

Oral language development in early years settings - optimising collaboration

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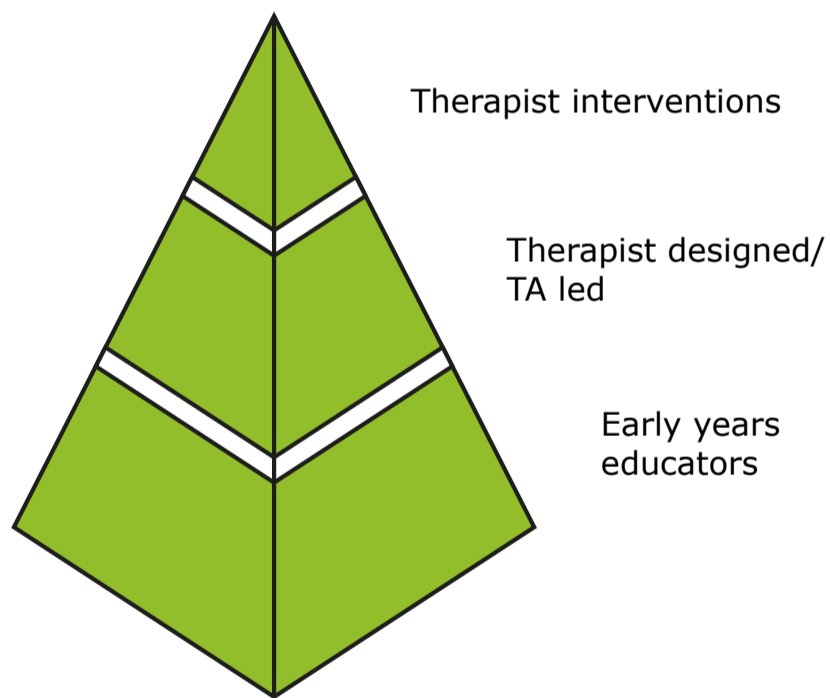
Background: As one of the prime areas of the early years foundation stage (EYFS) curriculum, communication and language underpins all areas of learning.

The number of children with additional needs in communication and language has been growing for many years and COVID has exacerbated this problem. Support for communication and language can be provided at different levels: Specialist, Targeted and Universal (Gascoigne, 2006) traditionally provided by different professionals. Increasing levels of need and growing waiting lists are putting pressure on Speech and Language Therapists (SLTs). Early years practitioners (EYPs) are providing additional support, however, understanding of what form this support takes is limited (Dobinson and Dockrell, 2021).

Specialist: a few children need specialist support to make progress

Targeted: some children need additional support

Universal: all children benefit from good practice



Aim: This study explores the universal communication and language support EYPs provide, and the increasing amount of targeted support they are delivering to children identified as at risk of additional needs.

Method: We interviewed eleven EYPs participating in the Language Intervention in the Early Years (LIVELY) research project (McKean et al., 2020). We asked about their existing practices in supporting language development with children aged between three and five years old.

Analysis: Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) is being used to analyse the results.

Results: Settings provide range of language enriching environments and activities described in the **Sharing Best Practice in Schools** booklet. Many practitioners initially overlooked some of the ways they and their settings were providing support, suggesting that knowledge can be **implicit**. Practitioners are providing more targeted support for children at risk of communication and language difficulties; support that was traditionally provided by SLTs. Interviewees talked about a range of themes: **Identification, Support, Knowledge, Practice** and **Collaboration**. The variation in EYPs knowledge and understanding can result in a lack of consistency. Many decisions are being made **at a distance**, by practitioners not directly involved in supporting the children.

Promoting oral language development in early years settings

Identification

Knowledge

Collaboration

Support

Practice



- At a distance
- Appropriateness
- Consistency
- Currency

- Diffusion of knowledge and responsibility
- Explicit / implicit
- Relevance
- Quality

Images from the Noun Project

Sharing Best Practice in Schools



Conclusions: While it is reassuring to see that support for communication and language has been normalised in many settings, questions are raised about equity of provision across settings when the approach relies on implicit knowledge. We are considering whether all EYPs have the knowledge and expertise to make judgements about need and how to deliver programmes, some of which are designed to be delivered by specialist SLTs. Collaboration between EYPs and SLTs needs to be examined further.

References:

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