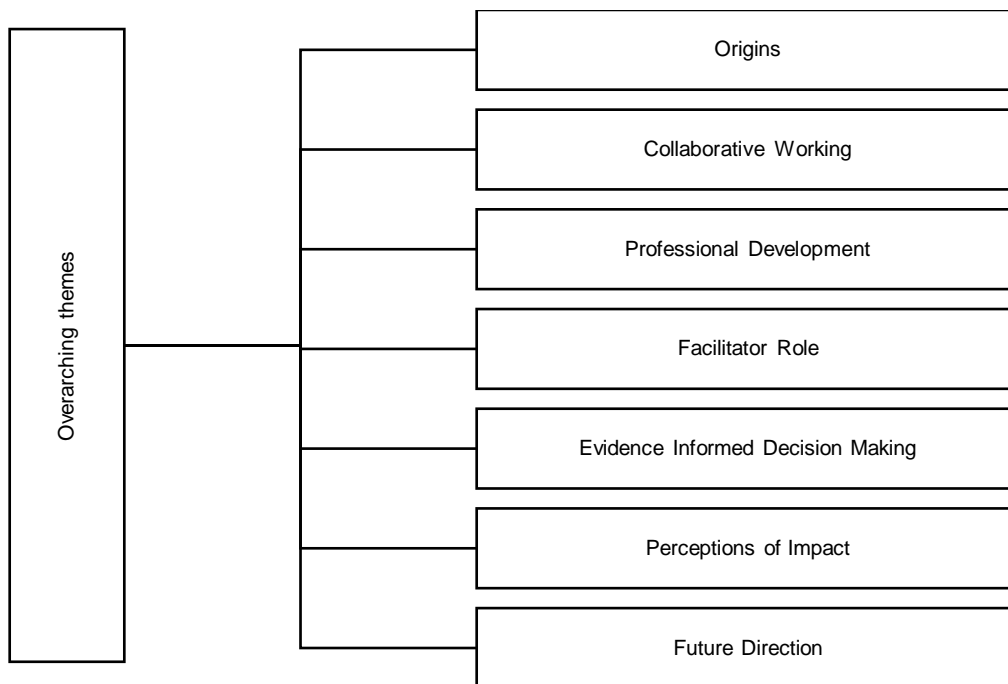
## 4. Results from Interviews

### 4.1 Interviewee Demographics

Twenty educational professionals were interviewed at the end of the SSLiC Programme, one from each participating setting. All were members of their setting's communication team.

### 4.2 Overarching Themes

From the analysis of the participant interviews, there were seven overarching themes identified which are illustrated in **Figure** .



**Figure 17 - Overarching Themes**

Each of these themes were composed of a number of subthemes, identified via the thematic analysis. A description of the overarching themes is given below.

#### **Origins**

This overarching theme considered factors which contributed to the direction and rationale for the setting-based project and relates to the educational setting and community context and how this influenced the planning stages of the SSLiC Programme. It encompassed the sub-themes 'Meeting needs in the local context', 'School priorities', 'System strengths', 'Early input' and 'Teacher understanding of language needs'.

### **Collaborative working**

The second overarching theme considered some of the perceptions related to the role, benefits and barriers of working collaboratively with practitioners from within their setting and from external agencies. A number of sub-themes were represented under the overarching theme of Collaborative Working including 'Communication Teams', 'Working across systems', 'Developing stronger links' and 'Time constraints of collaborative working'.

### **Professional Development**

The overarching theme of Professional Development illustrated the role of professional development in relation to the setting's implementation of the SSLiC Programme and the multi-faceted nature of the SSLiC Programme in contributing to participants professional development. The sub-theme of 'Approaches' was a prominent sub-theme identifying the various ways in which professional development was delivered to practitioners throughout the SSLiC Programme. The sub-themes 'Resource Development' and 'Leader Development' related to how the process of professional development resulted in the generation of additional resources to enhance the setting's language provision and opportunity for participants to develop their own skills as leaders.

### **Evidence Informed Decision Making**

The overarching theme of Evidence Informed Decision Making reflects the perceived factors which contributed to the process of identifying and using different forms of evidence for the purpose of handling decisions. The sub-themes include the role of 'Baseline Measures', 'Research' and 'Capturing evidence'. The perceived challenges of generating evidence to inform decisions across the setting was reflected in the 'Capturing evidence' sub-theme.

### **Facilitator Role**

Within the overarching theme of Facilitator Role, factors related to the perceived qualities and skill sets of the SSLiC Facilitator were represented. This included the sub-themes of 'Interpersonal skills,' 'Facilitator skill' and 'Knowledge' and reflected how these factors influenced the implementation of the SSLiC Programme in educational settings.

### **Perceptions of Impact**

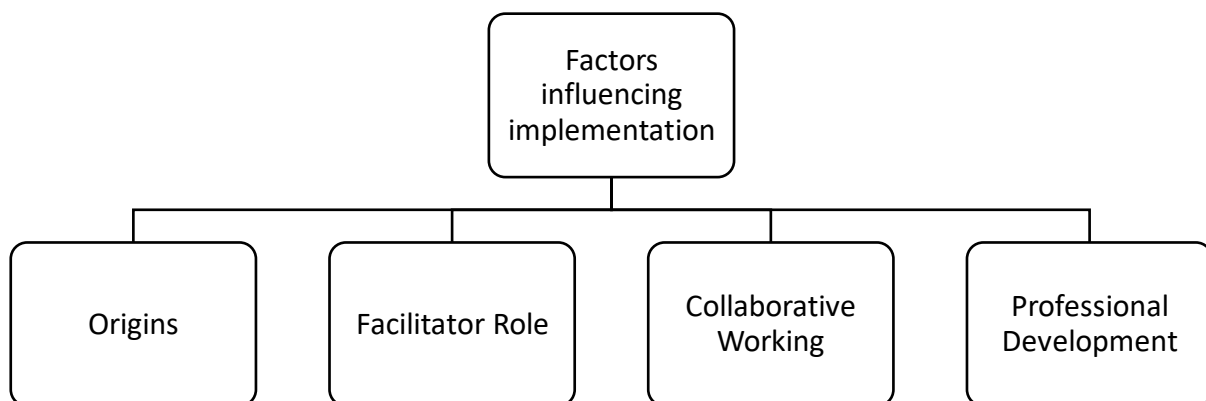
This theme relates to the participants perceived views on the impact of the SSLiC Programme within their setting. A number of sub-themes were considered within this overarching theme including 'Approaches embedded in practice', 'Secondary outcomes', 'Staff skills' and 'System change'.

## Future Direction

This overarching theme considered factors influencing the continuing progress of the school's universal intervention once the SSLiC Programme had been completed. The theme was encompassed by sub-themes 'Sustaining change', 'Maintaining momentum' and 'Iterative improvement' which related to the processes being considered by participants at the end of the Programme.

### 4.3 What factors influence the implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings?

Four overarching themes and several subthemes were identified as factors which influence the implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings. These included the overarching themes of "Origins", "Facilitator Role", "Collaborative Working", and "Professional Development". Figure 18 illustrates the overarching themes.



**Figure 18 - Factors influencing implementation**

#### Origins

Within all interviews, there was an emphasis on the origins of the SSLiC Programme and the factors which contributed to the initial direction of the setting-based project. A key factor contributing to the initial direction of the project was the role of language and communication within the setting's overall priorities. Participants discussed their desire to improve their setting's universal language provision and provide high-quality teaching for all pupils. As Interview Participant 16 said:

*“What we were really hoping for was to improve the universal language provision. Because the universal language provision makes all the difference. And in a way, unless the universal language provision is right, doing more*

*targeted or specialist work is much harder; so getting that universal provision was a real priority for us” (Interview Participant 16)*

Participants also frequently referred to language and communication being “*high priority*” and part of the School Improvement Plan. For example, as Interview Participant 4 reported “*one of the priorities on it was to improve the communication environment of the school*”. The role of prioritisation was also highlighted as a way in which the positioning of the SSLiC Programme as a priority supported the implementation of the project, particularly when there were other competing programmes taking place. For example, as mentioned by Interview Participant 5, it was described how

*“working in a school, it’s incredibly busy, and there’s always new initiatives being thrown at you, different things come in. So, we really had to prioritise SSLiC amongst all the other projects and initiatives that we have going on in the school. Otherwise, I think there’s a chance it would just be another project which got forgotten about” (Interview Participant 5)*

Participants also described how it was important that the setting-based project took into consideration the local context and issues of the school’s socio-demographics, such as the number of children with Special Education Needs and Disability (SEND), those with English as an Additional Language (EAL), and socio-economic status of the students and their families the school catered for. Participants often highlighted how their school populations impacted on their rationale for the setting-based project. For example, Interview Participants 7 and 11 described how:

*“The special needs register in our school in the early years, up to Year 3, the main category of need is speaking and listening; speech, language and communication needs” (Interview Participant 7).*

*“We’ve been talking for a few years now about the cohort we have, what we need to do really is a curriculum change for them rather than use specific interventions. We need to make some significant adaptations to our entire curriculum because the numbers of children that need intervention are not an intervention size group. So what we need to be doing to support children with their early language and literacy is at the whole cohort level, something that will benefit everyone” (Interview Participant 11).*

Furthermore, there was a strong perception from some interview participants noticing children entering their setting with very low levels of language, including the perceived impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on children's language abilities. For example, Interview Participants 2 and 3 described how:

*"I knew that the pandemic meant that for certain key year groups, there were certain key issues. So one, for instance, was thinking about our nursery children and our reception children coming into school with limited experience of nursery themselves, and very different experiences to what our children had previously. And we could identify straightaway that we had... you know, we have had some significant issues with speech and language in reception and particularly in nursery. So we knew it was going to be... that we would need to have a strong speaking and listening focus for all children coming in to school, not just for a few children." (Interview Participant 2).*

*"We've noticed over the past few years a distinct drop in children's spoken language and their understanding because of the pandemic" (Interview Participant 3)*

It appeared that these contextual factors provided a strong rationale for the direction of the setting-based SSLiC project.

Finally, when considering other factors which contributed to the origins of the setting-based SSLiC project, an important factor appeared to be how settings could utilise the strengths and existing practice within their nursery or school systems to drive the SSLiC Programme. Interview Participants discussed how the setting-based projects provided opportunities to, "*keep the momentum going from the things that we were doing the previous year*" (Interview Participant 2), and to build on existing practice. For example, Interview Participant 5 explained how:

*"I think that our school already was doing a lot to improve and raise the profile of spoken language...I think we felt that it (SSLiC) was a programme that maybe gave us a platform to just sort of raise the profile even more" (Interview Participant 5)*

Additionally, alongside building on existing whole setting practice, participants identified strengths within their own and their colleagues' practice that supported their rationale for implementing a programme like SSLiC. For example, Interview Participant 4 described how:

*"I spent last year developing my understanding of strategies for supporting EAL children and I thought that it linked really well and it would build on my already growing knowledge" (Interview Participant 4)*

Importantly, participants felt that the SSLiC Programme provided a tailored approach to professional development needed in their setting and to meet each setting's individual needs. As Interview Participant 13 said:

*"It appealed as a programme because it was well structured, based on strong research evidence but also because it was flexible, schools could choose what they want to do based on their own need, so it wasn't a one size fits all programme, and that really appealed to us" (Interview Participant 13)*

Throughout the interviews, the origins, including the local context, positioning the project as a priority for the setting and the setting being able to build on existing strengths, appeared to be key factors for being able to initiate and begin implementation of a universal language intervention.

### **Facilitator Role**

Within the interviews, the unique role of the facilitator as a 'specialist coach' to facilitate the implementation of SSLiC Programme in educational settings was identified as a key feature. Participants discussed how helpful they found the ongoing SSLiC Facilitator support in the creation, implementation and monitoring of their setting's Action Plan. In that sense, participants talked about the facilitator as an ongoing resource for any issues and questions they had. They particularly valued the facilitator's academic and practitioner experience and their ability to translate complex research literature into accessible and relevant materials for participants.

*"She's been absolutely fundamental to the project. The wealth of knowledge that our facilitator had was huge and so valuable. And she made sure to keep things moving and keep the SSLiC project really at the heart and the focus of everything that was going on in our setting" (Interview Participant 16)*

*“It was helpful having an outsider’s view, and obviously somebody with a lot of experience and background knowledge in terms of seeing the issues around provision for children with speech and language needs.” (Interview Participant 2)*

*“...she helped us to really focus, keep it manageable, thinking about timescales...” (Interview Participant 3)*

*“...just taking the role of taking a step back and enabling us to reflect on where the successes had been. Cause when you are in the midst of something it’s far too easy to focus what hasn’t happened and what still isn’t working as you would like it to” (Interview Participant 5)*

Participants also discussed the facilitator’s role in supporting with the evaluation and research element of the SSLiC Programme. Knowledge and understanding of research methodology and supporting schools to gather evidence of impact was considered a key element of the support provided by the facilitator:

*“..she just reminded us of the importance of trying to, as we’re going along, the importance of gathering evidence and tracking the sort of impact of things and not just sort of trying things without really measuring and observing closely whether they’re effective.” (Interview Participant 14)*

In the interviews, there was a particular mention of the facilitator’s strong interpersonal skills through their ability to foster and support, across Communication Teams, effective collaborative working. The facilitator did not work from the position of a research ‘expert’ advocating solutions but one of someone offering alternative options based on their knowledge and understanding of the research and their own practitioner experience. In that sense, the importance of ‘mutuality’ in facilitators’ and practitioners’ relationship was often emphasised:

*“You weren’t ever feeling like you were being dictated to. But you were clearly being guided extremely expertly well. You know, that holding of the hand approach, in a very gentle way of keeping you on task, keeping you on your timings” (Interview Participant 16)*

*“..So if we had any concerns it was absolutely fine to email and to have that communication. It was more like a sort of coaching as opposed to...we didn't feel like we were answerable to her. It was sort of we're helping her and she's helping us sort of thing.” (Interview Participant 17)*

### **Collaborative Working**

Collaborative working was emphasised by programme participants as one of the key factors which affected the implementation of the SSLiC Programme in their setting. Early in the programme, each educational setting formed a Communication Team which included key members of staff and whose role was to champion the importance of communication and prioritise actions related to the improvement of communication outcomes for children. As Interview Participant 11 said:

*“So, we have real specialism in our school, but actually we are not all working with the same focus or even really communicating about language as one unit of people. In order for us to harness the power of each other's knowledge and expertise in various areas and focusing on language together, it makes complete sense to form a communication and language team. That was the best thing that came out of the first evidence SSLiC day in September.” (Interview Participant 11)*

Programme participants talked about how representation of senior leaders in Communication Teams enabled better strategic planning within their setting by identifying communication priorities for the school development plan. For example, Interview Participant 9 reported:

*“Having SLT, so the head and the assistant head of early years as part of that communication team, I think has made a huge difference. Because trying to do...if it was just the teachers trying to do it alone, I don't think it would have had the same impact as having the head and the assistant head who are obviously making decisions about the wider school, having them on board has made a huge, huge difference in terms of policy change.... Yes, we've been able to look at our policies and make sure that strict targets are included in those. Many things like that, just the conversations that we're having in our SLT meetings, it's very easy to turn the focus and remind people about our SSLiC targets, which is brilliant.” (Interview Participant 9)*



Similarly, Interview Participant 5 talked passionately about the importance of senior leaders in Communication Teams and reported:

*“Our SENCo was included in the Communication Team, I think it was a requirement that a leader went along to the first SSLiC evidence day and, really it makes total sense. That meant it formed part of our school development plan and everything we do as a school. It wasn't just a bolt-on, it was actually ingrained in what we were trying to do as a school anyway”*  
(Interview Participant 5)

Collaboration was also illustrated through examples of practitioners working together across different systems or phases in the setting. Examples included working in pairs ('Communication Buddies') or small working teams (for example, the Early Years team or the Key Stage 1 team working together) towards completing actions set in the setting's SSLiC Action Plan. Importantly, programme participants often discussed how collaborative working gave them regular opportunities to provide constructive feedback to identify areas for personal and school development and address these in everyday teaching practice:

*“The thing that's made change most effective and encouraged most is sharing practice I think and making it more of a kind of benefitting each other and sharing best practice as opposed to just sort of being encouraged to do something and then being checked to see if you're doing it or not. And I think that's what we've found in our teams is that sharing ideas with each other and maybe finding you're particularly strong at a certain thing, measuring it. And that's sort of inspiring other teachers to do that. And I think that's been the most effective thing because it's not patronising, it doesn't feel like such a burden that you're asking people to do another sort of job. It kind of happens naturally and you see something good has happened before your eyes and you want to go and try it yourself”* (Interview Participant 10)

*“Whilst we are a strong team, we sort of work in isolation. You know, once you're in the classroom, the door is shut and that's the end of it. You don't speak to anyone else or see anyone else. So I think that sharing of practice has been really really beneficial”.* (Interview Participant 3)

Participants described the pressures of having to follow a more formalised curriculum after the early years (Nursery and Reception), with very little emphasis and focus on children's language and communication. Different teams within the setting working together meant that good practice from the early years can be disseminated in older primary school years. For example, Interview Participant 2 said:

*“We were really interested in the transition from reception to year one, especially because of the continuous provision in reception and how that is really stripped back in year one. And so in our school in particular, we launched a new curriculum coming up to two years ago, a very ambitious curriculum where the continuous provision drops off really quickly in year one. So we wanted to think about how can we support our children during that time of moving from reception to year one, and what are the important things to do with language that we need to have in place to support these children.” (Interview Participant 2)*

Examples of collaborative working were also described between educational staff and parents. In Setting 18, parents and carers were provided with the opportunity to share their views through a questionnaire in relation to their confidence in using language learning strategies and in accessing language related support in the setting. Their views were acted on and informed the development of book packs that were regularly shared with parents alongside advice on interactive book reading. This type of collaboration demonstrated the breadth of pertinent insights that parents have into how they may support their child's language at home but also the importance of educational settings in exploring different ways of supporting parents to do so.

Collaborative working was finally demonstrated through working together with external agencies. Participants discussed how staff worked closer with their SLT to bridge the gap between speech and language therapy and classroom practice (Setting 19). In that sense, collaborative working led to a greater understanding of the role of SLT input and how support given through SLT interventions could be replicated and applied within the classroom.

Despite its numerous perceived benefits, collaborative working was also identified by programme participants as a time-consuming process posing particular challenges in practitioners' day-to-day practice. Interview Participant 15 talked about:

*“The trouble is when you get people who are senior leaders in school to do stuff like this, it's really hard for them to fit it in. It's like an added duty to their already very heavy duties.” (Interview Participant 15)*

In relation to collaboration with external agencies, constraints on SLT time were also highlighted by programme participants as barriers. However, all participants identified how collaborative working has contributed to the development of a shared language of support and to staff's professional development which – if sustained – can generate a powerful force for change.

### **Professional Development**

Programme participants talked about the benefits of educational staff participating in the SSLiC-based project and accessing good quality professional development which was directly linked to their role in the setting. Different approaches of professional development were identified by programme participants: staff meetings and in house arranged INSET trainings were the most common form of professional development in participating settings adopted in 19 number of settings.

A number of settings also used the model of mentoring between more experienced members of staff and newly qualified staff to develop practice.

*“We're having regular CPD in terms of professional development on spoken language; that our appraisal targets don't just link to maths and reading and writing, but they also link to spoken language.” (Interview Participant 6)*

Peer mentoring was described as valuable and better accepted by educational staff in participating settings. Interview Participant 3 talked about:

*“When observations are happening in school, it's always the senior leaders are coming in and observing the class and what's going on in the classroom, and actually having a peer observing them, I think they felt much more comfortable. It's not been an observation as such, it's about having those dialogues about their daily practice has been really, really helpful. It's been really good professional development for us”. (Interview Participant 3)*

Underpinning most SSLiC setting-based projects has been the process of using a robust and repeatable observation tool (GSCOT) as a means of professional development with a focus on regular opportunities to provide peer feedback and subsequent goal setting. The use of such tools

supported schools to make more evidenced-informed decisions, further discussed under the *Evidence-Informed Decisions* theme.

Another approach to professional development was highlighted as a result of the final SSLiC Review Day held at the end of the SSLiC Programme. Programme participants reported that they found the SSLiC Review Day to be particularly beneficial in terms of practitioners learning about other settings' projects, taking ideas and sharing resources with other settings. As Interview Participant 13 reported:

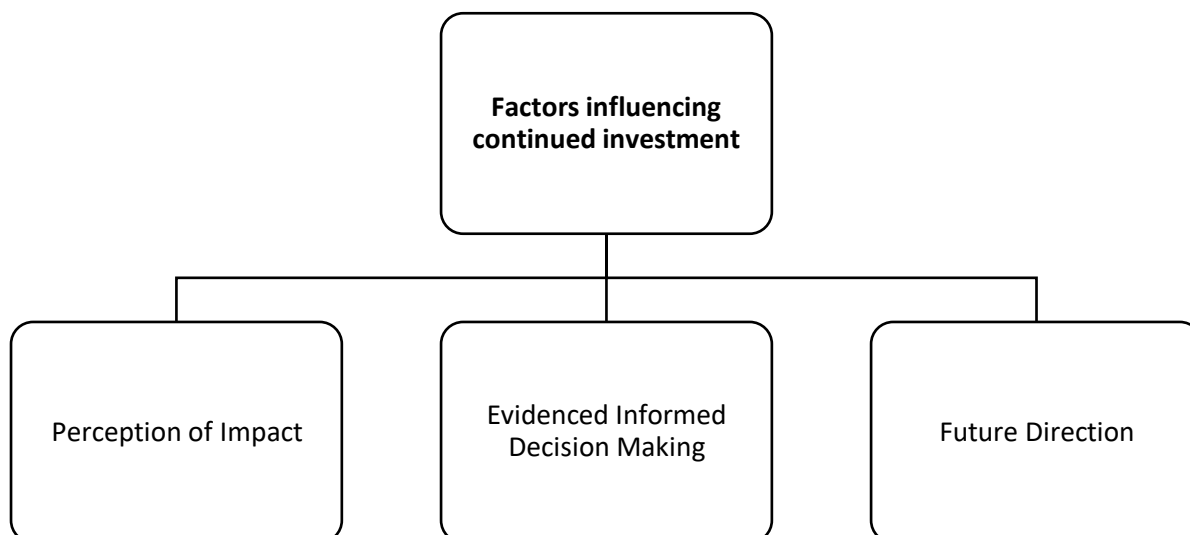
*“..The last session for us really was fantastic and that research, just being able to hear what everyone else was doing... And we really enjoyed sharing what we'd been doing as well. It's how you learn, isn't it? It sort of reinforced what we were doing and having that opportunity to really analyse how successful we've been...And hearing other people and everyone's done so many different things; and both of us have stolen so many ideas. So we've moved into different areas, little tips as to how it might work better if we tried this. And we've got a whole list of things that it might be nice to try, but also how we might measure success in the future.” (Interview Participant 13)*

In addition, a key feature of professional development related to the development of additional resources for each particular setting. Developing resources that met individuals' professional needs was considered particularly empowering and useful by programme participants. When participants were asked what they are most pleased about, Interview Participant 12 reported:

*“The induction package we developed for new staff. I am very proud of that”  
(Interview Participant 12)*

#### **4.4 What factors influence the continued investment in the implementation of universal language interventions in educational settings?**

Three overarching themes were identified as factors which influence the continued investment in implementing universal language interventions in educational settings. This included the overarching themes of “Perception of Impact”, “Evidence Informed Decision Making” and “Future Direction”. 19 illustrates the overarching themes.



**Figure 19 - Factors influencing continued investment**

### **Perception of Impact**

When considering the factors that might influence continued investment, the notion of the perceived impact which the SSLiC Programme had, or had the potential to have, was highlighted by participants in a number of areas. All participants described how they perceived an impact of the programme in terms of raising the profile of speech and language development across the whole setting. Interview Participants 7, 8 and 13 reported that:

*“SSLiC really gave us the opportunity to raise the whole profile of speech and language and communication needs across our whole school. Everyone now sees the value in it. And it’s when everyone sees the value in it, it is much easier to get people onboard” (Interview Participant 7).*

*“Everyone’s awareness is really heightened about the importance of language and about promoting language at school. It’s been great” (Interview Participant 8)*

*“The staff culture around oracy has been the biggest transformation for us” (Interview Participant 13)*

Ultimately, participants talked about the SSLiC Programme being embedded in everyday teaching practice. For example:

*“It continues to be on the agenda for our school in the sense of the way we operate. It’s now embedded in our classroom practice. It’s something that translates and starts from*

*day one for a new member of staff and I guess, essentially, it becomes less of a project and more just a way of being and teaching.” (Interview Participant 14)*

Participants described how they perceived an impact of the programme across a range of systems including impact on individuals, staff teams and working with parents and external agencies. For example, participants discussed how the SSLiC Programme had had an impact on staff’s skills in supporting children’s oral language. This was evidenced through a perceived increased understanding of children’s language development, alongside knowledge of approaches such as using visuals, developing the quality of their talk with children and providing additional, structured opportunities for interactions. Furthermore, there was a perception from the interviews that this increased understanding had translated to a change in staff practice, with the use of approaches becoming embedded in their everyday work. For example, the participant in Interview 4 described how:

*“I suppose what I’m most pleased with is that it’s become a focus for everybody in a relatively short space of time....And it’s become part of our daily practice....The other teachers that I work with are so on board with it and it’s become a kind of integral part of our working day.” (Interview Participant 4)*

There was an acknowledgement from participants that the SSLiC Programme has impacted the practice of not only teachers but also support staff resulting in consistency of good practice across all adults in the educational setting. As Interview Participant 5 said:

*“It’s increased everybody’s awareness again of oracy and language development. So I think prior to this year, everyone knew it was in our school development plan and everyone knew that this was a focus, but it felt like it was coming far more from the teachers. But SSLiC included the TAs in it much more. They are modelling far more for children and they just have a far greater understanding of what it is we are trying to do and how we might be able to do it” (Interview Participant 5).*

Similarly, Interview Participant 16 reported that:

*“I think the biggest differences that SSLiC has made is that everybody is now very consistent in their approach and in their understanding about how to support spoken language. We made sure to include everyone in the project, teachers and support staff so*

*that everyone can be empowered and everyone can sort of sing from the same hymn sheet, you know?" (Interview Participant 16)*

Some participants also described how the SSLiC Programme had made a perceived impact on secondary outcomes. For example within Interview 4, the participant discussed outcomes on pupil literacy:

*"So I think that really has made an impact, had an impact on their writing. And it's that idea that spoken language develops their written language. We have seen an improvement in their writing and I think we could link that...tentatively we could link that to SSLiC". (Interview Participant 14)*

Participants talked about how the impact they noticed on pupil's engagement and staff confidence was also observed by external agencies visiting the setting. For example, Interview Participant 4 talked about:

*"We've been working with a lot of external agencies, like School Improvement Officers, Lead Early Years Teachers, and they've all noticed an improvement as well. So it's not just me thinking like oh, actually is doing pretty well, like it's been noticed by external professionals as well' (Interview Participant 4)*

In addition, perceived impacts were also identified, not just in staff skills, but across the different phases of the school (*"it has had a whole school impact because the strategies that are being used are not age-dependent, they work across all primary. So yes, I feel it's had an impact across the whole school"* Interview Participant 7) and systems within a school. For example, improved relationships between teachers and external agencies such as Speech and Language Therapists were noted in Interview 2 and the perceived impact of the SSLiC Programme on the school community was discussed in Interview 9:

*"I think for us, because our focus was on engaging parents and carers, we've had some real positive feedback from our parents and carers about the project. And about how it showed them what their children could actually do and what they could do to support their children with reading. So for us that was probably the biggest bonus. And it's definitely raised the profile of spoken language within the setting. And moving forward, it's given us an idea of how to drive things better I think." (Interview Participant 9)*

Throughout the interviews, the notion of perceived impact appeared to extend beyond the core staff team (Communication Team) working directly on the SSLiC Programme which arguably indicates some of the benefits of the continual investment in the practices and approaches learnt or adopted by the programme.

Finally, participants reported how the SSLiC Programme seemed to bring a lot of strands of work together to affect systemic change across the whole setting:

*“By implementing it, it almost helped us embed everything else that we do around speech and language. It brought lots of strands of work together.” (Interview Participant 17)*

### **Evidence Informed Decision Making**

The role of evidence informed decision making appeared to be a key component of the SSLiC Programme. However, the extent and nature of how evidence was used and collated varied amongst participating settings. This included how participants discussed using research, the ways in which they gathered data at the start of their setting’s project and how this, and other measures such as observational data and screening results were used to subsequently evaluate the projects at the end.

When considering the use of research evidence to inform their decision making, interview participants spoke positively of the research evidence that was provided to them at the start of the programme, indicating how it helped guide the implementation of the SSLiC Programme in their school. For example, Interview Participant 13 described:

*“I think as practitioners as well, we don't get much time to consider research as part of our drive and our action plans. So actually, taking the time to do that as well is very beneficial. And the great thing was that we were given a summary of the evidence at the beginning that we could take and apply in our school”*  
*(Interview Participant 13)*

Having research as a basis for decision making was additionally echoed by participants within Interviews 11 and 12. For example, Interview Participant 12 noted that research evidence was used to support the school projects and Interview Participant 11 commented on how:

*“I knew that with the SSLiC Programme we were going to get the latest, up-to-date research about spoken language, which we could then use back in school”*  
*(Interview Participant 11)*



Using evidence derived from other settings' SSLiC project was also mentioned as a way of informing decisions about continuing the development work undertaken in participating settings. Interview Participant 19 for example said:

*"The SSLiC Review Day that we had last week, where the different settings taking part in this research project got to share their projects and how they measured impact. That was really good, because my colleague and I were making notes through going oh, that's really good, we could do that, we could measure like that. So sharing good practice amongst colleagues in-house, but also externally, and learning about new ways of measuring impact". (Interview Participant 19)*

However, whilst the role of research appeared important to participants in directing their projects, a perceived barrier to its use was time available to focus on development work at a whole school level. Interview Participants 15 and 18 said:

*"Someone needs to have the ability to do that (collect evidence) in terms of time as well because time was the most significant barrier for us before" (Interview Participant 15)*

*"Time restraints were the biggest issue for us. We've lost a couple of staff members at the moment and we are quite a small setting, none of us have outside office space or time, so we're all here every day. So we just can't physically do it (collect evidence) within that time" (Interview Participant 18).*

Throughout the SSLiC projects, regular reference was made to schools using the tools provided, such as the CSCOT, and the initial SSLiC Self-Assessment Audit as a means of informing the direction of the projects. For example, all participants made reference to the findings of these tools, both in terms of areas of strengths and areas for development, and how this related to the direction of each setting's project and the decisions they made. For example, Interview Participant 8 discussed how eighteen classes were observed using the CSCOT and the school's project focussed on addressing areas which were identified on the CSCOT as needing developing within the language learning classroom environment. Other interview participants talked about how valuable they found information derived from CSCOT in profiling classroom environments:

*"CSCOT is so detailed, it covers so many areas, we would spend a good forty-five minutes to an hour in observing classrooms in our setting. And it is*

*CSCOT that gave us the real opportunity to see the areas that we needed to focus on. And I would say that's made the biggest difference, because we could evidence what was going well and we could evidence our next steps and what we needed to change" (Interview Participant 19)*

Additionally, settings or Communication Teams also developed their own measures which informed the direction of their project. An example of that was the development of a questionnaire to obtain parental views on the setting's 'Top Tips on Developing Spoken Language' document which was subsequently used in the setting (*Interview Participant 16*).

Furthermore, there were examples of how this gathering of data had been repeated throughout each setting's project alongside further data being collected. These examples included the repeating of screening measures, re-assessing children on the baselines measures and repeating the CSCOT. Moreover, there was reference to collating additional data through distributing qualitative staff questionnaires at the end of the school's project to further evaluate the project but also explore staff views of its' effectiveness.

There was also a recognition from some of the participants that without adequately measuring the impact of the changes, they wouldn't be able to determine if the changes were effective or not. For example, as described by Interview Participant 5:

*"...as we're going along, the importance of gathering evidence and tracking the sort of impact of things and not just sort of trying things without really measuring and observing closely whether they're effective. And it was important for her (SSLiC Facilitator) to kind of remind us of that because it's very easy to just sort of try something and not really...measure its success in a sort of formal way." (Interview Participant 5)*

Despite this importance, it was noted, that there was less emphasis on collating data to inform future decision making and there were few mentions of how challenging it was to collect additional data that could influence further decisions. There was also different emphasis in some settings about the type of impact data that needs to be collated. For some settings, whether the SSLiC Programme was successful or not was judged by the progress children have made on age-related expectations in speaking and listening. In other settings, impact was measured in relation to staff's changes in knowledge and practice.

Impact or evaluation data appeared to be more likely to be gathered where the focus of the SSLiC projects aligned closely to the areas identified within the CSCOT. However, a common theme was how settings could capture the impact and affect change which had occurred in order to support further investment in the SSLiC projects.

Further, whilst not all participants gathered additional data whilst implementing the SSLiC Programme, all were using research evidence albeit in a different way to guide their decisions and support their setting projects, as described by Interview Participants 5 and 6:

*“So we sort of felt that our priority was more about telling our staff about the practical implications of that research rather than repeating things that we felt people sort of already knew.” (Interview Participant 5)*

*“And seeing all the research in the SSLiC Handbook, we felt we could use the research that had been done already to sort of reinforce what we were trying to do” (Interview Participant 6)*

It was noteworthy how important it was to the participants to share with other settings their findings in order to validate their approach and to also gain insights into what others have done. For example, Interview Participant 17 described how, *“I liked the fact that we then fed back to each other at the end, so we kind of shared the knowledge.”* Participants appeared to value the role of evidence in informing decisions at the start of their projects, and equally they appeared to value the opportunity to share knowledge and insights with other settings towards the end of their projects. Arguably, it was this iterative process which promoted a continued investment in the SSLiC Programme.

### **Future Direction**

Participants discussed how they had still a lot of work to *do*, and that development work implemented as part of the SSLiC Programme was only the start of their journey in changing their language provision. They talked about their plans to continue with a focus on language and communication in the future. As Interview Participant 7 said:

*“It’s going to be on our Academy Improvement Plan again next year. This target is not coming off as it’s so important. And the Communication Team we sort of felt like the eight months that we implemented the programme isn’t*

*necessarily long enough to really embed and show what can be achieved with it. There is still so much we want to do” (Interview Participant 7)*

Keeping the momentum of progress made was considered important by participants who talked about continuing to use evidence-based tools to reflect on practice:

*“Keeping it at the forefront. That’s what we need to do. Reviewing regularly and treating this as a kind of ongoing cycle. There is so many things you need to work on, it’s like I always think the start can almost be the easiest part, it’s then maintaining that, and not letting something else come over” (Interview Participant 13).*

Participants also talked about their desire for Key Stage 2 specific tools and resources to profile the classroom language environment, like the CSCOT. Participant 19, for example, said:

*“The CSCOT is something that we are going to be using throughout the school now. A tool like this is so relevant for older year groups and it would be so good to be able to use something like CSCOT as a school for classrooms in Key Stage 2” (Interview Participant 19).*

Importantly, participants talked about the need for government policy to reflect the importance of language and communication in education, and to have language high on the education agenda:

*“You know it’s the right thing to do. We are all experienced and we know how essential language is for children’s development. It’s the number 1, foundational skill. But it’s still good to have that direction and acknowledgement also coming from above, from policy, from government to give us the OK to keep on going with that work. And ultimately to facilitate and strengthen the workforce. Making language a big deal like reading and writing is a big deal”. (Interview Participant 10)*

## 5. Implications for Policy and Practice

The study aimed to expand the evidence base of universal language support in early years and primary school settings by investigating the impact of a universal language intervention called SSLiC. SSLiC aims to support the development of high-quality, universal language provision in educational settings for all children. Impact was assessed at pupil, classroom, educational professionals and whole setting level, and implementation of the SSLiC Programme in settings was evaluated. In the analysis of the data collected, a number of issues were raised which are relevant to professional educational practice and policy.

Firstly, our results have shown that, overall, **following implementation of the SSLiC Programme, children's learning engagement increased over time in participating settings.** Children in Nursery year demonstrated greater improvement in learning engagement than their peers in Reception, Year One and Year Two. Similarly, **classroom learning environments improved over time, across three different dimensions: language learning environment, language learning opportunities and language learning interactions.** Again, statistically significant differences were observed only in Nursery classrooms. **All participants reported that they used the SSLiC Programme to raise the profile of the importance of spoken language in their settings for children's educational attainment and wellbeing.**

These results echo participants' reports about the challenges of focusing on language and communication beyond the early years. While most educational professionals intuitively recognise the value and importance of language and communication, there are significant barriers to translating this recognition into the focus of everyday teaching practice. Our study results also highlighted the tension that does exist in educational practice about how support for children's language learning needs aligns with the requirements of the English classroom curriculum. Participants discussed the challenges of prioritizing language and communication in the classroom over specific curriculum activities (in reading, writing and Maths) despite their strong beliefs in the crucial role of language as a foundational skill for learning and academic achievement. As such, an important implication from our study relates to **the demand to raise the profile of the importance of spoken language in education by putting oracy on an equal footing with literacy and numeracy, and recognizing its importance beyond the early years.**

Our study data also suggested a very positive response to the implementation of universal language interventions and support. Practitioners in participating settings were overwhelmingly

positive about the SSLiC Programme. Staff reported finding both the materials and professional development helpful, with the mentoring element identified as particularly supportive. Practitioners also reported positive changes in their knowledge and understanding of how to improve their and their colleagues practice by using existing research evidence and translating it into practice. Importantly, practitioners also reported a better understanding of how to measure changes in their setting's language provision and evaluate the impact of their work. Although the aim of the SSLiC Programme was to develop practice, practitioners reported that taking part in the SSLiC Programme facilitated improvements in direct pupil outcomes. As such, our study points to **the need to equip and empower educational professionals and educational settings to provide sustained, and comprehensive high-quality language teaching for all children**. Our study showed that this can be achieved by **developing oracy leaders in educational settings to enable a learning culture and the conditions for oracy to thrive**.

In addition, the present study highlighted the need to **invest in continuing professional development by employing the principles of effective professional development and learning**. Our study results point to the demand for **professional development that is evidence-based and built on tailored, sustained support with 'expert mentors'**. Participants in our study were especially positive about the support they received by the SSLiC Facilitators suggesting they were fundamental to the success of their setting-based projects. We argue that a move towards well-designed, evidence-based and bespoke professional development and learning is key to successfully improving practice and impact on child language outcomes.

In terms of the focus of professional development, practitioners in our study reported a desire for **evidence-based resources and tools that will enable them to better identify language learning needs and support high-quality oracy teaching across the early and primary school years**. Resources that allow educational staff to profile and reflect on existing practice have the potential to inform the ways in which a setting's universal language provision can be further developed and strengthen.

Finally, it was evident from the results of our study that there are still gaps in our understanding of *how to apply* the wealth of research evidence on language and communication in practice. If we wish to establish a more evidence-informed practice in educational settings, **professional development activities need to focus on enabling teacher capacity to engage in and with research**. To facilitate this, the focus of professional development needs to be on **sharing good practice and**

enabling practitioners to add to the evidence base of '*what works*' for supporting language and communication in educational settings.

## 6. Conclusions

The case for treating oracy as a foundational skill in education is undeniable, particularly in the case of children from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a wealth of research in the area of language and communication, although there are still gaps in our understanding of *how* to apply this in educational practice and the best ways to support educational practitioners to make communication embedded in their setting's policy and practice.

While most educational professionals intuitively recognise the value and importance of universal language support, barriers persist inhibiting a consistent and systematic approach to providing high-quality oracy education for all. This means universal language support is varied and young children and their families continue to have unequal access to high-quality language learning opportunities. This research report sets out important implications emerging from our study about possible ways forward.



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